

On Social Productivity and Future Perspectives on Action Research

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Abstract: The paper addresses some of the consequences of neoliberalism in our societies and argues that the phenomena that is being discussed under the label of *surveillance capitalism* has deep implications regarding action research. It fractures individuals into apolitical wants and needs, neutralising the core of action research which is the integrity of the individual and the social fabric. But this can be a two-way relationship, and action research can contribute to counteracting these trends by recreating the citizen actor and integrating individuals in society. To discuss how this can be done in practice, the paper shares some positive deviants, which are positive examples that emerge under unfavorable conditions. Through their discussion the paper poses future-oriented perspectives on action research.

Keywords: action research, neoliberalism, surveillance capitalism, individual and social resistance

Sobre la productividad social y perspectivas de futuro de la investigación acción

Resumen: El artículo analiza algunas de las consecuencias del neoliberalismo en nuestras sociedades y argumenta que el fenómeno que se está discutiendo bajo la etiqueta de *capitalismo de vigilancia* tiene implicaciones profundas en relación con la investigación acción. Las tiene porque fractura a los individuos en una serie de deseos y necesidades apolíticos, neutralizando el núcleo central de la investigación acción, que es la integridad de los individuos y del tejido social. Pero esta puede ser una relación bidireccional, y la investigación acción puede contraponerse a estas tendencias recreando a la ciudadanía como actor e integrando a los individuos en la sociedad. Para ver cómo esto puede hacerse en la práctica, se presentan una serie de desviaciones positivas, que son positivos casos que emergen en condiciones desfavorables. A través de su discusión, el artículo comparte algunas perspectivas de futuro de la investigación acción.

Palabras claves: Investigación acción, neoliberalismo, capitalismo de vigilancia, resistencia individual y social

1 This article is the result of an extended online collaboration initiated and orchestrated by Werner Fricke to pose the emergent challenges for action research in the face of the multiple global crises and problems humanity and our planet face. Four colleagues with very different work experiences from different parts of the globe, and operating in different organisational environments worked to find a way to develop a coherent argument without hiding our differences and diverse priorities. Through a considerable variety of video conferences and manuscript drafts, we believe we have come together with an article that manifests ways of making our differences count. We were gratified by the process, because it shows how our shared commitment to action research enabled us to derive strength and clarity from differences, and find a shared way forward toward a better and fairer future. Action research cannot speak with one voice because our differences can become our strengths, enabling us to deal better with the complexity of an increasingly threatened world.

1. Introduction

A century has gone by since Kurt Lewin's studies in the 1920s. Looking back on these 100 years of action research (AR), we realise that the world has changed considerably and is changing with increasing speed. Capitalism, especially in its uncontrolled, disembedded forms that have emerged with the rise of neo-liberalism and the "new public management" since the 1970s, is the main force revealing this change. It is accompanied by imminent environmental disaster, created by uncontrolled capitalist pillaging of planetary resources for profit and unprecedented levels of global and societal inequality. The new forms of capitalism, among which we focus on disaster capitalism and surveillance capitalism, alienate work and convert individuals into internet clicks to be sold to advertisers without respect for their privacy, personal integrity, the conditions of production of goods and services, and often for the rule of law.

To address these challenges, action researchers need to situate our practices clearly in the global neoliberal capitalist context. Neoliberalism is the most recent attempt to force the world to conform to the profoundly antisocial model of society as a collectivity of individuals guided entirely by selfish rational choice. Despite the inhumane beauty of the ideal rational choice model, putting it into practice yet again as Reagan and Thatcher tried, ran into lots of powerful opposition.

Their first step in trying to impose a free market (already a fundamental conceptual contradiction) was what is now called the "New Public Management" (Behn, 2001). This is a public management model based entirely on the "audit culture". It distrusts any and all institutions, and the integrity of individuals to behave appropriately unless held to account quantitatively for the economic consequences of their actions, and punished for failure to meet the goals set for them by the neoliberals. "New public management" is the instrumentalisation of the neoliberal model in transport, healthcare, education, social services, conservation, science, etc.

The second step is disaster capitalism. Even armed with the New Public Management, the neoliberals were not satisfied by their efforts at "freeing up" the market. So, Milton Friedman and the Chicago Boys hit on taking advantage of major social disruptions to impose neoliberal discipline. Even this, however, did not produce the free-market utopia because even people as horrible as Augusto Pinochet recoiled at the harshness of the measures demanded by the Chicago Boys" (Klein, 2007).

Step three is surveillance capitalism. Rather than confronting the social forces "holding back" the free market head-on (because they continually failed to achieve their goals), the neoliberals have moved to surveillance capitalism. Here the imposition of neoliberal practices can be carried on mainly out of sight, without setting off reactions to stop the practices. Action researchers now have to understand that any AR project anywhere has to face such forces consciously and deal with them, not just by collaborative AR processes to help rebuild or re-create the integrity of the individual, but also by addressing the questions of power and contention for power directly.

The division of labour is extreme in this platform economy. Workers and many service organisations are suffering from a re-birth of Taylorism, particularly through globally decentralised supply chains and worker precarity. Employees are isolated from each other and their coherence as individuals is undermined, as factories and other work organisations that