

REFLECTION ON “HOW TO PUT AN ACTION RESEARCH STRATEGY INTO PRACTICE?”

Fred Emery, April 1987

1. Introduction

It is unclear as to just what empirical studies are being referred to here.

Clearly (1.1) the reference is to work conducted in the Norwegian tradition. Since there have been few detailed empirical reports of field experiments in Norway the reader must be inclined to believe that the prime reference is to the set of studies reported by Thorsrud and Emery in 1970.

If this be so then the gist of the introduction is that it is no longer appropriate to follow that model of action research.

I have absolutely no disagreement with that conclusion; and have been developing different models since 1972.

It is thoroughly misleading, however, to suggest, as this presentation does, that is what if appropriate in the nineteen eighties would have also been the most appropriate strategy in the 1960's.

The introduction should, to my mind, place the alternative strategies in their historical context. Thus we should be reminded that in the early sixties practically no-one, be they industrialist, trade union leader, bureaucrat, politician or social scientist, disagreed with the Weber-Engels thesis that authoritarianism was the price we had to pay for the economic viability of large scale modern industry. The thesis had been challenged by isolated field experiments in British coal-mining and Indian textiles. The Norwegian Program set out to challenge the thesis across the broad spectrum of modern technologies. The tests had to be as scientifically hard as possible and they had to be carried out in experimental sites that were fully exposed to the play of market forces, including the labour market. The only concession was that we could avoid sites where management and labour were actively engaged in hostilities.

The situation in the eighties is very, very different.

In the first place there is now little scientific doubt that any workplace could be democratized and still be economically viable. A finding which would, no doubt, have brought joy to both Frederick Engels and Max Weber, political opposites though they were. In the second place the ‘cultural counter-revolution that broke out in 1967 has left a lasting shadow over the legitimacy of all forms of authoritarianism.

In the 1980's “action research to improve life in the workplace” is no longer concerned with improving that such improvements are possible but it is concerned with helping people achieve what is possible in their particular circumstance.

The central problem of action research into working life has shifted from understanding of the objective characteristics of socio-technical systems and the innovation of change to the socio-psychological problems of the adoption of new but proven practices.

The critical determinants of adoption were identified as long ago as 1958 (see Emery and Oeser, Information, Decision and Action, Melbourne University Press, 1958. Their findings have since been replicated in a large number of studies in different societies, Dave Garnett, 1980). The most important single determinant was shown to be ‘conceptual skill’ of the potential adopter, i.e. the ability to identify the

invariants in problematic situations. The ability did not appear to be a function of whatever it is that so-called intelligence tests measure but it did seem to be an educable skill. The unresolved problem at the time was how to educate or otherwise develop the conceptual skill of adults. The evolution of the so-called participative design workshops, 1969-74, was a conscious attempt to create an appropriate context for such adult learnings.

In contradiction to this introduction the task for the eighties is seen as providing an education in the understanding and application of general principles of organizational design. The large corporations, with their highly professional personnel departments and ready access to consultants appear to be in little need of such education. Many small and medium enterprises are locked in by ignorance and highly particularistic local arrangements and hence need such education. The hoped for outcome of providing such education is that researchers will uncover general principles governing the effectiveness of such provision.

There has been a shift in purpose, 1961 to 1987, but nothing that justifies action researchers abdicating their responsibilities as social scientists.

Palshaugen's paper seems to me to be an over-reaction to mechanistic world hypothesis that is subscribed to by so many social scientists. The Tavistock tradition, at least as represented by Eric Trist and myself, has always favoured the contextualist world hypothesis. The proper root-metaphor is, I am sure, the dialogue and not, as Pepper suggests, the historic event. However, it is the dialogue about ongoing action, not a dialogue that is free of such reality constraints.