

**AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF ACTION RESEARCH**



UNIVERSITY *of the*  
WESTERN CAPE

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A mini-thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of M Phil in the Department of Didactics, University of the Western Cape

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**Abstract**

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M Phil mini-thesis, Department of Didactics, University of the Western Cape

This mini-thesis examines and critiques epistemological justifications for certain claims of action research.

Part One provides a preliminary characterisation of action research by contrasting it with classical research, the latter being identified as those forms of research modelled on Cartesian-Newtonian concepts of science.

Part Two investigates claims of action research authors Grundy, Carr and Kemmis in respect of their claim that action research is a **democratic** form of research. I state this claim and draw attention to the primacy, for it, of the idea of "participation". I then show that for action research participation is linked with views about language and the generation of knowledge and investigate these authors' concept of language to the extent that it relates to a theory of persons. Following Marx, I argue that human beings are beings of "praxis", participants in the construction of a material as well as a social world - a

world of institutions, practices, and language. The social world is what it is because of people's shared understandings as well as their subjective understandings of the rules, norms and conventions surrounding the institutions, practices and language they engage in. These understandings are formulated, communicated and modified in and through language. This illuminates social science research as a discipline consisting importantly of critical discussion about our shared and subjective understandings, and I then show that action research indeed (1) rejects the "objective spectator" stance of the researcher required by classical research; and (2) recognises that human beings are participants in the construction of knowledge about the social world. Thus action research can give interpretations significantly different from those of classical research to explanation (and prediction), social theory and truth. However, I then take issue with action research in respect of two of its claims which are closely connected with its view of its own "democratic" character, namely: (1) that truth is the outcome of "consensus", and (2) that the researcher is an "equal participant" along with all others concerned. Action research seems to take too lightly the significance of "traditions" of learning and enquiry.

In spite of this critique I conclude that the epistemological grounding of action research as social research is undeniably sounder than that of classical research.

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**Abstrak**

**An Epistemological Critique of Action Research**

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M Phil mini-tesis, Departement Didaktiek, Universiteit van Wes-Kaapland

Hierdie mini-tesis ondersoek en kritiseer epistemologiese regverdigings vir sekere aansprake van aksie-navorsing.

Deel Een verskaf 'n voorlopige karakterisering van aksie-navorsing deur dit met klassieke navorsing te kontrasteer, waar laasgenoemde geïdentifiseer word as daardie vorms van navorsing wat geskoei is op Cartesiaanse-Newtoniaanse wetenskapsbegrippe.

Deel Twee ondersoek die bewering van aksie-navorsingskrywers Grundy, Carr en Kemmis ten opsigte van hul aanspraak dat aksie-navorsing 'n demokratiese vorm van navorsing behels. Ek stel hierdie aanspraak, en vestig die aandag op die belangrikheid daarvoor van die begrip "deelneming". Ek wys vervolgens dat vir aksie-navorsing deelneming gekoppel is aan sienswyses oor taal en die ontwikkeling van kennis, en ondersoek hierdie outeurs se begrip van taal soos dit verband hou met 'n teorie van persone. Na aanleiding van Marx argumenteer ek dat menslike wesens, wesens van "praxis" is; deelnemers aan die daarsstelling van 'n materieële sowel as 'n sosiale wêreld - 'n

wêreld van inrigtings, praktyke, en taal. Die sosiale wêreld is wat dit is vanweë mense se gedeelde begrippe sowel as hul subjektiewe begrippe van die reëls, norme en konvensies wat die inrigtings, praktyke en taal waarby hulle betrokke is, omring. Hierdie begrippe word in en deur taal geformuleer, oorgedra en gewysig. Dit alles werp lig op maatskaplike of sosiale navorsing as 'n dissipline wat op 'n belangrike wyse bestaan uit kritiese diskussie van gedeelde en subjektiewe begrippe. Ek wys dan daarop dat aksie-navorsing inderdaad (1) die "objektiewe waarnemer" - standpunt oor die navorser soos klassieke navorsing dit sien, verwerp, en (2) erken dat menslike wesens deelnemers is in die ontwikkeling van kennis oor die sosiale wêreld. Dus kan aksie-navorsing vertolkings bied van begrippe soos verklarings (en voorspelling), maatskaplike teorie, en waarheid, wat betekenisvol verskil van die wat deur klassieke navorsing verskaf word. Dan neem ek aksie-navorsing egter onder die loep ten opsigte van twee van sy eise wat nou verband hou met sy beskouing oor sy eie "demokratiese" aard, te wete : (1) dat waarheid die resultaat is van "konsensus"; en (2) dat die navorser 'n "gelyke deelnemer" is saam met alle ander betrokkenes. Aksie-navorsing neem die beduidenis van "tradisies" van studie en navorsing te ligtelik op.

Ten spyte van hierdie kritiek besluit ek egter dat die epistemologiese begronding van aksie-navorsing as sosiale navorsing ongetwyfeld veel sinvoller is as die van klassieke navorsing.

Maart 1991

**Declaration**

I declare that **An Epistemological Critique of Action Research** is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

**ROSALIE JOAN SMALL**

Date : March 1991



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Signed : .....

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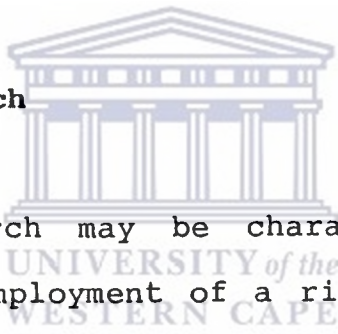
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## 1. ACTION RESEARCH AND CLASSICAL RESEARCH

The idea of action research encompasses a wide range of activities and approaches. One way of attempting a characterisation of action research would be to contrast it with what may be called traditional or classical research, and by the latter I mean that form of research that has its roots firmly in positivism and which is still the dominant form of research in the social sciences, and in education.

### 1.1 Classical Research



Classical research may be characterised amongst other things by its employment of a rigid research design; by its judging or measuring the results (of investigation) by means of instruments which are thought to allow "objective data treatment" by a researcher who assumes the role of "objective observer" comments Werdelin.<sup>1</sup>

Fundamental differences between action research and classical research must certainly not be looked for in specific research techniques, since a whole range of research projects that would have themselves called "action research projects" may involve the use of a variety of methods and techniques, some of which resemble, superficially at least, the methods and techniques thought to belong to the domain of classical or traditional research,

insofar as they allow for what may be considered researcher objectivity and data quantification. Elliott, for example, lists the following as methods that could possibly be used by the researcher in an action research project: analytic memos, diaries, documents, photographs, video and tape recordings and transcripts of these, observation, the interview, running commentaries, the shadow study, check lists, questionnaires, inventories and triangulation.<sup>2</sup> Of these, the ones that could most obviously be thought to belong to the domain of classical research are perhaps observation, the interview and questionnaires.

The difference between action research and classical research then does not reside in the sphere of technique or method; it lies in philosophical orientation.

Two concepts in Werdelin's characterisation (above) of classical research are crucial to a distinction between classical research and action research, and these are first, the adherence to "scientific method" implicit in that characterisation and secondly (and connected with the first), the idea of the objective stance of the researcher.

A goal of classical research has been and still is "objectivity". "Objectivity" is highly valued there since it lends credibility to research in the social sciences. The

expectation of scientific credibility is rooted in at least two things. In the first place it is rooted in the high status accorded to science and to "scientific method" and goes back at least as far as Bacon and Descartes who both searched for methods which would provide certainty. While the former turned to empiricism the latter turned to the certainties of mathematics, but both looked for ways which would provide them with, to use the words of John Hughes, "the foundations of human knowledge."<sup>3</sup>

The expectation of scientific credibility is rooted in the second place in a mistaken or, at the very least, an inadequate notion of science, as if all scientific endeavour could be explained in Cartesian-Newtonian language. This holds too at times even for those social theorists who regard classical research approaches as inadequate for investigating social phenomena. The emphasis in research, in our teaching of research methods, in our teaching in schools and in other educational institutions, on the quest for certainty and objectivity attests to the firm hold of positivism over the social sciences, and this in turn is grounded in a view of science as essentially Newtonian science, for Newton's legacy is in essence a view of the universe as a mechanistic, ordered system governed by immutable laws, and these laws are laws of motion. The Newtonian conception of the universe is essentially that of a rigorously deterministic one where motion is dependent on cause-effect relationships, and it

is thought to be the task of science to discover these regularities, these laws of nature.

Newton combined Descartes's insistence on the rigour of mathematics and logic with Bacon's insistence on empiricism and on sense experience, and it is this view of science and of scientific method upon which positivist social science models itself.

On this approach to science a crucial distinction is made between facts and values and, concomitantly, between statements and nonsense. On this approach a scientific statement is a statement about facts - about what is the case in the world of natural phenomena. The scientific worth of a statement - its meaningfulness - is dependent on its verifiability or (in the tradition of Popper) its falsifiability. Scientific statements are thought to be objective statements which, after testing, will be found to be true or false. Neither truth nor falsehood are criteria for meaningfulness; testability is.

On this view value judgements are both non-verifiable and non-falsifiable. They are thought to be subjective and have purely emotive meaning. Value judgements fall outside the class of scientific statements. Scientific knowledge is thought to be objective, value-free and neutral.

Linked to this view about the objectivity of scientific knowledge is a particular model of "scientific explanation". Scientific endeavour does not consist merely in the enumeration or description of events; it tries to explain events by discovering the causal connections between them. This model of explanation is the Deductive Nomological model.

Deductive nomological explanation has the following logical form:

Whenever A then B

A

Therefore B



Here A and B are events that are observed to occur in the world, and are called variables, where A is the independent variable (or initial condition) and B is the dependent variable (or consequent condition). The first premise of the argument is a nomological statement. It is an explanatory statement of the hypothetical kind and it expresses a regularity in the world; it expresses what may come to be regarded as a law of nature. This regularity concerns cause-effect relations between events in the world. These regularities or cause-effect relations are thought to exist entirely independently of human thought.

A nomological statement begins as a conjecture (hypothesis) which needs to be subjected to rigorous testing and experimentation. It would, after the failure of rigorous attempts to falsify it (as Popper would have it) be accorded the status of scientific theory. It is always provisionally held in so far as it is possible that in future it might be falsified. It derives its scientific credibility and respectability from amongst others rigorous logic, objective observation and the failure of relentless attempts to falsify it.

It can be noted that on this model, explanation and prediction are closely tied to each other. If one has an established nomological statement and a statement of the initial condition then it is possible to predict the consequent condition. In fact "every adequate explanation in science is **potentially** a prediction ...."<sup>4</sup>

This view of the relationship between explanation and prediction depends upon a view of understanding in terms of which understanding in science is a matter of knowing cause - effect relationships. It is a view according to which "to understand an event or state of affairs is to know another event which will invariably produce or prevent it."<sup>5</sup>

This is to say that the feature of prediction is regarded as a necessary feature of the deductive nomological model,

and as underlying all experimental testing of proffered explanations. No explanation can be considered acceptable unless it can generate definite and testable predictions. And prediction is important because it provides the basis for control. That is, knowledge of cause - effect relationships in principle provides the means for intervention with a view to technical control over events or states of affairs.

All this means that the potential for prediction and control is a necessary feature of scientific explanation. An adequate scientific explanation is one that firstly makes prediction possible and secondly provides the potential for control. This view, as Fay points out below, illuminates some underlying assumptions about firstly truth and reality and secondly the relationship between scientific knowledge and control:

Underlying and informing the [deductive nomological] theory of explanation .... are deeper assumptions as to the nature of truth and reality, and these deeper assumptions are rooted in the notion of manipulative control. So the conclusion is not merely that scientific knowledge provides the basis for manipulative control, but also, and more importantly, that what can count as scientific knowledge is that which



gives us the means by which one can in principle control phenomena.<sup>6</sup>

The deductive nomological model is grounded in the following assumptions about the world and about science:

**First.** The world is viewed as atomistic, discrete entities capable of being subject to objective observation and precise description.

**Second.** The only possible relationships between entities are cause - effect relationships, therefore these relationships can be accounted for by means of laws and law-like statements, ie. nomological statements.

**Third.** Scientific theory consists in sets of nomological statements. Scientific theory describes and explains but in no way influences the entities it describes and explains.

**Fourth.** The language of science is considered to be neutral and value-free. It is the language of objectivity in so far as it encompasses only those statements which can truly be called scientific statements, ie. those which are testable. This language aims at formalised and quantified explanations. It is a language of variables and of measurement.

**Fifth**, and related to the preceding point. Talk that does not fall into the class of scientific statements as defined above, lacks the credibility of scientific status. Religious, moral, aesthetic, and political views all fall outside the category of scientific statements.

**Sixth**. A nomological statement comes as a prediction in the form of a hypothetical statement. The ability to predict encompasses, in principle, the ability to control, for it is possible to control phenomena (or events) by manipulation of variables. On the deductive nomological model of explanation, scientific knowledge enables the scientist to gain control over the world of natural phenomena by means of the manipulation of variables. But, more important, a scientific statement is regarded as one which makes possible manipulative control.

**Seventh**. On radical positivist thinking as outlined above the idea of the unity of science is illuminated. On this view there is only one kind of knowledge and that is "scientific" knowledge. Genuine knowledge about any phenomena has the same logical form. There is a difference only in content (variables) between what counts as knowledge in, for example, the research field of physics and the research field of education.

Classical or traditional research in education uses the model of explanation outlined above as the model for

explanation in the social sciences. The social theorist operating from within the classical research paradigm uses explanation of the deductive nomological type to explain social phenomena. While for the natural scientist the variables in question are events in the natural world, the classical researcher's variables would include phenomena such as class, race, scholastic achievement, parents' level of education, and gender. While the natural scientist tries to find causal connections between events in the natural world, the classical educational researcher tries to establish causal connections between variables in the social world. And this allows for the classical researcher the possibility of prediction along the lines of the predictions of natural science. Moreover, knowledge about social matters acquired along the lines of the natural sciences is considered to be objective knowledge. This means that statements about research findings in say the field of education are, like statements about findings in the research field of Newtonian physics, considered to be value-free and neutral.

What follows below is a brief outline of some significant considerations in connection with classical research. These considerations have to do with questions about:

1. prediction and control
2. manipulative intervention and power
3. the relation of theory to practice

4. the postulation of universally valid "laws of society"
5. the objective spectator stance of the researcher.

These considerations are significant insofar as they provide a way of illuminating crucial differences between classical research and action research. It will be shown below - and especially in Part Two of this mini-thesis - that given its epistemological grounding action research differs significantly from classical research in at least its conceptions about these five considerations above.

**First.** Classical research, because of the centrality to it of prediction (as is the case with the natural sciences on which it models itself) would define "knowledge" as that which in principle makes possible prediction in respect of and control over social (including educational) phenomena. This expectation of prediction and control makes of a social science what Fay calls a "policy science" and of the researcher a "policy engineer", a policy science being "that set of procedures which enables one to determine the technically best course of action to adopt in order to implement a decision or achieve a goal".<sup>7</sup> Policy science is concerned with means to achieve ends. The policy engineer is one who tries to gain the kind of knowledge that will make it possible to determine what the technically most correct or efficient means to

obtain specific ends is to manipulate variables and this in turn implies control over social phenomena.

**Second.** The concept of control is closely linked with the concept of power. Within the classical research paradigm research is conducted with a view to acquiring knowledge to gain better control over social phenomena, but while that control gives power (ie. manipulative power) to those conducting or initiating research, that power is out of reach of the subjects of research. In the case of educational research, power is out of reach of the subjects of research who include students, teachers, administrators and so on.

**Third,** and closely linked with the above is the idea that research in education is carried out by an expert researcher whose findings may be "applied" by teachers to improve their practice. This idea is in line with situations in the natural sciences, where the physicist, say, explains and predicts events in the natural world, and where these explanations and predictions in no way affect the laws of nature themselves. Similarly the researcher operating within the classical research paradigm conducts research "objectively" in the sense that the project is **about** a social situation and not from **within** that situation. The researcher formulates theory about practices, and the latter are thought to be improvable or correctible provided that theory is a fair approximation to the real-

ity about the social or educational world. On the classical view, it is thought that theory can be applied to practice in order to improve or modify practice. That theory can instead inform or shape practice is a view not accommodated by a radical classical approach, but one which action research purports to accommodate.

**Fourth**, and directly linked to the classical research view about theory as an approximation to the reality about the social world is the idea implicit in classical research approaches to social matters that laws of society have an existence of their own independently of human thought. On this view it is the task of the researcher to discover these laws, and to explain relationships between the variables of the social world.

**Fifth.** Classical research is conceived of as a scientific and objective enterprise. The language of classical research is considered to be neutral and value free. It aims at formalisation and quantification.

This concern with formalisation and quantification is evident from the research design, the presentation of data and from the language in which the project is presented. For example, provision is made in research design for sampling, the use of attitude scales, statistical analysis, for measurement of say levels of competence in certain tasks in relation to age, gender and other relevant

"variables". Instruments used for measurement and analysis are refined so as to eliminate as far as possible personal prejudice and bias. A consequence of all this is that human phenomena are reduced to what John Hughes calls "chunks of data",<sup>8</sup> and the language in which these phenomena is written about aims at mathematical precision. As is the case with Newtonian physics, value judgements, political, religious and moral principles all go by the board as having no scientific status whatever, and hence no relevance, for educational or other social scientific research. All this hangs together with what is referred to above (and following Fay) as a policy science, for with a policy science debates about educational matters, or about political life (to name but two kinds of areas which might be the concern of a social science) are reduced to technicalities, for underlying the view of a policy science is at least the following assumption namely, that a rational solution to educational problems requires a scientific approach.

If education is regarded as a policy science then, should an educational problem be diagnosed as being rooted in inefficient or ineffective teaching strategies or techniques, it is thought that the situation may be improved by adopting more efficient or effective teaching strategies or techniques. Classical research would attempt to discover such strategies or techniques and all that would be required of a teacher, it is thought, is to "apply" the

knowledge gained by the relevant research process. A teacher becomes, to use the words of Ebbutt and Elliott, a "knowledge applier", or a "competent technician".<sup>9</sup>

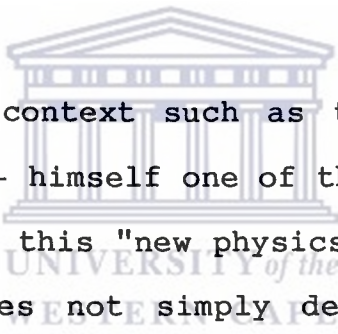
Action research embodies an explicit or implicit awareness of all these facets of classical research and is an attempt to provide a logically and epistemologically more sound approach to research about social matters than the classical research approach.

One of the weaknesses of classical research (as I have pointed out above) is that it models itself on a particular notion of science, namely Newtonian science. But scientists themselves have long ago begun to question the supposed "objectivity" of science. Recognition has been given in for example physics to the impact of the scientist on the subject matter to be investigated. Zukav explains this impact of twentieth century research in physics, quantum mechanics and relativity on the scientists conception of the relationship between scientist (observer) and the subject matter under investigation, and shows in the passage below that physicists have begun questioning the rigid subject-object dichotomy:

The new physics tells us that an observer cannot observe without altering what he sees. Observer and observed are inter-related in a real and fundamental sense.



The exact nature of this interrelation is not clear, but there is a growing body of evidence that the distinction between [subject and object] is illusion. ... Access to the physical world is through experience. The common denominator of all experiences is the "I" that does the experiencing. In short, what we experience is not external reality, but our **interaction** with it.<sup>10</sup>



It is within a context such as that indicated by Zukav that Heisenberg - himself one of the major contributors to the evolution of this "new physics" - observes that natural science "does not simply describe and explain nature"<sup>11</sup> and at the same time assumes that "one can describe the world without speaking about God or ourselves".<sup>12</sup> Instead, for Heisenberg and for exponents of the "new physics", there is a sensitivity to the idea that natural science "is a part of the interplay between nature and ourselves; describes nature as exposed to our method of questioning"<sup>13</sup> (own emphasis).

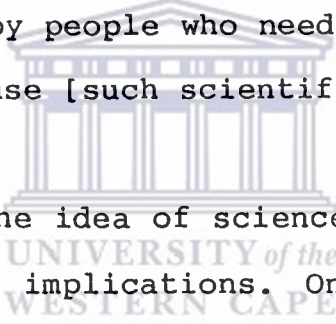
So, in physics there is a serious questioning of the stance of the physicist as objective spectator, uninfluenced by and having no impact on what is considered to be "reality" for natural science. But classical social science research, modelled as it is on Newtonian science,

still insists on a type of objective spectator stance on the part of the researcher that negates the "interplay" between researcher and subjects of research. Action research, it will be shown below, regards this "interplay" as crucial and indeed inevitable in research about social matters.

Social science research needs perhaps not at all to turn to any model of science (be it Newtonian physics or the "new physics") to provide justification for its research design and procedures. If it did, however, Heisenberg's comment that "we cannot disregard the fact that natural science is formed by men"<sup>14</sup> could be regarded as a key statement in the development of such an enterprise. A statement such as this one draws attention to two things. The first of these has been mentioned above and it is namely the interplay between researcher and subjects of research that draws into doubt the possibility of the type of objective stance of the researcher as envisaged by classical research. The second thing is that it draws attention to the idea that if natural science is "formed by man" - if it is essentially a human affair - then it must also be a social affair. That is it must as Luke Hodgkin points out below with reference to mathematics, be social practice:

... although the scientific knowledge which we construct becomes a 'power above our-

selves', it is not a power above society ... I think this is a crucial mistake of those who have tried to separate 'science' in the sense of scientific knowledge from the society in which it is produced and consumed. From a materialist point of view the knowledge produced by scientists has no existence except in so far as it is learnt, understood, applied, transformed in the practice of other scientists ... or more generally, by people who need, for whatever reason, to use [such scientific truths].<sup>15</sup>



An emphasis on the idea of science as social practice has some significant implications. One of these is that it destroys the pervasive veneration of science and of "scientific method" as something elite, and places knowledge generated by natural scientists alongside, not above, knowledge generated in the social sciences.

A further implication of the view that science is social practice has to do with our notion of research and with the stance of the researcher. If all research is social practice then the researcher (be it in the field of the natural sciences or in the field of the social sciences) is inevitably a participant, together with other participants, in the generation of knowledge. The researcher cannot be a spectator as Newtonian science or as classi-

cal research would have it.

The above brief characterisation of classical research makes possible a preliminary characterisation of action research.

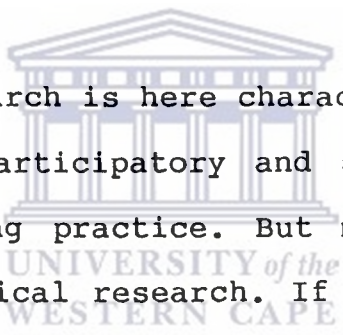
## 1.2 Action Research

Action research has moved away from a particular kind of veneration of science in so far as the Newtonian model of science is not considered to provide the only or the most respected model for research.

Action research has also given interpretations to, for example, research design, objectivity and truth which differ quite radically from interpretations ascribed to these by classical research. Differences between action research and classical research may be illuminated by means of the following description of action research by Cohen and Manion:

Action research is small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention. ...[It] is **situational** - it is concerned with diagnosing a problem in a specific context and attempting to solve it in that context; it is usually (though not

inevitably) **collaborative** - teams of researchers and practitioners work together on a project; it is **participatory** - team members themselves take part directly or indirectly in implementing the research; and it is **self-evaluative** - modifications are continuously evaluated within the ongoing situation, the ultimate objective being to improve practice in some way or other.<sup>16</sup>



Thus action research is here characterised as situational, collaborative, participatory and self-evaluative, and it aims at improving practice. But much the same might be said about classical research. If action research were to provide a more sound epistemological basis for conducting research than does classical research then to simply **claim** that it is situational, collaborative, participatory and self-evaluative would not be sufficient. Action research would have to explicate clearly what these claims involve, and would also have to provide sound justification for them.

In the remainder of Part One I give only an indication as to how action research might explain and justify its claims about its situational, collaborative and participatory character, and deal more fully with these in Part Two of this mini thesis.

The claim of action research about its situatedness indicates that action research gives recognition to the specificity of every human and social situation, and questions the assumptions of classical research that there are "laws of society" expressed by nomological statements and that these laws have universal application.

The researcher within the tradition of classical research would conduct research with a view to formulating universally generalisable hypotheses. The underlying assumption here is that there are "natural" laws within the social world. If these "natural" laws can be discovered and formulated in terms of nomological statements it is possible to predict future events in the social world. And if future events can be predicted then by means of manipulating appropriate variables, the problematic social situation can be remedied. So, it is thought, a particular educational problem, for example the high failure rate at certain levels amongst certain groups in society, can be remedied by applying certain teaching, learning and studying methods and techniques, the latter having been identified after rigorous testing of hypotheses in the classical research tradition. The classical research tradition would have it that there are truths (or near-truths) about social reality that can be established by observation and experiment, and that what holds for the experimental situation can be generalised to hold universally. Classical research claims that for social matters

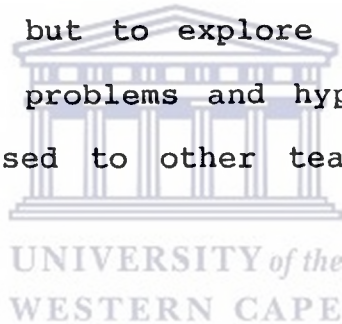
there are law-like regularities similar to "laws of nature", and that these regularities can be identified through correct research procedures.

Action research, with its emphasis on its situational character, is in opposition to classical research in respect of its assumption that there exist universally valid "laws of society". More specifically it is in opposition to the idea, implicit in this claim of classical research, that these laws of society exist somehow independently of human beings. Action research would not wish to deny that there are certain kinds of regularities in human life and that these regularities in some instances resemble immutable laws - for example regularities of human physiology or those found in certain social customs or traditions. What action research challenges with its insistence on its situational character is the kind of prediction supposedly possible in terms of universally valid "laws of society". Action research questions the reification of "laws of society" and instead recognises that the evolvment of regularities in the social world is the outcome of certain kinds of endeavours by human beings.

At this stage a dilemma emerges for action research, one which action researchers themselves recognise: if action research is locked in its situatedness then it jeopardises one of our key expectations about research, namely that

research findings should be of use not only in the situation which had generated them, but they should also be useful for comparable situations. The problem here is what Elliott calls the problem of "generalizability" when he writes about educational action research conducted by the Ford Teaching Project:

We wanted teachers not only to monitor their own problems and develop practical hypotheses about how they arose and could be resolved but to explore the extent to which these problems and hypotheses could be generalised to other teacher's classrooms.<sup>17</sup>



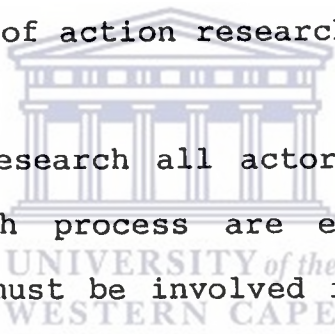
The idea of generalisability is closely bound up with the classical research tradition, but whether or not it need be or indeed can be abandoned while retaining a viable notion of research is a key problem to be investigated in Part Two of this mini thesis.

Action research would also have to explicate claims about its collaborative, participatory and self-evaluative character. For action research collaboration, participation and self-evaluation are closely linked with one another. "Collaboration" could be understood to mean that those engaged with a research project work jointly on it. Action researchers could take issue with Cohen and Manion



when they write that action research is "usually though not inevitably" collaborative. For Grundy and Kemmis, for example, collaboration is a crucial component of action research, and is linked to a conception of participation, in so far as they envisage the planning, implementation and assessment of a research project to be the outcome of the joint efforts of all those involved with the research project.

In this regard Grundy and Kemmis write about the participatory character of action research as follows:



In action research all actors involved in the research process are equal participants, and must be involved in every stage of the research. The research process cannot be planned outside the participant group then 'handed over' for implementation and subsequent evaluation by an outsider.<sup>18</sup>

Grundy and Kemmis link the requirement of participation to the requirement of collaboration in so far as, for them, "the participatory element of action research extends beyond individual participation ... to ... collaborative involvement."<sup>19</sup>

The requirements for action research of collaboration and participation draw attention to the idea that a researcher is or becomes part of the social situation under investigation. The researcher within the action research tradition is not an "objective" spectator as classical research would have it, but acknowledges that the researcher has an impact on the research situation. Action research in other words acknowledges what Heisenberg has called an "interplay" between researcher and subjects of research. This acknowledgement has consequences for a conception of what a social theory is and how it originates and is validated; that is, it has consequences for our conception of the relation of theory to practice. These issues too are explored in Part Two of this mini-thesis.



Part Two of this mini-thesis also probes the action research conception of "participation". If by participation were meant merely those observable movements human beings perform, it is difficult to see how action research differs in any significant way from classical research. If however participation is linked to self-evaluation where the latter is understood to be critical discussion amongst all those engaged in the research project, then it is possible to formulate conceptions of objectivity, knowledge and truth which differ radically from those formulated by classical research.

In Part Two of this mini-thesis I attempt a more comprehensive clarification as well as critique of action research in respect of its claims about its situational, collaborative, participatory and self-evaluative character. For the purposes of this mini-thesis I limit myself there to the listed works of Grundy, Carr and Kemmis and my clarification and critique of the situational, collaborative, participatory and self-evaluative character of action research takes place via a central claim of these authors.



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## 2. ACTION RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE CLAIMS

### 2.1 A Central Claim

One of the central claims of action research concerns claims about its democratic character. Grundy claims that "Action research is an inherently democratic form of research"<sup>20</sup> and Grundy and Kemmis claim that "... action research is a democratic form of research".<sup>21</sup>

Claims about the democratic character of action research seem to be connected with claims about a number of other concepts viz the concepts of participation and collaboration, involvement and improvement, and truth.

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This seems to be indicated by the following quotations below numbered (i) to (v):

- i) "[The] democratic aspect of action research does not arise merely out of a humanistic belief that participation is a 'good thing' or an instrumentalist view that if participants make their own decisions, change is more likely to result".<sup>22</sup>
- ii) "Collaborative participation ... is ... a hallmark of action research and the action researcher."<sup>23</sup>

- iii) "The participatory democratic approach of collaborative action research ...".<sup>24</sup>
- iv) "... the participatory element of action research extends beyond individual participation in the process to involvement. The kind of involvement required is collaborative involvement."<sup>25</sup>
- v) "[Action research is] guided strategically by the rational goal of improvement and the democratic goal of involvement."<sup>26</sup>

Implicit in quotation (i) is a link between the "democratic aspect" of action research and the idea of participation. Quotation (ii) links the concepts of participation and collaboration while quotation (iii) links the concepts of democracy, participation and collaboration. In quotation (iv) the concepts of participation, collaboration and involvement are linked. Quotation (v) links the concepts of improvement, democracy and involvement.

For action research then the concepts of democracy, participation, collaboration, involvement and improvement appear to be intimately interrelated concepts. An investigation of claims about the democratic character of action research would involve an examination of at least

these concepts and of the conceptual connections between them.

But this field of investigation might be narrowed down somewhat, and for the following reason: In the above quotations (i) to (v) the concept of participation appears to be crucially important in so far as it would seem that it provides the link between the concepts of democracy and of research in claims about the "democratic form" of action research. There is talk in quotation (iii) of a "participatory democratic approach" and in quotation (ii) of "collaborative participation". Quotation (iv) circumscribes the notion of participation in action research in terms of the notion of "collaborative involvement", while the latter is seen in quotation (v) as a goal of action research - as its "democratic goal" at that.

Thus in view of the centrality of the concept of participation in claims about the democratic character of action research, it is that concept - the concept of participation - and the conceptual links between research, participation and democracy that need investigation in order to assess claims about the democratic character of action research.

This mini-thesis undertakes such an investigation.

In view of the close connection for action research between the concepts of participation on the one hand and the concepts of collaboration, involvement and improvement on the other hand, the latter concepts will be illuminated in some way by an investigation of the concept of participation.

## 2.2 Participation

The emphasis for action research on participation is grounded in views action researchers have about the nature and function of human language and in expectations they have in connection with groups of people and the generation of knowledge.



A statement like the following about the "participatory element" of action research draws attention to this:

It requires a special kind of communication which recognises the authentic knowledge of group members ... [and] which has been described as 'symmetrical communication'; that is, a level of communication which allows all participants to be partners of communication on equal terms.<sup>27</sup>

Here "a special kind of communication" quite clearly draws attention to some possibilities and limitations of human

language while the idea of participants in dialogue or discussion as "partners of communication on equal terms" would indicate certain kinds of expectations about groups of people and about the contribution of members of a group to the generation of knowledge.

The same kinds of thoughts are expressed, perhaps more clearly and forcefully, by Grundy when she indicates that people have the "right and obligation" to participate in the construction of human knowledge<sup>28</sup> and further, that these "rights" and "obligations" have to do with the nature and function of human speech; they are, for Grundy, linked to the view that "human speech exists for understanding ...".<sup>29</sup>

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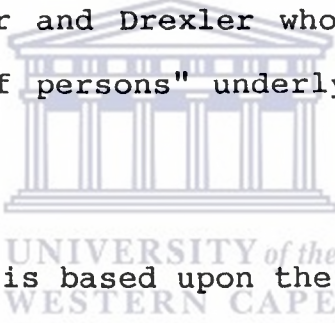
In order to make clear what action researchers mean by **participation**, expressions such as "symmetrical communication" and "partners of communication on equal terms" and statements about the "right and obligation" of people and about human speech and understanding in the situations above have to be closely examined.

One way of doing this is to examine the connection for action researchers between participation and the nature and function of human language. That is, the idea of participation for action research might be made explicit by an attempt to clarify a conception of human language. But fundamental to any conception of human language must



be a conception of human beings and of their possibilities and limitations. Human language is, after all, generated by human beings and its nature as well as function in human life must be discussed against the background of some kind of conception of human beings.

Grundy and Kemmis show some appreciation for this in connection with their views about human language and in connection with their expectations about groups of people and the generation of knowledge mentioned above when they quote from Werner and Drexler who comment upon what they call a "theory of persons" underlying the above mentioned ideas:



This notion is based upon the philosophical assumption that whenever human beings 'act' rather than 'behave' according to stimulus - response sequences, this necessarily involves the reciprocal recognition of human beings as persons appreciated and accepted in the way they strive for consensus and mutual understanding.<sup>30</sup>

Key concepts to emerge from the above quotation are those of action and behaviour and those of consensus and understanding. An examination of the latter two concepts (those of consensus and of understanding) provides insight into the epistemological position of action research. The

first two concepts (those of action and behaviour and the distinction between them) provide a starting point for a formulation of a "theory of persons" and this is what is attempted in the next section.

### 2.3 Theory of Persons

The theory of persons alluded to in the quotation from Werner and Drexler above depends upon a distinction between "action" and "behaviour" where the former has to do with a certain kind of consciousness which may be described in terms of "intelligence" and where the latter has to do with more or less mechanical or instinctive responses to external stimuli. This theory of persons may be more fully explained with reference to certain views of Karl Marx. A brief explication of what may be called Marx's view of man is relevant here in so far as it is possible to give an account in terms of it of the centrality of the notion of participation for action research.

Marx's conception of man centres around the idea of **praxis**. For Marx, man is not the mechanical sum of different spheres (eg. the economic, the political, the moral and so on), but what makes a human being what he or she is, is in words of Gaja Petrovic "the general structure of his relationship toward the world and toward himself."<sup>31</sup> For Marx, man is the being of praxis and this means, essentially, that human activity is a "universal-creative

self-creative activity, [an] activity by which man transforms and creates his world and himself".<sup>32</sup>

The difference between human activity as **praxis** and mere movement in the sense of response to stimuli, or mere happenings or animal behaviour, is that the notion of praxis encompasses a certain type of consciousness. It is a consciousness which is not only reflective, but also self-reflective. Paulo Freire makes this point when he writes that man is the only being able "to treat not only his actions but his very self as the object of his reflection."<sup>33</sup>

Praxis then is reflective and self-reflective activity and it is not activity based solely on say, habit or custom or instinct; it is purposeful and intentional activity. In so far as praxis is purposeful and intentional it is creative and transformative : a "universal-creative self-creative activity."

The idea of praxis as purposeful, intentional activity may be clarified by considering Marx's concept of work or labour. For Marx work or labour is praxis. Significant here is Erich Fromm's observation that for Marx the concept of labour - like that of capital - is not an economic category but an anthropological one. It has to do with a distinguishing feature of human beings. In the words of Fromm, "labour, to Marx, is an activity, not a commo-

dity."<sup>34</sup> For Marx, labour is bound up with man's relationship to nature. To begin with, human beings were dependent for subsistence upon the world as they found it. But this relationship to the material world has changed. Through the mediation of labour or praxis human beings have had and continue to have an impact on the material world for they "begin to **produce** their means of subsistence".<sup>35</sup> Thus human beings - unlike animals - create and witness a changed and changing material world for "By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life."<sup>36</sup>

There is thus a changed and changing relationship between human beings and nature brought about through human labour, and if man's relationship with nature has changed and is changing, man has transformed and is transforming himself. A point like this is quite clear from the following thoughts of Marx on labour:

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and nature. ... By ... acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature.<sup>37</sup>

For Marx, human labour in the sense of praxis is distinguished from other kinds of activities including animal activity by the presence of a type of consciousness that has the potential for creatively imagining prior to materially constructing and producing. Moreover, for Marx, the activity of labour is bound up with purposefulness and intentionality on the part of the person engaged in work. Of the latter Marx says that he:

... raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no momentary act. Besides the exertion of the bodily organs, the process demands that, during the whole operation, the workman's will be steadily in consonance with his purpose.<sup>38</sup>

For Marx, then, labour or work is the distinguishing feature of human beings and if this were granted Fromm is correct in his designation of the concept of labour or

work as an anthropological one.<sup>39</sup> This idea of the concept of work or labour as an anthropological concept draws attention in a significant way to a view of human labour as not only an end in itself; it is not engaged in solely as a means towards attaining some end or goal or objective - the product. It is instead that which is inseparably part of a human being, that by which a human being can be defined as human and through which human beings create and recreate themselves. It is indeed

... the self-expression of man, an expression of his individual physical and mental powers. In this process of genuine activity man develops himself, becomes himself; work is not only a means to an end - the product - but an end in itself, the meaningful expression of human energy...<sup>40</sup>

Bound up with the idea of man as a being of praxis is the idea that human beings are the only beings who can claim to have a history. Here again an understanding of Marx's concept of labour or work as the distinguishing feature of human beings is crucial to an understanding of the idea of the historicity of human beings. Marx's claim that "the whole of what is called world history is nothing but the creation of man by human labour"<sup>41</sup> may be understood by bearing in mind a characterisation of praxis (human labour) as "universal-creative self-creative activity".

Praxis is "the transformation and creation of the world and of man himself."<sup>42</sup> Because this activity is characterised by a type of consciousness which is bound up with purposefulness and intentionality only human beings can properly be said to have a history, unlike animals of which it may be said they have a past but not a history. "One can speak only figuratively of a 'history' of the animal kingdom".<sup>43</sup> The crucial difference between human beings and animals is that "whereas an animal changes by adapting to and transforming its environment without any plan or purpose, man can by his creativity change purposefully his environment and himself."<sup>44</sup>

Human beings then have in a significant way been responsible for creating their past and hence also themselves. This point will be seen to be crucial for action research and for the idea of participation in action research. Moreover, from a recognition of the point about human beings' responsibility for having created their past and themselves, a number of things emerge - all of which are important for an understanding of action research and of the centrality to it of the notion of participation. These things may be summarised as follows:

First, if human beings are distinguished by virtue of that capacity for "universal-creative self-creative activity" then human beings at any given moment in the present can

never be completed, or finished or defined - once for all.

Second, if human beings have created their past then they have the potential also for creating their future.

Third, if creativeness and self-creativity is a distinguishing feature of human beings then a denial or limitation or curtailment of that creative and self-creative activity would constitute a denial or limitation or curtailment of a person's humanity.

Fourth, not only material goods - tangible objects - are the results of human labour (praxis). Human labour generates too a social world - the world of ideas, concepts, institutions, practices and of language. It is against the background of a perception such as this that Freire can speak of human beings as "historical-social beings".<sup>45</sup>

An elucidation of this last idea, the idea that is of the sociality of human beings, is entirely to the point at this stage of this mini-thesis in so far as it throws some light on what we may understand by "participation" in the way in which that concept is used by action researchers.



## 2.4 The Sociality of Human Beings

Thoughts about the sociality of human beings - which include thoughts about their shared meanings and understandings and about the nature of human language - provide a starting point for formulating a conception of research about social matters.

The idea of the sociality of human beings may be clarified by returning to the distinction in the quotation from Werner and Drexler (2.2) between "acting" and "behaving". This distinction is consistent with the distinction between action in the sense of praxis on the one hand and other kinds of movement or behaviour on the other hand, and draws attention to a cardinal notion for action research, namely the notion of action concepts.

For action researchers the 'data' of the social situation under research are human actions as distinct from mere events, happenings or movements. The former embody people's intentions, are characterised by purposeful activity and have to do with a type of consciousness that has been linked above to the idea of human praxis. But not only does the concept of action presuppose intentionality on the part of the actor, it also presupposes a background of rules, norms and conventions against which and in terms of which actions are intelligible or unintelligible, and understood or misunderstood. These rules,

norms and conventions are embodied in social practices and institutions, and in language, about which there have to be some shared understandings.

Now rules, norms and conventions require per definition some assumptions or definitions that are shared by whole groups of people. In order for a person to understand the actions (including speech acts) of others, that person has to share with those others some understandings of certain kinds of things. These shared understandings are also what enable an individual to understand his or her own actions.

What has been called here "shared understandings" might be further elucidated by turning to some thoughts of Charles Taylor and the distinction between what he calls "subjective meanings" and "shared meanings".<sup>46</sup>

Human beings may have and do have what we may call individual beliefs and attitudes. These individual beliefs and attitudes are what Taylor calls "subjective meanings" and the question of their diversity or convergence - whether individuals share them with some other individuals, with many other individuals or with no others - does not enter into the picture here. What does enter into the picture here is that these individual beliefs and attitudes might be beliefs and attitudes about some or other social practices and institutions. One may for example

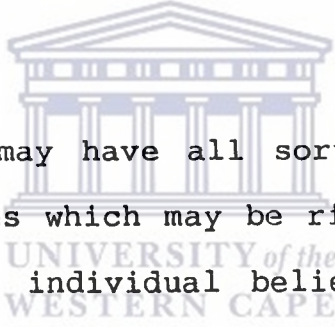
have what may be called individual beliefs or attitudes about current and pervasive teaching practice or about the institution of schooling. A few others or many others or no others may have the same or similar beliefs and attitudes about the practices and institutions under consideration.

Now social institutions and practices all have sets of norms, rules or conventions governing them and in terms of which they are what they are. (The criteria for the identity of those institutions and practices are constituted by those norms, rules and conventions). The point is that the rules, norms and conventions governing social institutions and practices do not themselves depend on the beliefs and attitudes of any single individual; they "are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves."<sup>47</sup> In order for something to be and to be understood to be a social practice, groups of people have to share an understanding of what that practice is or is about. These latter kinds of understandings which are understandings which themselves constitute the meaning for whole groups of people of the institutions and practices under consideration are what Taylor calls "shared meanings".

Now the point is that individual beliefs or attitudes i.e. "subjective meanings" may be had only if the person whose belief or attitude it is already understands what it is he

or she has the attitude or belief about. That is the person in question must share with whole groups of others understandings about for example what distinguishes one set of practices from other sets of practices, or one institution from others.

The following quotation from Taylor's "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man" illustrates the distinction between "subjective meanings", and what he calls here "intersubjective meanings" (what I have called "shared meanings"):



The actors may have all sorts of beliefs and attitudes which may be rightly thought of as their individual beliefs and attitudes, even if others share them; they may subscribe to certain policy goals or certain forms of theory about the polity, or feel resentment at certain things, and so on. They bring these with them into their negotiations, and strive to satisfy them. But what they do not bring into the negotiations is the set of ideas and norms constitutive of negotiation themselves. These must be the common property of the society before there can be any question of anyone entering into negotiation or not. Hence they are not subjective meanings, the

property of one or some individuals, but rather intersubjective meanings, which are constitutive of the social matrix in which individuals find themselves and act.<sup>48</sup>

Shared meanings or intersubjective meanings then are in a sense independent of any individual beliefs or attitudes. They are independent to the extent that they form "the background to ... social action"<sup>49</sup>, and to the extent that they are precisely those things about which there can be individual beliefs or attitudes. Shared meanings place one in the realm of social institutions and practices.

An analysis such as that of Taylor's cannot but emphasise the sociality of human beings. Quite simply, talk about subjective and shared meanings presupposes groups of human beings between whom there are quite distinct relationships. And these distinct relationships are explained in terms of shared understandings. Indeed the concept of sharing discloses a relationship which must be distinguished from a "relationship" (if it may be called that) of human beings existing as separate and separable entities.

The idea of subjective meanings likewise indicates the sociality of human beings in so far as (as noted above) individuals have views, ideas, attitudes and beliefs in respect of institutions and practices, but the point is

precisely that these institutions and practices have been generated and are continually being transformed by whole groups of people albeit over long periods of time.

There is another concept that emerges as clearly as possible from a consideration of the sociality of human beings and this is the concept of language. Subjective meanings and shared meanings make sense only in terms of language. It is in and through language that meanings are conveyed or confirmed and understandings are modified or adjusted.

Moreover, it must be recognised that there is a sense in which there is no separation between language and, say, the practices and institutions which are described or explained or criticised in and by language. The point is, firstly, that language is itself a practice in so far as it is an intentional, purposeful activity human beings engage in. In the second place, what makes a practice or an institution what it is is the language surrounding it. Taylor puts this lucidly when he writes "... that some practice [is what it is] has to do in part with the vocabulary established in a society as appropriate for engaging in it or describing it."<sup>50</sup> In this sense language is embedded in all practices and institutions, is indeed constitutive of these practices and institutions, and shape them.

We may say further that language provides the link amongst human beings. The phenomenon of human language presupposes whole groups of human beings who have generated, sustained and transformed a language. Language is of course not the kind of thing to be generated, sustained and transformed solely by the efforts of any single individual. Indeed an individual becomes a language being only in terms of a language grouping - sometimes called a speech community - in which there is the capacity for what Taylor has called subjective meanings and shared meanings. It is for this kind of reason that Taylor can emphasise society as the locus of the individual.<sup>51</sup>

But to emphasise the centrality of society for the development of an individual human being is not to imply a kind of vertical relationship between society and the individual, with the latter occupying a position of insubordination to "society". There is instead a mutual interdependence between the two in so far as society is not simply an aggregate or conglomerate of individuals but a structure which has coherence and whose members are engaged in specific kinds of relationships with one another. These relationships are constituted by subjective and shared meanings and understandings, and the latter are possible in so far as human beings are beings of praxis, that is, beings who are participants in the construction of language, of the social world, of history and of the future.

Action research is certainly aware of the centrality of language to research. Carr and Kemmis<sup>52</sup> and Grundy<sup>53</sup> for example link a conception of language to a key concept for research, namely truth (see 2.5.3 below), while Grundy and Kemmis show concern for "the development of the researching community as a language community"<sup>54</sup> about which they "believe that the issue deserves further consideration".<sup>55</sup> Grundy and Kemmis also regard as "important" "the role of language as a medium for self-reflection."<sup>56</sup>

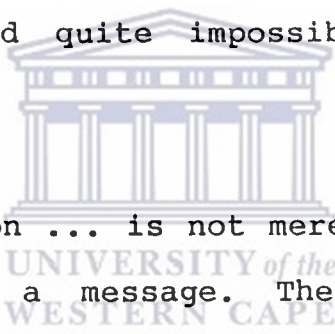
Now given thoughts about human beings as beings of praxis, and thoughts about language as expressed in sections 2.3 and 2.4 of this mini thesis, then the concern of Grundy and Kemmis to see the development of research communities as language communities appears to be misplaced, and for the simple reason that any community of human beings is and must necessarily be a language community. Similarly, language as "a medium for self-reflection" is not merely "important"; self (or any other kind of) reflection cannot take place except in and through language.

Grundy and Kemmis might here do better by clearly articulating thoughts about the development of research communities as consciously critical and self-critical communities sensitive to the kind of phenomenon human language is, and showing awareness of the centrality of critical discussion to research. In this respect Grundy, Carr and Kemmis in the course of an articulation of the link between language



and truth offer less ambiguous insights (see 2.5.1 below).

If action research were to claim a sounder epistemological basis than does classical research then it would have to articulate clearly a view of participation and a view of the link between participation and language. That is, action research would have to explain how, in any act of communication, understanding requires a participant or performative stance as opposed to a spectator stance - the latter is indeed quite impossible, as Richard Winter explains:



Communication ... is not merely the transmission of a message. The words of a telegram may be 'transmitted' between two pieces of electrical equipment, but its properties as a communication of meanings are created by the interpretive activities of the sender and the receiver ....<sup>57</sup>

Quite clearly what is involved here is the participation of writer and reader (or speaker and audience) in a world of shared meanings and understandings. The writer or speaker may of course, given the response of the audience, consider the "message" to be understood or misunderstood. But the point is that for communication to be at all possible there must be the possibility at least of intel-

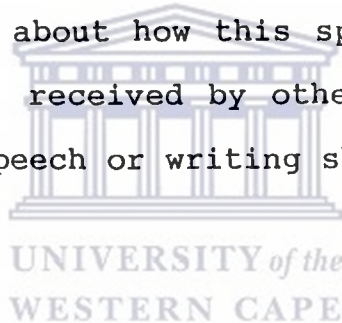
ligibility of meaning. And there can be such a possibility only if there is at least one other who participates in "the verbal and cultural system of which the particular expression forms an element."<sup>58</sup> Participation must not be understood here to entail merely a one-way relationship between speaker or writer and audience as if the former simply issued "transparent" signs or symbols. Instead:

I can only communicate by **presupposing** the intelligibility of my speech for the Other, and I can only make this presupposition because I interpret its intelligibility for myself by envisaging its intelligibility for the Other. In other words intelligibility resides in the presupposition of the interchangeability of perspectives between speaker and hearer, writer and reader.<sup>59</sup>

Important here is the expression "interchangeability of perspectives" in so far as this points quite clearly to a state where neither speaker nor audience can be left unaffected in some way or other by an act of communication. An act of communication requires per definition participation of a certain kind on the part of speaker or writer and audience, and participation here involves participation in the formulation or reformulation of

meanings and understandings. It is with this in mind that Winter makes the important point below about the impact of language on the development of human beings, of what I have termed, following Marx, beings of praxis:

Communication ... is always a formulation of the Self ... in the light of the Self's mastery of the language, the setting, and (above all) through the Self's awareness of its own nature as the grounds for its assumptions about how this speech or writing will be received by others, and hence what this speech or writing should or might mean.<sup>60</sup>



Now if every act of communication is a "formulation of the Self" - and this "formulation of the Self" must hold equally for writer or speaker and for audience - and if meanings and understandings are constituted in and through language then Winter is correct in observing that "no speech can claim the finality of correctness".<sup>61</sup> And if any act of communication cannot claim for itself the status of final correctness, then we have to envisage a relationship between theory and practice quite different from that envisaged by classical research. With these thoughts about the "nature" of language in mind we have to conclude, with Winter, that theory cannot legislate for social action in the way envisaged by classical research:


... rather, it presupposes a relationship between theorist and social actor which must be continuous and unending, because it is both irremediably particularised and endlessly problematic. This is because the theorist **requires** an Other, not as an object but, in some sense, as a 'collaborator' in that reflexive intersubjectivity where meaning itself resides.<sup>62</sup>

Thoughts about the relationship between theory and practice are taken up more fully under 2.5 below, but at least two further thoughts are worth mention here.

Firstly, Winter's idea that speech is always a formulation of the self draws attention to the idea that description - supposedly neutral, objective and of the spectator type - is NOT the only or the most significant feature of language. One may think here of classical research where the descriptive feature of language is paramount, where only deductive - nomological statements are accorded "scientific status" and where in other words only a limited feature of language is considered to be worthwhile for the purposes of research.

Secondly, thoughts like these of Winter about language allow for a more profound grasp of the concepts of "participation" and "collaboration" as characteristics of action research, for they make possible a reading of these concepts as going beyond merely the observable behaviour of those involved in research activities. "Participation" and "collaboration" have to do less with the (perhaps frenzied) activities of those engaged in research; they have to do more with a "formulation of the Self".

## 2.5 Knowledge Claims, Participation and Social Science Research




Given a conception of the social world as a humanly constructed one, two comments - one about participation and the other about truth - are to the point here.

It is becoming clear, and will become clearer in what follows in this section, that participation (as that concept has been explicated towards the end of the previous section) is a necessary element of all research. Classical research indeed fools itself with claims about a neutral, objective, spectator stance. Such a stance is indeed quite impossible.

It has also become clear that research about social matters may be understood NOT to be a question of **discovering** truths about the social world. Research is NOT a question

about acquiring knowledge where "knowledge" is understood to be an articulation of what Winter identifies as a "descriptive grasp of an external object world through the supposedly transparent medium of referential language."<sup>63</sup> Research about social matters is not a matter of simply "discovering 'what is the case' with respect to the social world, discovering facts whose existence is independent of the researcher's state of mind".<sup>64</sup> Rather, given a conception of the social world as humanly constructed, thoughts about social scientific research would have to do with:<sup>65</sup>

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- The logo of the University of the Western Cape, featuring a classical building with columns and a pediment, with the text "UNIVERSITY of the WESTERN CAPE" below it.
- \* acquiring an understanding of the intentions of social actors;
  - \* making clear the rules, norms and conventions against the background and in terms of which the actors act;
  - \* attempting to understand people's shared meanings and understandings in respect of social practices and institutions.

All of this takes place within the context of a critical discussion between researcher and subjects of research. Critical discussion here is a matter of asking questions and formulating responses, for meanings are constituted and reconstituted in an act of communication.

Now research is of course a human activity. Like other activities (as distinct from mere response to stimuli or

random movement) it is characterised by being purposeful and intentional. Research may be said to be a kind of purposeful, intentional finding out or enquiry. But research can and must be distinguished from other kinds of purposeful, intentional forms of enquiry, otherwise the very notion of research goes by the board.

Against the background of views on language and the act of communication explicated above, Winter articulates a conception of research and of action that attempts to preserve the fragile relationship between the two; a relationship in which a distinction is made between research and those human activities about which there can be research, but one which, at the same time, avoids classical research's rigid distinction between action and research and which relegates social action to that sphere to which theoretical findings need to be "applied". Winter refers in this connection to action and research as being both "distinct and mutually required",<sup>66</sup> and to a "reflexive conception of research's relation to action ... [which] preserves the authenticity of both...."<sup>67</sup> Thus Winter conceives of action and research in a way:

... which preserves research's capacity for achieving a critical distance from action AND preserves action's intelligibility as a creative, rather than a causally determined response to interpretive meaning.<sup>68</sup>

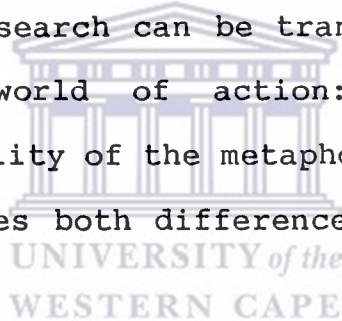
What Winter struggles to avoid here (and what action researchers should avoid too if their conception of research were to be any different from that of classical research) is a formulation of research that embodies a deterministic relationship between research and action and where the former prescribes for and is "applied to" the latter. The achievement of such a "critical distance" between action and research as envisaged by Winter is a prerequisite for gaining clarity and greater understanding about the actions in question.

Winter articulates these thoughts, as well as thoughts about the possibility of change - where he sees the very separation of action and research as a requirement for change - as follows:

To note action and research as a difference is to note that action proceeds on a basis which must always fall short of a theoretically conceivable certainty. The knowledge which guides action can always provisionally be deemed to be sufficient for **that** course of action at **that** time, but it can also be deemed insufficient, in the light of a notion of 'greater understanding' which not - action - but - research could possibly create. The separation of action and research is thus one articulation of a



faith in the possibility of change; action is conceived as meshed (however loosely) into a social system, whereas research is the process whereby the self-perpetuating processes of that system might be interrupted. However, although the possibility of change is grounded in the **distinction** between action and research, it requires equally an intimate and principled linkage between the two, in order that the 'findings' of research can be translatable back into the world of action: indeed the intelligibility of the metaphor of translation requires both difference and similarity.<sup>69</sup>



A conception of research such as Winter's that emphasises the "reflexive" relationship between action and research yields a conception of change different from that yielded by classical research. With the latter, change is envisaged as the result of the **application** of the outcome of theorising (that is, theory) to practice or action, and with it the concomitant thoughts about manipulation and policy engineering.

On a conception of research such as Winter's, research is envisaged not as prescriptive in respect of action (in the

sense in which it is envisaged as such by classical research). Research is envisaged rather as making clearer the social actor's possible courses of action, some of which might be more appropriate in respect of the actor's aspirations, and some of which might be less appropriate:

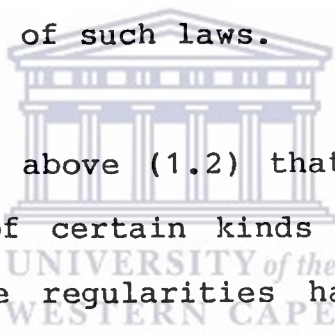
Research is the theoretical moment when action reviews its resources for meaning construction ... and in doing so recognises that surrounding action's here-and-now choices are an array of possibilities ... some of which could, now, be formulated as indeed possibilities.<sup>70</sup>

Research's task as formulating possibilities for action which, for Winter, takes place within the context of research's questioning of action, CANNOT be made clear except in terms of the ideas of action concepts and of human language. And this of course points to an approach that takes seriously the idea that the social world is a human construct. On such an approach - and action research is potentially such an approach - we have to give an account of key concepts of research that differ fundamentally from an account of these concepts as generated by classical research. Key concepts of research discussed below are the concepts of **Explanation**, of **Social Theory** and of **Truth** - all of which are central to an understand-

ing of the epistemological grounding of action research.

### 5.1 Explanation

On an approach that takes seriously the idea that society is a human construct the idea that "laws of society" exist in a fashion analogous to Newtonian laws of science, must go by the board. Classical research would have it that human agents have no or only minimal impact on laws of society and are perhaps also only minimally responsible for the existence of such laws.



I have indicated above (1.2) that one would not dispute the occurrence of certain kinds of regularities in society, but these regularities have to do with humanly constructed practices and institutions, with norms and conventions. The kind of "prediction" operative in social matters is a different kind of prediction from that which obtains in Newtonian science. We can often fairly accurately "predict" how people would respond in given situations but our ability to engage in this kind of prediction is dependent on our sharing certain meanings and understandings. It is in no way the causal prediction obtainable in a nomological statement of the type "whenever A then B". The search for causal laws of this kind is untenable on a view of society as a human construct.

Explanations of social matters are NOT of the deductive nomological kind.

Indeed, research about social matters tries to uncover subjective and shared meanings about institutions and practices, and what Fay <sup>71</sup> has called quasi-causal and functional explanations of social actions.

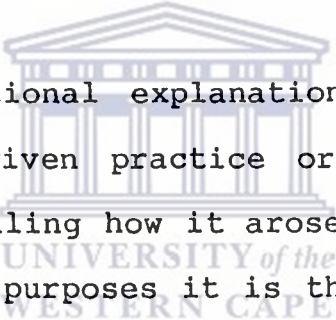
The idea of quasi-causal explanations may be clarified by contrasting these with causal explanations of the deductive nomological kind. The difference between the former and the latter may be illuminated through the word **conditionship** where Fay<sup>72</sup> refers to the relationship between what he calls "certain configurations of conditions" and "certain forms of action, rules and common meanings" as conditionship relations. Conditionship relations differ from causal relations insofar as the latter is a matter of more or less rigid cause-effect relations while the former recognise that the perceptions and understandings of the observing agent must be taken into account as a mediating factor in any examination which attempts to explain why certain social circumstances or conditions give rise to certain actions, rules and norms, not in the sense of causing them as in a cause-effect relationship but in the sense of asking: Which conditions WARRANT (in contrast to CAUSE) certain forms of behaviour. Fay observes in this regard:

... men act in terms of their interpretations of, and intentions towards, their external conditions, rather than being governed by them, and therefore these conditions must be understood not as causes but as warranting conditions which make a particular action or belief, more 'reasonable', 'justified', or 'appropriate', given the desires, beliefs, and expectations of the actors.<sup>73</sup>

Quasi-causal explanations thus have to do with the intentions and interpretations of social actors. Fay points out however that there are "features of social life which ... cannot be explained by referring to the intentions of the individuals concerned."<sup>74</sup> This feature of social life is what Fay refers to as "the pattern of unintended consequences of actions"<sup>75</sup> about which he writes:

Societies consist of ordered sets of relationships among their members, and it is this basic fact which accounts for the phenomenon that when an action is performed its results rebound throughout the society in ways that are relatively predictable, though the actors themselves might not have been aware of them....<sup>76</sup>

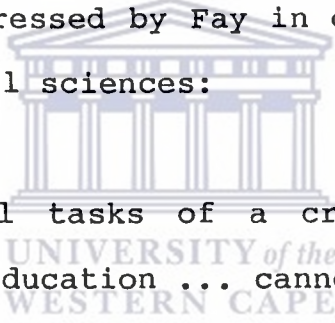
Fay sees it as the task of a social science to explore these patterns of unintended consequences, and in particular those which reinforce "the actions, beliefs, and roles of the other members of the society...."<sup>77</sup> Those patterns of unintended consequences that, in other words, reinforce and support the status quo. For Fay a social science can achieve this by means of functional explanations - where functional explanations are understood to be explanations of the function of a particular part or organ of the social system, as explained below:



... a functional explanation attempts to explain a given practice or institution, not by revealing how it arose, nor by disclosing the purposes it is thought to fulfil, but by explaining why it continues to exist, and it does this by demonstrating the contribution its effects make to the continued existence of the social whole which in turn sustains it. A functional analysis uncovers the ways in which the (unintended) consequences of an act or the (unforeseen) effects of an institutional practice modify a host of other social factors, demonstrating how such effects reinforce and strengthen that complex of factors which comprises the social whole, and how, in turn, this complex of factors

helps to maintain the original act or practice.<sup>78</sup>

The emphasis of action research on its situational character (1.2 below) might be considered a tacit acknowledgement that social matters cannot be explained in terms of causal laws of the deductive nomological kind. The following thoughts of Kemmis on educational action research illuminates the point about the situatedness of action research, and illuminates links between action research and thoughts expressed by Fay in connection with explanation in the social sciences:



The critical tasks of a critical social science in education ... cannot be divorced from the practical realities of education in particular schools and classrooms, nor from the political reality that schools themselves are concrete historical expressions of the relationship between education and society.<sup>79</sup>

Now Kemmis's talk of the "critical tasks" of a "critical social science" aside (since these expressions themselves need clarification), his concern with "particular schools and classrooms" indicates as clearly as possible a concern with what one may call the specificity of every social

situation that rules out prediction of the kind envisaged by classical research.

Kemmis's view about schools as "concrete historical expressions" of the relationship between education and society" is a further expression of the situatedness of particular social institutions. In this instance Kemmis draws attention to the situatedness of specific institutions of society (namely educational institutions) within their historical framework. Now given the specificity as well as historical situatedness of a social institution, explanations about its origin, development and functioning CANNOT be done in terms of deductive nomological statements, but rather in terms of what Fay has called quasi-causal and functional explanations.

Quasi-causal and functional explanations are called for by action research for another reason: action research recognises and admits that human perceptions and understandings of institutions and practices feature in any explanation of social matters:

... we must remember that educational situations are constituted as such not only in terms of such things as bricks and mortar, financial and curriculum resources, the use of time, and organisational arrangements. More importantly, they have their educa-



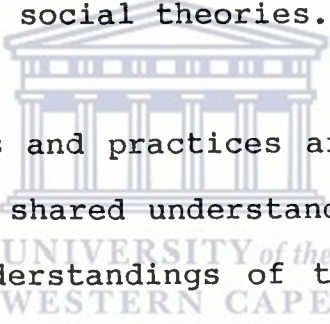
tional character because people act in them in certain ways which they understand as educational.<sup>80</sup>

All of this means that action research recognises that social reality is not a "given". The actions, the subjective understandings and the shared understandings of human beings in respect of social institutions and practices - all of which constitute what we may call "social reality" - are the actions and understandings of ontologically free agents, so that human actions and human understandings are per definition changeable by human intervention. This means that prediction and control (in the sense in which these feature in classical research) cannot, logically, feature in action research.

## 5.2 Social Theory

The idea of society as a human construct has the following implications for a conception of a social theory: a social theory cannot be a theory about something that has an existence separate and separable from the actions and understandings of human beings in respect of social institutions and practices. Here views of Charles Taylor are again illuminating. Taylor writes that "the theory is not about an independent object, but one that is partly constituted by self-understanding."<sup>81</sup> The object of a social theory is "partly constituted by self-understandings" in

so far as for example, practices that are carried on in a society are and can be carried on only if people have an understanding of what it is they are doing. Likewise, in order for people to engage in the workings of an institution, or in order for people to engage in criticism or commendation of an institution, they have to have some kind of understanding of, say, the norms and conventions associated with the institution. These kinds of understandings Taylor calls self-understandings and it is in the sense outlined here that he considers them to be "constitutive" of social theories.

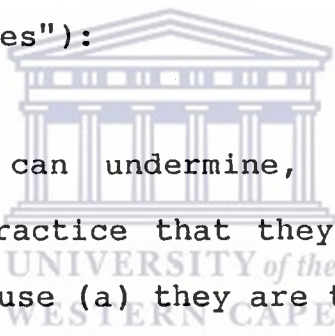


Thus institutions and practices are what they are because of **both** people's shared understandings of them as well as people's self-understandings of them. A social theory is formulated to explain our (shared or self) understandings of, amongst others, institutions or practices, or the unintended consequences of social action, or the functions of certain institutions and practices. In other words, "social theory arises when we try to formulate explicitly what we are doing, describe the activity which is central to a practice, and articulate the norms which are essential to it."<sup>82</sup>

But what is important here is that the very character of what we are trying to describe or explain is affected by those same descriptions and explanations; there is, so to speak, a reciprocal relationship between the "existence"

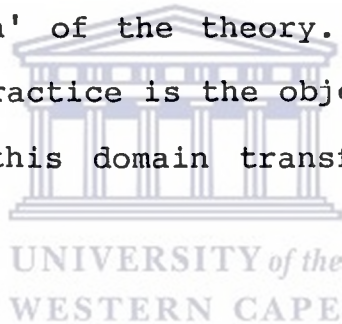
of institution and practices on the one hand and our self-understandings and shared understandings of them on the other hand. And this means that attempts to formulate theory about institutions and practices may and do have an impact on these same institutions and practices.

Useful here are Taylor's comments on the "striking disanalogy" between natural science and political theories (where "natural science" must be taken to mean Newtonian science, and where "social theories" can substitute for "political theories"):



The latter can undermine, strengthen or shape the practice that they bear on. And that is because (a) they are theories about practices, which (b) are partly constituted by certain self-understandings. To the extent that (c) theories transform this self-understanding, they undercut, bolster or transform the constitutive features of practices. We could put this another way by saying that political theories are not about independent objects in the way that theories are in natural science. There the relation of knowledge to practice is that one applies what one knows about causal powers to particular cases, but the truths about such causal powers that one banks on

are thought to remain unchanged. That is the point of saying that theory here is about an independent object. In politics, on the other hand, accepting a theory can transform what the theory bears on. Put a third way we can say that while natural science theory also transforms practice, the practice it transforms is not what the theory is about. It is in this case external to the theory. We think of it as an 'application' of the theory. But in politics, the practice is the object of theory. Theory in this domain transforms its own practice.<sup>83</sup>



It is against this kind of background that claims of action research about the origins, development and validation of a social theory might be understood.

For action research, social theory has its **origins** in a need for change, that is it has its origins in problems surrounding practices in specific social situations. This much is clear from a statement such as the following about the claim of action research that it aims at improvement:

Action research aims at improvement in three areas:

- (1) the improvement of a **practice**

- (2) the improvement (or professional development) of the **understanding** of the practice by its practitioners, and
- (3) the improvement of the **situation** in which the practice takes place.<sup>84</sup>

Classical research, too, recognises a need for change, and it might be argued that what is said above about improvement may apply equally to classical research. But "improvement" for classical research has to do with manipulation of variables and control over the social situation in question. Action research tries to avoid imputations of manipulation and control, and consequently claims that "The aim of involvement stands shoulder to shoulder with the aim of improvement."<sup>85</sup> Action research hopes to avoid the prescriptive character of classical research theory by claiming that "those involved in the practice being considered are to be involved in all its phases of planning, acting, observing and reflecting,"<sup>86</sup> in so far as this involvement has to do with the generation of knowledge and claims about what may be considered to be the truth about the social situation in question.

A more thoroughgoing elucidation and criticism of the aim of involvement of action research is entirely to the point and will be undertaken too under a discussion of a conception of truth (below).


Action research envisages the **development** of a social theory in a way which differs radically from the way it is envisaged by classical research. For action research a social theory is not brought to a research situation in fully developed form, ready for implementation in order to improve practice. It is not a question of applying a "fully completed set of laws"<sup>87</sup> to the research situation. For action research developing a social theory is a question of discussion, correction, formulation and reformulation in the light of a critical inter-change between researcher and subjects under research. The subjects of research "help to fashion [the theory] by their own choices and actions, and by their responses to it."<sup>88</sup> This point gives substance to claims of action research about the "involvement" of all concerned with a research project.

Action research's view about the **validation** of a social theory likewise differs from that of classical research. Grundy and Kemmis claim that "Action research does not consist in the application of theory to practice, but it does involve a reciprocal relationship between theory and practice."<sup>89</sup> For action research, the validation of theory is not a matter of its "scientific status" as envisaged by classical research. The point about the reciprocity between theory and practice indicates (as Taylor would put it) that if theory can transform practice

then it can be tested in the quality of the practice it informs:

What makes a theory right is that it brings practice out in the clear; that its adoption makes possible what is in some sense a more effective practice.<sup>90</sup>

Taylor makes it quite clear that the arena for testing out a theory is not an artificially constructed situation. The arena for testing out a social theory is the social situation itself:



... because theories which are about practices are self-definitions, and hence alter the practices, the proof of the validity of a theory can come in the changed quality of the practice it enables.... good theory enables practice to become less stumbling and more clairvoyant.<sup>91</sup>

Action research is in line with this view, as the following comment by Kemmis shows:

Educational researchers can measure the value of their work by the extent to which

education becomes, in practice, more rational, just, humane and socially-integrative as a consequence of their collaborative efforts with others to improve it.<sup>92</sup>

A social theory then originates, develops and is validated in a particular social situation and through critical interchange or critical discussion between researcher and subjects of research, in a testing out or critique of the theory. All this amounts to is an ongoing correction of the theory, which means that the theory is not intended to be self-contained. Instead, it is always referred for its validity to the social actors of that social situation for which it is formulated. In classical research, on the other hand, the validation of a theory lies in itself so that the theory is self-contained and in that sense entrenched against its acceptance or non-acceptance by those whom it concerns most closely.

Finally, the above thoughts - especially those about the development of a social theory - give substance to the initial characterisation of action research as, amongst other things, "situational", for they point as clearly as possible to the emphasis for action research on actual social situations as opposed to classical research's ideal of experimental situations for the development of social theory.



### 5.3 Truth

Views like those explained above about the origin, development and validation of a social theory prepares the ground for a conception of truth that denies a crude correspondence theory of truth where true statements are thought to be statements that "name" things "out there". It also denies any kind of objectification of truth - that is it denies the view that truths are eternal and unchanging, and awaiting discovery. It is for reasons like these that Carr and Kemmis refer to truth as "socially constructed".<sup>93</sup>

The idea of truth as "socially constructed" is linked for action research to critical discussion and to the ideas of participation and involvement. What this entails can be illustrated by means of what Grundy and Kemmis have called the four "moments" of action research.<sup>94</sup> For Grundy and Kemmis these four "moments" embody the following four stages in an action research project:

1. **Planning** (what action must be taken in the social world).
2. **Action** (in the social world, guided or informed by prior planning).
3. **Observation** (of action undertaken, and essential for the fourth "moment" of
4. **Reflection** (on prior action and observation, and a

prerequisite for further planning of further action).<sup>95</sup>

Action research locates these four "moments" in

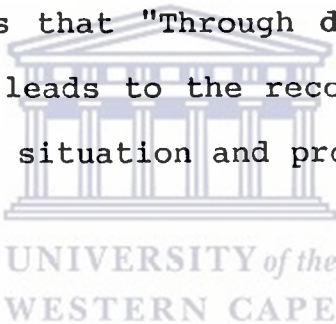
- A. **Discourse** among participants, where all those engaged in the action research project will be required to engage in stages 1 and 4 - the stages of planning and reflection; and
- B. **Practice** in the social world where all those engaged in the project are required to engage in stages 2 and 3 - the stages of action and of observation of that action.<sup>96</sup>

In this, action research may contrast radically with classical research. With the latter, a fully developed theory is brought to bear on practice; theory is "applied" to practice. But action research is sensitive to thoughts similar to those raised by Taylor about the relationship of reciprocity between theory and the "objects" of theory, namely institutions and practices and people's understanding of them.

Grundy points out, in connection with an illustration of the "moments" of an action research project that the methodology of action research "is not a linear methodology, beginning with plans and ending with the evaluation of actions taken along the way."<sup>97</sup> Instead, the methodology of action research reflects what Winter has termed

(above) the reflexivity of action and research. Action research in this respect negates classical research's dichotomy of theory and practice, research and action. Indeed the term "action research" may be construed to be an indication of the reflexivity of action and research, an indication that while there is a sense in which we have to separate action from research, it is not in the sense indicated by classical research.

What is of especial importance here is the observation of Grundy and Kemmis that "Through discourse among participants reflection leads to the reconstruction of the meaning of the social situation and provides the basis for the revised plan."<sup>98</sup>



This "reconstruction of the meaning of the social situation" has to do with what action research calls the enlightenment of social actors, which proceeds by way of (1) the development of an historical account of the social situation, (2) by way of ideology critique of the social situation and (3) by way of a kind of psychoanalytic dialogue, and has, claims action research, emancipatory potential.

For Carr and Kemmis the emancipatory potential of action research has to do with the emancipation of practitioners from "the often unseen constraints of assumptions, habit, precedent, coercion and ideology."<sup>99</sup> Enlightenment which,

for action research, is a prerequisite for emancipation, is "a systematic learning process aimed at the development of knowledge about the practices being considered and the conditions under which they take place."<sup>100</sup>

Action research then aims at enlightening the social actor about what one may call the "reality" about social situations, or, as Grundy would have it, "Reflection will produce enlightenment with respect to their own practice and also with respect to the wider social context of the practice."<sup>101</sup>

Two things are worth mention here in connection with the above statement by Grundy. The first is that "reflection" here is taken to mean reflective inquiry within the context of a critical discussion amongst those engaged in the action research project. Action research envisages this engagement has participatory and collaborative:

... to achieve genuine and undistorted enlightenment in the whole group review process [action research] must engage the experience and understanding of all participants ... [and] allow them to communicate openly and freely ...<sup>102</sup>

As will be seen below, action research bases claims about its democratic character on the notion of the attainment

of "genuine and undistorted enlightenment" that flows from the engagement of "all participants" who do so "openly and freely".

The other point worth mentioning in connection with Grundy's statement is that enlightenment with regard to (1) practitioners' own practices and (2) the wider social context of that practice requires, for action research, that the critical discussion takes the form of a kind of psychoanalysis, that it undertakes ideology critique and develops an historical account of the social situation in question.

Action research believes that ideology critique can be undertaken by way of procedures similar to the procedures of psychoanalysis. The latter, claim Carr and Kemmis, is a way of bringing out into the open "those distortions in patients' self-formative processes which prevent a correct understanding of themselves and their actions."<sup>103</sup> And the aim is here not only for the therapist to come to an understanding and offer an explanation to the patient of these "distortions" but for the patient to come to these understandings and offer these explanations too in order to be able to free herself or himself of these distortions. Social groups may follow the procedures of psychoanalysis in order firstly to make clear how their common-sense understandings of the social world mask or distort an oppressive social order and in this sense go

contrary to the interests of those groups, and secondly how these same common-sense understandings of the social world do give an indication of what the interests of those groups really are. Carr and Kemmis put things this way:

Social groups ... are prevented from achieving a correct understanding of their situation because, under the sway of ideological systems of ideas, they have passively accepted an illusory account of reality that prevents them from recognising and pursuing their common interests and goals. For this reason, critique is aimed at revealing to individuals how their beliefs and attitudes may be ideological illusions that help to preserve a social order which is alien to their collective experience and needs. By demonstrating how ideological forces generate erroneous self-understandings, ideology critique aims to reveal their deceptive nature and so strip them of their power.

As well as revealing how ideology may conceal contradictions and inadequacies inherent in ideas and beliefs, ideology critique also attempts to show how these same ideas and beliefs contain some indica-

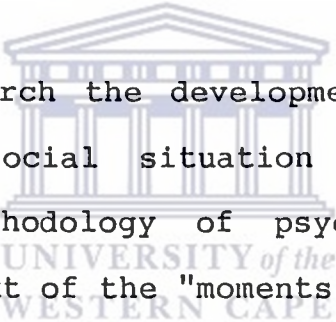
tion of the real interests of individuals and thereby imply some alternative self-conception based on their true meaning. In this sense, ideology critique attempts to show individuals how their erroneous self-understandings nevertheless intimate, in a disguised form, their real needs and purposes.<sup>104</sup>

For action research ideology critique undertaken through the procedures of psychoanalysis goes hand in hand with the development of an historical account of the social situation in question. The explanation of human beings as beings of praxis (2.3 above) implies the ontological freedom of human beings and in so far as in terms of freedom (or oppression) human beings have a history it follows that historical perspective must be an essential constituent of the action research approach. Carr and Kemmis quite correctly place human beings as "historical agents ... [whose] consciousness arises from and is shaped by their historical practice ...".<sup>105</sup>

Developing an historical account should be emancipatory because it draws attention to the potential of human beings as far as both freedom and the suppression thereof is concerned. Through the development of an historical account one becomes conscious of what lies in the past -

and this consciousness includes knowledge of suffering, and of oppression. Ignorance of past suffering

not only rendered existing forms of domination 'natural' and acceptable, but also made it more difficult for those who were victimised by such oppression to develop an ontological basis for challenging the ideological and political conditions that produced such suffering.<sup>106</sup>



For action research the development of a historical account of the social situation and ideology critique through the methodology of psychoanalysis take place within the context of the "moments" of the action research project as indicated above. Central to all this is the idea of rigorously critical and self-critical discussion, and this discussion centres around people's subjective understandings and their shared understandings about practices and institutions and the historical development of these. And it is in and through this kind of critical discussion that understandings are modified and corrected and new meanings are generated. In this respect action research is consistent with and takes seriously ideas explicated above about the social world as a human construct. Action research also takes seriously the view (concomitant with the latter view) that in respect of the social world what we may call "knowledge" has to do with



the understandings of human beings and not with something existing independently of human thought. In this respect action research is grounded in an epistemology that differs radically from that in which classical research is grounded.

But there are at least two aspects of the development by action research of its epistemology that, within the scope of this mini-thesis, merit attention. The first of these two aspects has to do with the link, for action research, between truth and consensus and the second concerns claims about the democratic character of action research. These two aspects of the epistemology surrounding action research are almost inseparably linked, as will become clear below.

In regard to the first of these two aspects, Grundy claims:

Consensual theories of truth are fundamental to the epistemology underlying the participatory nature of action research. Put simply, consensus theories of truth recognise that within the construction of human knowledge, what we are prepared to count as truth is that which groups of people are prepared to agree is true.<sup>107</sup>

Here Grundy posits a link between truth and agreement, and she does this via the idea of participation. Participation is understood as the engagement of all the members of the research project in unconstrained critical discussion. Truth is considered to be the outcome of such discussion. Agreement here is quite clearly to be understood as consensus amongst members of the group.

Now there is a link between participation in the sense of critical and self-critical discussion on the one hand and a certain kind of agreement on the other hand. In regard to social matters the discussion centres around institutions and practices and people's understandings of these. These are subjective as well as shared understandings. There could in fact be no possibility of critical discussion or indeed of any kind of communication if there were no possibility of shared understandings. Here shared understandings can be taken to mean a certain kind of agreement amongst people. But the linking of truth and agreement where agreement is taken to mean consensus is a weakness in the epistemological stance of action research.

One problem that arises with this linking of truth and agreement (consensus) is that this consensus might be consensus amongst a relatively circumscribed group. That truth-telling is linked to consensus among members of a relatively circumscribed group may be inferred from a

statement such as the following by Grundy that "...it is always the knowledge generated from within the action research group which is to be recognised as the authentic and legitimate basis for action, not knowledge from 'outside'".<sup>108</sup>

Given the latter two statements by Grundy, it could appear as if "truth" were a matter of decision-making. Now if truth were a matter of decision-making involving a relatively circumscribed group of people, we might meaningfully raise the following query: Is it not possible that the members of that group are all mistaken or suffer some kind of delusion or are engaged in self-deception? One may think here of a group of people who may arrive at uncoerced agreement that mass suicide is the solution to certain social problems, while another group might consider genocide the solution to their particular social problems.

The point is that a view that regards consensus or agreement amongst members of a group as a sufficient condition for truth gives rise to problems about the validation of true statements. Agreement - even uncoerced agreement on the part of critical, intelligent people - is not a sufficient condition for truth.

The idea that truth depends on agreement amongst members of a relatively circumscribed group has implications for a

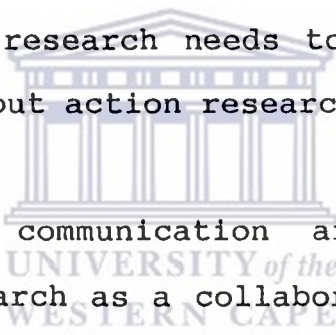
conception of truth in relation to broader human society, in so far as there could be so many "truths" for so many groups, each of the latter being a closed community, generating its own criteria for what is to count as "knowledge" and validating its own truths independently and unconnectedly from the broader human and research community.

This could have implications for the very idea of research, and for the question of dissemination of research findings. That truth is what a circumscribed group of human beings agree to could mean that research findings are in every case useful only for that particular research community, and that other groups may not benefit from the research findings of that first-mentioned group. Now while there cannot be, to use words of Carr, a "philosophically uncontested, ahistorical concept of 'research'"<sup>109</sup> insofar as the relationship between our conception of research and our research practices is one of reciprocity, and our conception of what research is or should be about is always subject to modification, nevertheless, at any given point in time, there must be some shared understandings about what can count as "research". Without such shared understandings the very notion of "research" becomes meaningless.

Now action research, with its emphasis that the knowledge generated by a research group is the only authentic knowl-

edge for that group, runs the very real risk of allowing every research group - no matter how circumscribed it is as far as membership is concerned - of detaching itself from broader human society in respect of the concept of "research" and in respect of the generalisability of research findings.

Action research is well aware of problems of this kind. Grundy and Kemmis note that action research needs to develop procedures of disseminating research findings, that is, action research needs to develop a tradition of communication about action research:

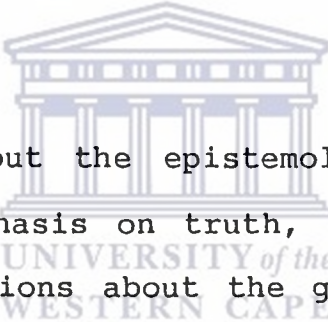


Issues of communication are vital for action research as a collaborative form of practice-based research. ... Communication among action researchers about action research and about the substantive practices examined by action researchers is ... essential if the aspiration of a self-critical profession able to regulate its own learning processes is to be achieved.<sup>110</sup>

Grundy and Kemmis here seem to be in agreement with more established notions of "research" that its findings need to be made known. But the question still remains as to whether the findings of a specific action research project

can indeed be useful within the context of another social situation. If not, the issue of generalisability must remain a feature of classical research only.

The weakness in the epistemological development of action research lies not of course in its taking extremely seriously what it calls the "knowledge" about social matters generated by an action research group. Taking seriously people's understandings of the social world is indeed consistent with views about the social world as a human construct.



The weakness about the epistemology of action research lies in its emphasis on truth, and in the definiteness about its assertions about the generation of truth. Any emphasis on truth, taken far enough, may become the quest of classical research (emulating Newtonian science) for certainty. It might be more appropriate, given a view of the social world as a human construct, to say something of the sort Popper says here about the search for truth:

Truth is not manifest; and it is not easy to come by. The search for truth demands at least

- (a) imagination
- (b) trial and error
- (c) the gradual discovery of our

prejudices by way of (a), of (b),  
and of critical discussion.<sup>111</sup>

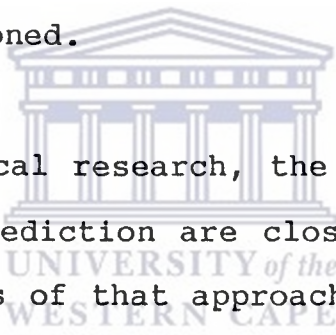
Action research would agree that truth is neither manifest nor easily come by - the ways of ideology critique through the methodology of the psychoanalytic dialogue are tortuous ways indeed. But even more significant for action research are Popper's thoughts about truth and agreement. For Popper the "tradition of critical discussion"

... must not be mistaken for a method of proof, that is to say, for a method of finally establishing truth; nor is it a method which always secures agreement. Its value lies, rather, in the fact that participants in a discussion will, to some extent, change their minds, and part as wiser men.<sup>112</sup>

Critical discussion, also as conceived by action research, cannot hope to bring about more than greater wisdom, better insights and greater clarity about a social situation. These more modest expectations would be consistent with views expressed above about the origin, development and validation of social theory, where it is held that social theory can inform but not prescribe for practice. Any positing of "truths" about social matters brings us perilously close, as far as the theory/practice relation-

ship is concerned, to the classical research position which requires the "application" of theory to practice.

Abandoning the predication of truth as the outcome of critical discussion in favour of thoughts about greater clarity and better insights about a social situation might indicate how the research findings of an action research project might be useful for other social situations, so that action research need not land itself in a position where its claims that it is indeed **research** it is engaging in must be abandoned.

The logo of the University of the Western Cape, featuring a classical building with columns and a pediment, with the text "UNIVERSITY of the WESTERN CAPE" below it.

While for classical research, the concepts of generalisability and of prediction are closely linked and are outstanding features of that approach to research, there can be for action research no question of prediction of this kind. Instead, action research emphasises its situational character. Although action research cannot and indeed would not wish to engage in prediction of the cause-effect type, there is a kind of "prediction" it can engage in. This type of "prediction" may be likened to a kind of informed guess, where the latter is grounded in the expectation that there are certain kinds of regularities in the social world. That is, given that the social world is a world of language, and of institutions and practices, and of people's understanding of them, we may have expectations about how people will act in given situations.



These expectations are not only based on common-sense. Critical discussion as envisaged by action research may generate what we have referred to above as quasi-causal and functional explanations, which enable us to have deeper insights into, or greater clarity about, a social situation. It is possible, given the expectation of regularities in the social world, to engage in a type of tentative prediction which says something like: Given a situation similar in these respects to the situation that has been researched, we may expect such and such to happen. So, for example, Lofland could "predict" under which circumstances newcomers to the Divine Precepts - a religious grouping - would become converts.<sup>113</sup> Lofland's project might provide insights useful for research projects with a similar subject matter.

Finally, the second of the two aspects of action research's development of its epistemology to be discussed here is the claim that action research is a democratic form of research (see 2.1 above). While it is not within the scope of this mini-thesis to discuss theories of democracy, it is entirely to the point to give an indication of the extent to which action research's claim here is consistent with its epistemological grounding.

Action research's claim to being a democratic form of research is closely linked with Grundy's views expressed above about firstly, the link between truth and consensus

and secondly, that what must be regarded as authentic knowledge is the knowledge generated by the action research group.

It follows from this that action research's claim about its democratic character has to do with what action research considers to be the participatory and collaborative character of action research. Grundy and Kemmis claim in this regard that action research is "guided strategically by the rational goal of improvement and the democratic goal of involvement."<sup>114</sup>

For action research this "democratic goal of involvement" has to do with the participation, on all levels, of all those affected by the research project.<sup>115</sup>

Action research is here clearly at variance with classical research insofar as the latter approach envisages the adoption of an objective observer stance by the researcher. In this respect the approach of action research is sound; an objective observer stance as envisaged by classical research cannot be achieved, and for reasons outlined in this mini-thesis.

Now action research, in its rejection of the idea of an objective observer stance in respect of the researcher, lays emphasis on the participatory character of that researcher's involvement in an action research project.

But while action research quite correctly abandons the objective observer stance of classical research it mistakenly emphasises the participatory character of the researcher's involvement as that of an "equal participant" in the research situation. Action research clarifies the idea of equal participation via the idea of a "facilitator":

In the action research literature the person who works with teachers and other practitioners to 'assist' them in their action research has become known as the 'facilitator'. The traditional role of researcher as someone who researches the practices of others is abolished in action research. In this mode of work, to be a 'researcher' one has to be an 'actor'.<sup>116</sup>

The researcher is clearly for action research an "actor" who is, along with teachers and other practitioners, an "equal participant" in the research project. Here action research seems to want to avoid the idea that a researcher is, in some sense or other, an expert. Kemmis draws attention to perceptions previously held by himself and others about the role of a facilitator and in the following passage clearly questions the idea of "researcher as expert":

I have become increasingly troubled by the "outsider" role. In the past ... we have described ourselves as "facilitators" or "process consultants...." We have seen ourselves as the agents of the enlightenment of others. These characterisations of the role are dangerously self-regarding, self-preserving and disingenuous. They allow us to disclaim responsibility for our own involvement in the transformation of educational situations under the guise of respecting the autonomy and responsibility of the teachers and students in whose lives we intervene.<sup>117</sup>

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The sentiment expressed here is that the researcher should be prepared to share responsibility for "the transformation of educational situations." Now however well intentioned such a sentiment might be, it is surely not only those researchers who perceive themselves as "equal participants" in a research situation who can claim that they acknowledge their responsibility for contributing to a changed social situation. Researchers in the tradition of classical research may very well do the same - or claim to be doing the same.

As an antidote to the "outsider" role of the researcher, Kemmis recommends that "... 'outsiders' helping to establish processes of self-reflection in schools must become participants in the schools themselves (that is, become virtual 'members' of the school community they are engaging) ..."118

Now action research's denial of the objective observer stance of classical research and its emphasis on the researcher as an "equal participant" together with other members of the research group seems to indicate that in a research situation there are no experts. But this latter view is mistaken in so far as it would negate the idea that there can be such a thing as having a certain kind of expertise in a certain field. "Expertise" here means something like being some kind of authority on .... To be an "authority on" means something quite different from being authoritarian. Here Fromm's distinction between irrational authority and rational authority is illuminating. For Fromm irrational authority is synonymous with authoritarianism, its source is power and it is maintained through fear<sup>119</sup> while rational authority for Fromm is similar to what I have termed **expertise** or **being an authority on**, and it is linked with a certain kind of competence:

The person whose authority is respected  
functions competently in the task with

which he is entrusted by those who conferred it upon him .... and to the extent to which he is competently helping, instead of exploiting, his authority is based on rational grounds....<sup>120</sup>

Now any claim about having certain kinds of expertise or of being an authority on some subject matter or field of study has at least the following implication: It places a human being within a whole tradition of human thinking about a field of study, for example education, and acknowledges that human being's contribution - or potential for contribution - to the development of critical discussion within that field.

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But this potential for contribution to critical discussion within a field of study does not simply happen to people. It requires familiarisation with what Strike calls "the concepts and principles that govern the process of inquiry and learning"<sup>121</sup> in respect of a particular field of study. It requires in other words an initiation into a field of study. To accept, as Strike does, that there are "concepts and principles" relevant to a field of study does not imply that these concepts and principles are viewed as eternal, unchanging truths about the field of study in question. Such concepts and principles simply give an indication of the state of critical discussion in a particular field of study at a given time, for example

which arguments have been proffered, which ones have been refuted and which ones have survived. In this regard Strike points out that :

Scholars in a field will not agree on everything, but ... [they] will be members of an intellectual tradition who at a given moment will have some shared understanding about what the field's outstanding problems are, about how they should be approached, and about what will count as a solution.<sup>122</sup>

As far as research is concerned I have argued above that there must be some shared understandings about what can count as research and what cannot - otherwise it would be impossible to talk about something called research.

If action research did not acknowledge something like a research tradition - which, it is clear, is not something fixed and unchanging but depends for its vigour on the thoughts and activities of human beings - then it cannot call what it is doing "research". What it is doing might be beneficial to people but it still cannot be called "research". In any case, there would be no need for a "facilitator" (or whatever the person in question might be called) if there was not some idea that the facilitator is in some way or other an "authority on" or has some expertise in the field in question. The idea that the facili-

tator becomes a "virtual member" of the community being researched appears to be an unsuccessful attempt to force the equality of all involved with the research project. Indeed, the concept "virtual member" is at the very least obscure; one is either a member or not a member, an honorary member or a life member of a group, but there is no such thing as a virtual member of something.

Action research seemingly fails to see that there are inequalities amongst human beings. These inequalities have to do with the idea of competence in respect of certain areas. Human beings are not equal as far as initiation into fields of study and the ability to competently engage in the doings of that field is concerned. Strike makes this point clearly:

... there will be vast differences between the novice and the expert .... These differences directly result from the fact that the expert has mastered the concepts and principles that govern the process of inquiry and learning, whereas the novice has not. There is, thus, a significant inequality between the expert and the novice... [and] this inequality is relevant to the capacity of the respective individuals who make competent judgements....<sup>123</sup>



To admit that some people are more competent than others or are more capable than others of making competent judgments in certain areas is not to deny the equality of human beings in other respects. It is not to deny that human beings are creative and self-creative beings, and that they might have other kinds of contributions to make, also within the context of a research situation.

For action research the notion of "equal participants" also has to do with the way critical discussion is conducted within the research situation. About the requirement for action research that all involved in all its phases of planning, reflecting and acting should do so as "equal participants", Carr and Kemmis point out that:

In this, action research is democratic: it recognises that conditions for investigating the truth of knowledge-claims are also the conditions for democratic participation in critical discussion.<sup>124</sup>

These "conditions" would involve, for action research, freedom from coercion and from domination on the part of some in respect of others. This gives recognition to views expressed above about human beings as beings of praxis, that is, creative and self-creative beings. Given thoughts expressed above about human beings as beings of praxis then any denial or suppression of the participation

of an individual or a group in the construction of knowledge is to deny the humanity of that individual or group. But action research should admit that it is possible to realise the conditions for democratic participation **without** denying the inequalities referred to above, that is, without denying that there are some who are more competent to make certain judgements than others.

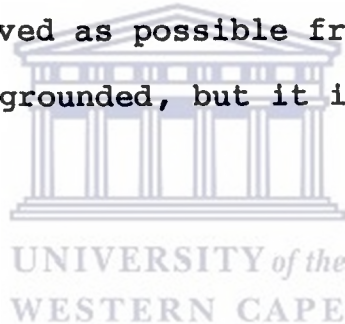
In its claims about its democratic character action research has in mind conditions which allow free and uncoerced expression on the part of those engaged in the project. Insofar as this is an ideal, and can remain no more than that, action research's claim that it is a democratic form of research is perhaps less modest than it should be. In this respect it is perhaps more appropriate for action research to emphasise that it is guided by democratic goals, as Grundy and Kemmis do point out.<sup>125</sup>

### 3. CONCLUDING REMARK

In any event action research locates truths (or perhaps more appropriately, insights and understandings) about the social world, not in the accurate naming of the elements of an objectively existing social world, but in a form of critical enquiry. Here Rorty's views on the epistemological stance of Dewey can be taken appropriately to sum up the position of action research:

For Dewey, as for Habermas, what takes the place of the urge to represent reality accurately is the urge to come to free agreement with our fellow human beings to be full participating members of a free community of inquiry.<sup>126</sup>

Action research certainly envisages such a "free community of inquiry" in respect of research about social matters, and the epistemological grounding of such a stance is not only as far removed as possible from that in which classical research is grounded, but it is also and importantly a sounder one.



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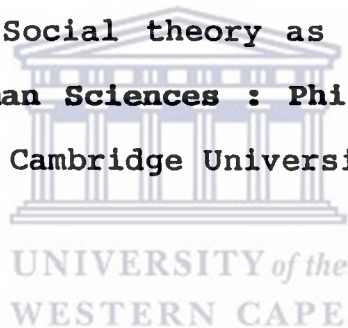
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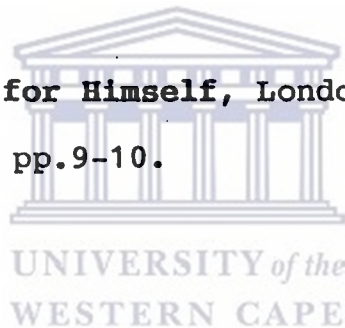


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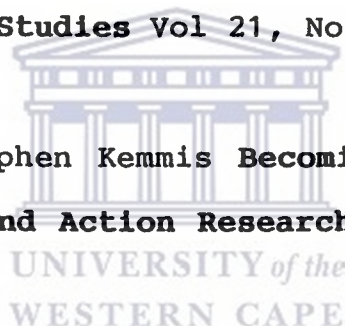
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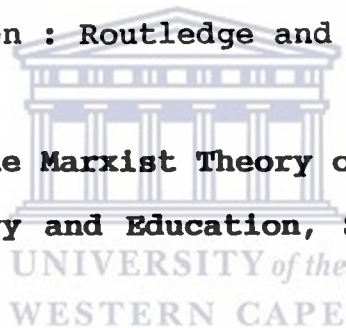
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