

Integrating Ethical Challenges In Practitioner Research^{*}

David Coghlan

Business School
Trinity College Dublin

I am approaching the topic of ethical challenges in practitioner research from a perspective of the philosophy of research. First, I refer to the emergence of science in the seventeenth century and the exclusion of the realm of practice and practical knowing from the academy with its consequence for the philosophy of science, for professional education and ethical behaviour. Secondly, I outline a counter position that I suggest is the basis for a science of practice. Thirdly, I locate practitioner research within a philosophy of practical knowing and offer some thinking on integrating ethical challenges in practitioner research. The questions underpinning this reflection are: On what “philosophy of science” do we base our practitioner/professional programmes? Consequently, what methodologies, methods flow from that philosophy? What is the logical place of ethics and morality within that philosophy?

Keywords: Philosophy of practitioner research, ethical foundations of practitioner research

^{*} This paper is developed from a talk to the AISHE seminar, Ethics and the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching, at Dundalk Institute of Technology, 27th March 2015.

<http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/235>

1. The Emergence Of Science

Toulmin (1990), in his reflection on the emergence of modernity from the renaissance period, notes that seventeenth century philosophers set aside some established conventions of renaissance humanism. He points to four shifts: from the oral to the written, from the particular to the universal, from the local to the general and from the timely to the timeless. He concludes that these four when taken together 'reflect a historical shift from practical philosophy, whose issues arose out of clinical medicine, juridical procedure, moral case analysis or the rhetoric of oral reasoning, to a theoretical conception of philosophy' (p. 34).

Positivism built a philosophy of science on a series of canons: seeking to create universal knowledge or covering law by means of theory building and testing, where the consistency of prediction and control is through logic and measurement that is context free. There needs to be a distance between researcher and what is researched whereby the researcher acts as a detached and neutral observer. It focuses on aggregating data about individuals, organisations and events and attributing generalisable causal links among variables studied. Qualitative studies work for this end by offering rich, in-depth accounts of one or several case studies and quantitative studies do so by generating statistically significant results.

Technical or instrumental rationality is a term that describes the dominant paradigm of professional knowledge that flows from the underlying disciplines of basic science and on which professional practice is built and instrumental problem-solving is conducted rigorously by the application of scientific theory and methods (Schon, 1983). Schein (1972) describes its components.

1. There is an underlying discipline or basic science upon which practice is developed.
2. An applied science from which day-to-day diagnostic procedures and problem solutions are derived.
3. A skills and attitudinal component that concern actual performance of services to clients using the underlying basic and applied science.

This paradigm is embedded in the institutional structures and philosophy of the education of professionals. Professional curriculum begins with science and is followed by an applied component. Students learn the science first. Otherwise they have nothing to apply. Skills are a secondary knowledge.

The outcome of this paradigm is that there is a hierarchy of knowledge. Science is on top and the technical skills of day-to-day practice are on the bottom. The nearer one is to basic science the higher is one's academic status. Academics are superior to practitioners. The corollary is that there is a split between theory and practice, a split that is grounded in positivist philosophy of science. In keeping with this split between

the researcher and the researched, research subjects tend to be viewed as data points. Consequently, ethical protocols emphasise not doing damage, maintaining confidentiality and so on.

2. A Science Of Practice

Riordan (1995) distinguishes between approaches that pursue explanation (*verstehen*) and those that pursue understanding (*erklaken*). The former emulated the natural sciences and worked with grounding research in comparable standards of evidence prediction and inference and led to the empiricist tradition of research. The latter, critical of the former's ability to deal with human meaning, sought to emphasize the interpretation of human meaning in the science of human organisation and action and led to the hermeneutic tradition of research.

Practitioner research, such as the diverse family of action research, captures much of what Riordan is exploring. It is orienting us to retrieve a philosophy of practical knowing that Toulmin has noted got excluded from the academy. The realm of practical knowing directs us to the concerns of human living and the successful performance of daily tasks and discovering immediate solutions that work (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). It differs from scientific knowing in that it is particular, contextual and practical. A contrast of scientific and practical knowing points to differences in how practical knowing has a concern for the practical and the particular, while science has theoretical aspirations and seeks to make universal abstract statements.

Accordingly, a different set of assumptions may guide professional education (Schon, 1987). Inherent in the practice of professionals is a competence that we can recognise as artistry.

- Artistry is a kind of knowing that is different from the technical rational model.

•Artistry forms a boundary around the practice of applied science and techniques as there is an art to problem framing, an art of implementation and an art of improvisation that are necessary in the practice of applied science and technique.

Schon's conclusion is to call for a new epistemology – one that can work with the tacit epistemology of the skilled professional. This tacit epistemology is the professional's knowing-in-action – the spontaneous behaviour of the skilful practitioner that is based on a knowing that is more than can be articulated. Uncovering such knowing is attempted through reflection-in-action and reflective practice. As Zuber-Skerritt, Fletcher and Kearney (2015) note such reflective practice is the basis for a critical transformation of higher education.

3. The Scholar Practitioner

What do I mean by the scholar practitioner? Let me first exclude what I mean. I exclude traditional research conducted by practitioners, for example, customer or employee surveys. I exclude such research because it does not matter who the researcher is. Customer surveys may be conducted by any researcher, whether professional, academic or practitioner. What I am addressing is where practitioners integrate scholarship in their practice and generate actionable knowledge, that is, knowledge that is robust for scholars and actionable for practitioners. I am focusing on scholar practitioners who work to generate knowledge-in-action, knowledge that is particular, contextually embedded and situated in praxis. Scholar practitioners are immersed and active in systems, whether as outsiders or insiders and act as agents of change. In this mode they engage as reflective practitioners who engage in a science of action and who produce useful research. Implicit in such engagement is that scholar practitioners do not learn as detached observers but rather through being engaged as actors in the management and change of organizational systems and that such inquiry is integrally

linked to action. Such engagement makes demands to develop skills in collaborative inquiry and action, personal learning and extrapolative from the particular to other settings.

4. Ethical Challenges In Practitioner Research

What then are the ethical challenges in practitioner research for scholar practitioners? Practical action is driven by choices which pose ethical questions of how scholar practitioners ask what troubles them, how they assess the external and internal context, how they construct an issue as problematic or developmental, how they build collaborative relationships with relevant others, how they decide and plan what courses of action are open to them, how they review options, weigh choices, decide and act. Practitioner research is full of choices and these choices need to be transparent, to the researchers themselves, to those with whom they are working and to those who read their work. As practitioner research has an unfolding nature as it attempts to integrate inquiry with everyday organizational action, one may argue that the ethical issues of scholar practitioners are not any different from the ethical issues of a good life.

A central element in the education of scholar practitioners is enabling them to learn to attend to how they judge what is valuable and how they make decisions on the basis of that valuing (Coghlan, 2013). They need to learn how to engage in critical thinking so that as they are confronted with concrete choices of what to do, they ask not only what courses of action are open to them, review options, weight choices and decide but also can explore their own thinking, their values, their untested inferences and biases. They need insight into their 'action logics' (Torbert and Associates, 2004) or 'theory-in-use' (Argyris and Schon 1974). The need to learn to critique the tradition in which their values are formed (Barden, 1991).

Given that practitioner research is an unfolding, emergent process which evolves through cycles of constructing, planning, action and reflection, it is not feasible to map out a detailed anticipation of ethical issues in advance which will cover all eventualities. Protocols are inadequate and are insufficient to meet the face-to-face, emergent, collaborative close work of scholar practitioners. At the same time it is possible to articulate some ethical principles to guide the work as a practitioner researcher. For example: serve the good of the whole, treat others as we would like them to treat us, always treat people as ends, never only as means, respect their being and never use them for their ability to do, treat people as persons and never as subjects and act so we do not increase power by more powerful stakeholders over less powerful. These exemplify values of human interdependence, co-generation of knowledge and fairer power relations.

For scholar practitioners engaging in research-in-action, ethics are integrally linked to role and politics. In my view, a critical skill for scholar practitioners is to learn to hold politics and ethics together. Roles are patterns of behaviour which individuals expect of others performing specific functions or tasks. Expectations come from different sources and may differ in view and in intensity. The consequences may be ambiguity and indeed conflict as to what roles are needed, appropriate and actionable politically. Potential tensions between pre-set organizational roles and emergent researcher roles are likely to be the tensions that surface more evidently.

Practitioner research invariably involves dealing with the politics of relationships. Action is political and acts of visioning and building support for action and inquiry are beset with politics, both overt and covert. In practitioner research ethical dilemmas arise both in the imbalance of power in an organisation and in the process of influencing by persuasion. By changing centres of power, practitioner research holds keys to changing productivity, organisational relationships and even organizational culture. This means

that scholar practitioners need to be sufficiently skilled and supported or supervised to learn to act politically and ethically. So, explicit attention to questions about participation and ethics are integrally linked to issues of practitioner research's quality and integrity.

5. Concluding Remarks

The questions posed at the outset of this reflection were: on what "philosophy of science" do we base our practitioner/professional programmes? Consequently, what methodologies, methods flow from that philosophy? What is the logical place of ethics and morality within that philosophy? I have challenged a research philosophy that splits the researcher from the researched and that views people as mere data points and so frames ethical protocols externally in those terms. Alternatively, I have proposed a research philosophy that inquires in and through action and that is undertaken by practitioners acting as scholar practitioners. The foundations of such scholar practitioner research are ethical and collaborative in an emergent inquiry process. Accordingly, in terms of ethics, there is no simple, one-size-fits-all solution. Ethical questions are not extraneous but integral to the process of practitioner research. The starting point of ethics is not a set of rules or conceptualized standards but the intelligent, reasonable, and responsible selves that scholar practitioners try to become as they engage in action. The professional training of scholar practitioners, therefore, needs to enable them to learn to engage in inquiry into their own cognitive and valuing processes through developing critical thinking so that they can learn to be explicit about how they think, they value, weight options, make decisions and take action.

In summary, the consideration of ethics in practitioner research, in my view, begins not from a research philosophy that prescribes a set of rules or conceptualized standards, though they are valuable and useful, to which researchers need to be seen to conform.

Rather I suggest a living inquiry, undertaken by scholar practitioners that demonstrates a transparent engagement with their own cognitive and valuing processes through collaborative inquiry into the context and purpose within which a practitioner research is framed and on which action is co-designed, co-implemented and co-evaluated. Consideration of ethics in these terms begins from a philosophy of practitioner research and needs to be consistent with it. The underlying value in such a philosophy is that it contributes to building new strategies to improve educational opportunities for our students and insure that the research carried out under the auspices of our institutions makes a positive contribution to society.

6. References

Argyris, C. and Schon, D.A. (1974) *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Barden, G. (1991) *After principles*. South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press.

Coghlan, D. (2013) What will I do? Toward an existential ethics for first person action research practice. *International Journal of Action Research*, 9, (3), 333-35.

Coghlan, D. and Brannick, T. (2014) *Doing action research in your own organization*. 4th ed. London: Sage.

Riordan, P. (1995) The philosophy of action science, *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 10 (6), 6-13.

Schein, E.H. (1972) *Professional education*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Schon, D.A. (1983) *The reflective practitioner*. New York: Bantam.

Schon, D.A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Torbert, W. and Associates. (2004) *Action inquiry*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Toulmin, S. (1990) *Cosmopolis: The hidden agenda of modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Zuber-Skerritt, O., Fletcher, M. and Kearney, J. (2015). *Professional learning in higher education and communities: Towards a new vision for action research*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.