

When Action Research Became a Cold War Methodology: The Ronald Lippitt – John Collier Correspondence.

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Abstract

Action research has a standing of its own in management and organization studies, and beyond as an applied research methodology, as attested, for example by Reason and Bradbury (1996), Cooke and Wolfram Cox (2005), and the existence of the journal *Action Research*. Action research proposes a research process now seen as a series of iterative steps, involving initial contracting with the researched, who then participate in the research, through design and implementation of data collection, analysis of that data, action planning, action, evaluation on the basis of further data collection, and so on. In so doing it opens the relationships between researcher and research up for reflection and analysis. It is therefore an underpinning of participatory approaches to organizational (and beyond Cooke and Kothari (2001), particularly organization development, and of other change management approaches such as appreciative inquiry which have developed out of it. It also, sometimes acknowledged, sometimes not, informs conceptualizations of consultancy processes, and of change agent and consultancy styles (Cooke 2003)

This paper seeks to, first, historicize a longstanding critique of action research, and of the change management processes informed by action research. That critique can be summarized as that these processes focus on the *content* of change to the exclusion of the *context* of change, or alternatively put, focus on *how* change is brought about while ignoring, or indeed concealing the question of *why* change is needed, in whose interests, and so on. In OD this is compounded by a naïve unitarism which assumes organizational and individual/group interests are inevitably compatible. A more recent argument (Cooke 2004) building out of this, critiquing the use of managerialist action-research by international organizations, demonstrates how this (comparatively) micro-level focus serves to sustain economic and social inequalities at the macro, national and global level.

Second, through that critique it seeks to reveal the extent to which action research grounds its managerialist legitimacy – a legitimacy which does, after all, sustain intervention by researchers in other peoples working and social lives – in an approach to its own history which is so impoverished and omissive as to belie its claims to research rigor; and which demonstrate that the requirement for critical self reflection as an aid to learning, which its managerial proponents urge on others Action research does sustain its present status by claims of connections to the past; it has (mildly competing) origin stories which allow it to construct an image of benevolence to all people. These competing origin stories debate whether the inventor of action research was Kurt Lewin (1898- 1947), although some to be fair acknowledge another, John Collier; or whether there were others doing “action research” in the decades preceding were action researchers.

The sources that identify Collier as an “independent” co-inventor of action research along with Lewin can be tracked back in most cases to French and Bell’s (1998) standard text on OD, who in turn cite Ronald Lippitt. Ronald Lippitt was one of a number of close collaborators with Lewin, and whose own publications on action research, contemporary with those of Lewin, undermine claims that its inventors wrote little about it. With Lewin, he was closely involved with the Institute of Ethnic Affairs, an action research institute founded by John Collier in 1945/6, when he ceased being Commissioner of the Bureau of (American) Indian Affairs, a post which he held for most of FD Roosevelt’s Presidency. In an article published at the end of his tenure in that post Collier claimed to have been practicing action research since the 1930s (1946), although in an autobiography he attributes the invention of action research to Lewin, going on to explicitly slight his successors as “lesser men” (Collier 1963). Circumstantially this must have been a dig at Lippitt; and it makes Lippitt’s willingness to credit Collier all the more creditable.

It is not at this stage possible to be more specific about a falling out. But there is on record an extensive exchange of views between Lippitt and Collier about the basic nature of action research. This record is in the archive of John Collier, and is a correspondence between the two about Lippitt’s involvement in the IEA. There is much within the correspondence of general interest on action research – for example Lippitt talks of his excitement at a forthcoming action-research workshop in New Britain Connecticut – which turned out to be that at which group dynamics was “invented”; and indeed its until now unacknowledged existence evidences the extent to which historiographies of action research have, for all action research’s claims to go beyond the standard scientific model, depended largely on (themselves under-researched) accounts of what is in scientific journals.

The particular thesis here, though, derives from the debate within the correspondence around the role of the action researcher as value neutral, disinterested scientist (Lippitt’s position) as opposed to social activist using science for progressive social change in support of a political agenda (Collier’s position). The foundation of this debate can be seen in the different professional affiliations of the two, and in slightly, but significantly, differences in definition of action research. But, I also argue, our understanding of the significance of the exchange, interesting enough as it is intrinsically, is extended when it is situated within the Cold War culture of the time, and the particular impact it had on Lewin and Collier’s research peers (Cooke Mills and Kelley 2005). The correspondence is therefore read in the light, first, of the idea suggested in research by colleagues of Lewin, Stuart Cook and Marie Jahoda (1954), of *anticipatory ideological compliance*. This suggested people within US generally, and academic faculty particularly de-politicized their work to avoid the consequences of McCarthyism.

Second, the analysis developed by Ian Nicholson (1998) to explain the career trajectory of another in Lewin’s circle, Goodwin Watson is applied. Watson was the 1930 a radical activist and advocate of the uses of psychology for social change but by the 1960s, after ongoing encounters with the forces of (proto)McCarthyism (Cooke 2004b), had transformed himself to advocate of corporate t-groups. According to Nicholson,

supported by Watson himself (Watson 1963) , the adoption of a disinterested scientific persona, again, provided protection against the trails of McCarthyism. Lippitt himself hints at similar reasoning in the correspondence; and Cooke's 1998 reading of the Lippitt et al's classic *The Dynamics of Planned Change*, wherein "neutral" change processes are extracted from the strategies advocated, inter-alia, by the radical (then) quasi- Marxist Saul Alinsky can also be reassessed in this light.

The underlying thesis, then, is that the depoliticization of action research critiqued today has its roots in a response to the Cold War. This is not an argument without nuance, however, in the Lippitt-Collier exchange, or here. Not least it is recognized that this depoliticization may not have been only a defensive response, but a positive choice by those who saw action research as a useful technique. More, there are two stings in the tail for those who might naturally side with Collier in the debate. From an anti/post-colonialist perspective Collier's advocacy of action research was inter-alia as a way of perpetuating indirect rule, a mode of colonial administration which maintained the sovereign power of the colonizers. More, according to many commentator because of his association with the New Deal, we was to suffer the very McCarthyite problems that Lippitt implied were coming. Lippitt's position, trimming though it may have been, on the other hand, permitted action research to survive and eventually prosper. The form it which it did survive was one, however, which opened action research up to the *content not context* critique above; and it, might be argued, also to its problems of ahistoricism.