With What Kind of Science Should Action Research Be Contrasted?

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Action research is often criticized for not being properly based in objective facts or for not formulating testable theories, in short, for not being properly scientific. But with what kind of science should it be contrasted? Hanson (1958) distinguishes between finished, (classical) sciences and research sciences. Unlike a finished science that can be conducted by us as individuals within an already well formulated disciplinary discourse, a research science cannot. If it is to inquire into possibilities not yet actualized, it must be conducted in a much more situated, conversational manner. Thus as researchers, instead of functioning as detached observers, seeking to discover the invisible or ‘hidden’ causes of an observed event, we must operate in an ongoing real-time situation in a much more dialogical manner. For such dialogically-structured activity can, within the dynamics of its unfolding, give rise to transitory understandings and action guiding anticipations of a ‘situated’ kind, thus enabling all those involved in such activity to ‘go on’ with each other in unconfused ways. It is this participation in a shared grammar of felt, moment by moment changing expectations that are – in the interests of a decontextualized objectivity – precluded (or ‘lost’) within the disciplinary discourses of a finished science. Thus, guided by Wittgenstein’s (1953) writings in his later philosophy, I want to show in this article that, not only is it more accurate to compare action research with research sciences than with classical sciences, but that action research can find its intellectual legitimacy in the same sphere of human conduct as all of our sciences – in people being responsibly accountable for their own actions to the others around them in terms of their immediate relations to their shared surroundings.

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