CHAPTER 1

Ins and outs of participatory action research

EXPLORING THE BIG TENT

Tricksters are mythic characters prone to disobey rules and conventional behaviour. They cross boundaries created by the natural and social order (Radin, 1956). They come in all shapes and forms, male and female, human and animal. They can mix attributes from different species and transform themselves to further subvert life as we now it. This makes it hard to recognize them. To complicate the matter, they present themselves under different names, such as Hermes in Greek religion, Brer Rabbit in Africa, Nanabozo in Ojibwe mythology and Coyote in many western Native American cultures, to name just a few. As Pelton remarks, 'no one ever saw, or even heard tell of, a Trickster with a capital "T", but the process of abstraction that tends to capitalize the "T" is not a perverse function of the academic brain. Everywhere one looks among premodern peoples, there are tricky mythical beings alike enough to entice any human mind to create a category for them once it had met two or three' (Pelton, 1980, p. 15).

PAR, the subject of this book, is a similar phenomenon. Many have heard about the creature, they know it exists, but no one is entirely sure what it looks like or how much trickery is needed to create and sustain it as a single entity. Establishing some consensus about the essence of PAR is a difficult task, beyond drawing up a list of attributes applicable in some respects. Jung once said of the trickster that his 'most alarming characteristic is his unconsciousness. . . . He is so unconscious of himself that his body is not a unity, and his two hands fight each other' (Jung, 1959, p. 263). We are tempted to say the same thing of PAR. In our view, it remains barely conscious of its many and varied expressions, and the body of literature that speaks to PAR theory is far from being united. Many hands keep on fighting or simply ignoring each other.

In the first edition of this book, we ventured to offer a general tour. We now consider the task of reviewing the field to be both daunting and of uncertain value. One major difficulty lies in using the language of 'PAR' to bring together frameworks and approaches that prefer to use labels of their own to express what it is they have to offer. For instance, while we are of the view that the history of psychosociology is essential for understanding the evolution and the current state of participatory action research, the fact remains that

adepts of *la psychosociologie d'intervention* in France do not self-identify as practitioners of PAR. The emphasis they place on connections between group dynamics, the unconscious and social life is a foundational principle they will not sacrifice to a utilitarian-sounding expression like 'action research'. The same can be said of many affiliated frameworks of PAR. Key terms used in the social sciences to describe what may be viewed as variants of PAR – community orientation, sociotechnical systems, praxis, reflexivity, transformative learning and empowerment, to name just a few – are particularly sensitive as they are loaded with history and rife with tensions of all kinds.

Consider the panoply evident in Tripp's review of PAR (Tripp, 2005), *The Sage Handbook of Action Research* (Bradbury, 2015), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Action Research* (Rowell *et al.*, 2017a) and our own previous scan of the literature (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013). The field includes workplace and Organizational Development methodologies and frameworks such as the Quality Movement (Deming, 1986; Thorsrud and Emery, 1964; Emery and Thorsrud, 1969, 1977; Gustavsen and Pålshaugen, 2015), Sociotechnical Systems Theory (Trist and Bamforth, 1951; Pasmore, 2001), Soft-Systems methodologies (Checkland and Poulter, 2006; Midgley, 2015), Participatory Systemic Inquiry (Burns, 2015), Design Thinking (Silverman, 2015), Action Learning (Revans, 1980), Experiential Learning (Kolb, 1984), Praxis Research (Whyte, 1991; Eikeland, 2015), Cooperative Inquiry (Heron and Reason, 2008) and Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Duncan, 2015). Other frameworks also focussed on organizations emphasize the importance of self-awareness and transformative learning. They include Reflective Practice (Schön, 1983), Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry (CDAI) (Erfan and Torbert, 2015), Clinical Inquiry/Research (Schein, 2008) and Action Science (Argyris, 1982). The history and variegated landscape of *la psychosociologie d'intervention* in France should also be considered here as it upholds the psychodynamic focus in the workplace initially promoted by the pioneering Tavistock Institute. We say more on this tradition in Chapter 2.

Efforts to ground academic interests in social justice have created another collection of action research experiments including Transformational Learning (Mezirow and Taylor, 2009), Equity-Oriented Collaborative Community-Based Research (Foster and Glass, 2017) and Community-Based Research (Hall, 2005; Nicolaidis and Raymaker, 2015; Stringer, 2015; Wallerstein and Duran, 2003; Minkler and Wallerstein, 2008). The Action Research Network of the Americas (arnawebsite.org) and Community-Based Research Canada (communityresearchcanada.ca) are notable endeavours in this direction. Since 2008, Community-Based Research Canada has played an important role in developing policy papers, leading and supporting research, convening community-campus gatherings and developing a national and globally connected community of engagement leaders (Tandon and Hall, 2012). The hallmark of the broader move towards closer community-campus partnerships is an inquiry and learning process that is action-oriented and firmly grounded in practical community needs, beyond scholarly interests alone (Brydon-Miller *et al.*, 2003, p. 24). True to the spirit of PAR, it calls for the active involvement of community members in all phases of the action inquiry process, from defining relevant research questions and topics to designing and implementing the investigation, sharing the available resources, acknowledging community-based expertise and making the results accessible and understandable to community members and the broader public. Mentors in this approach show

how students and faculty can engage in action-oriented inquiry and meet academic standards at the same time (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Sherman and Torbert, 2000; Herr and Anderson, 2005; Burns, 2007; Coghlan and Brannick, 2007; Stringer, 2007; Israel *et al.*, 2008; McNiff and Whitehead, 2009; Smith *et al.*, 2010; James *et al.*, 2012; Kindon *et al.*, 2007).

Community-oriented formulations of PAR with a focus on rural livelihoods and well-being make up another extensive set of contributions to the field. They include several variants of Participatory Learning and Action (Chambers, 1993), but also Farming Systems Research and Extension (FSR-E), farmer-to-farmer learning (Bunch, 1982; Holt-Gimenez, 2006), the Appropriate Technology (AT) Movement and a Latin America inspired approach called Systematization of Experiences (Falkembach and Torres Carrillo, 2015; Streck and Jara Holliday, 2015). As Chambers (2015) explains, the list of livelihood frameworks can be further extended to include the contributions of Reality Checks, Stepping Stones (Wallace, 2006), Participatory Geographic Information Systems (PGIS), Participatory Statistics, Integrated Pest Management (IPM), Community-led Total Sanitation (CLTS) and Participatory Epidemiology (Archer, 2007). Ethnographic Action Research and studies of indigenous, traditional or local knowledge systems (IKS, TKS, LKS) provide additional takes on PAR from an anthropological perspective (Gupta, 2006; Sherwood and Bentley, 2009; Brokensha *et al.*, 1980; Warren *et al.*, 1995). The many variants of participatory evaluation, including Action Evaluation (Friedman and Rothman, 2015) and Empowerment Evaluation (Fetterman and Wandersman, 2005), should also be mentioned along with youth-led approaches to research for social justice (recrearinternational.org).

The list does not stop here. A commitment to deep societal change characterizes a set of contributions to PAR made by Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970), Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1985), Reflect (Archer, 2007), feminist anti-racist post-colonial PAR (Lykes and Scheib, 2015), Critical PAR (CPAR) (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991) and our own formulation of engaged research (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013). A focus on active citizenry underlies another world of experiments of science-in-society, including e-PAR (Embury, 2015), Citizen Science and methods for eKnowledge creation or deliberative democracy such as Search Conferences, Citizens' Juries (Wakeford *et al.*, 2015), deliberative polling (Babüroglu *et al.*, 2015), crowdsourcing (Certomà and Pimbert, 2015) and Wikipedia (Jemielniak, 2015). Last but not least, many approaches included in the big tent revolve around effective group facilitation techniques and the creative arts, founded on principles of their own. Well-known examples are T-groups (Stefanac and Krot, 2015), The World Café (Steier *et al.*, 2015), Open Space technology (Owen, 2008), Photovoice (Mejia, 2015), Participatory Video (Satheesh, 2012), storytelling (Koch, 2015) and Learning History (Bradbury *et al.*, 2015).

Judging by the increasing attention to research that tries to make a difference in the lives of people, readers can be sure the list will get even longer in years to come. Doing justice to the varied experiences and insights of the many practitioners of PAR, and creating a shared understanding of the lay of the land, is consequently a formidable task, and perhaps a foolish one at that. It assumes that we are dealing with fruit of a kind rather than apples and oranges and that there is a 'field' called PAR that can be investigated. This is precisely the problem that literature reviews are supposed to resolve.

At first sight, there are two options to choose from. One is to clearly separate kindred and orphan practices from the 'true heirs of PAR'. Very few want to go down this narrow path, which is fraught with the risk of arbitrary exclusion. Another option is to simply recognize the jumble for what it is, a mixed bag of ideas and practices that continue to evolve in their own different ways, what Chambers and others have called a 'flowering of eclectic pluralism' (Chambers, 2015, p. 41; Midgley, 2015, p. 160). This has the advantage of creating a big tent that can attract an impressive number of supporters, visitors and passersby. The disadvantage is that membership in the big tent exists mostly in name and only when convenient. Maturing as a field gets set aside along with the internal tensions and profound disagreements among the invitees and presumed supporters of the cause.

In this and the following chapter we try to chart a course forward, somewhere between the cut-and-dry and the soft-and-mushy options. We do so to get some perspective on our own work but also to rise to the important challenge of claiming space for the field at this moment in the history of science. To begin, we bring into focus the central vision of science and society that lies at the common edges of PAR. As we shall see in the next section, practically all occupants in the big tent converge around a humanistic critique of positive science and technocracy. Much like Lewin and Dewey, PAR practitioners and kindred members and frameworks oppose a positivist perspective bent on removing everything that is profoundly human from the advancement of knowledge and society, including people other than experts and subjective experience of any kind. PAR boldly steps away from the official line of technocratic science by crossing the boundaries between the objective world and our deep involvement with it. Of course, this is true of all humanistic stances on science. What makes PAR unique is its commitment to fully integrating the core elements built into the acronym, namely Participation (life in society), Action (experience) and Research (knowledge making). To maintain this focus, and walk the talk, all three elements must remain in full sight at all times (McIntyre, 2008).

Our argument is that focus on the integration of P, A and R (in opposition to systems that dehumanize science) is essential, but that it does not preclude maintaining peripheral vision, as in human sight. In this chapter, the overall 'perspective' we offer on PAR acknowledges the need for lateral thinking and movement. This is what we do when we look into kindred ideas, tools and frameworks that manage to catch our attention even when they remain uncommitted to the full integration of all three PAR elements. Their unique focus on some aspect of PAR, novel ways to facilitate group thinking for instance, can challenge, inform and inspire.

The marvel of human sight – the ability to sharply focus while also processing information from the periphery (global impressions, well-known forms, rapid movements in the dark) and shifting attention at will – offers a metaphor for our brand of 'engaged perspectivism' where the central vision (and commitment to integration) is effectively enhanced but not distorted by information and teachings from the periphery. In the next chapter, we extend the idea of perspectivism to include the interaction of background and foreground, applying it to the interplay of three histories of PAR thinking and practice: the rational-pragmatic, the psychosocial-transformative and the critical-emancipatory. These represent three traditions of anti-positivist sentiment. The latter focus on social justice comes closer to our own views on the merits of PAR. All the same, all three approaches offer practitioners of

today an opportunity to bring one dimension or another to the foreground, depending on the circumstances and as the situation evolves. But first we turn our attention to a common edge of PAR thinking and practice.

UNITED AGAINST POSITIVISM

One way to capture the central vision of PAR and what brings its many expressions together consists in pitting them against some arch enemy, ideally a common adversary that explains how everything started. Frederick W. Taylor (1856–1915) is by far the best candidate for the role. The views he held and those of PAR could not be farther apart. The American engineer advocated a Newtonian approach to the 'science of management' where industrial efficiency depends on work being entirely predictable and therefore performed mechanically, subservient to precise time-and-motion studies. The secret to achieving this is to leave all human factors out of the equation, save of course the worker's all-too-natural drive to make money. When job instructions are based on exact science, problems occur only if workers fail to follow plans and disobey the chain of command. Taylor advised the steel company worker wishing to earn the top salary to do exactly as his supervisor 'tells you to-morrow, from morning till night. When he tells you to pick up a pig and walk, you pick it up and you walk, and when he tells you to sit down and rest, you sit down. You do that right straight through the day. And what's more, no back talk' (Taylor, 1911, pp. 44–45).

Taylor held that 'under scientific management exact scientific knowledge and methods are everywhere, sooner or later, sure to replace rule of thumb'. While human beings may be complex organisms, exact scientific experiments can unravel elementary laws that will help managers extract maximum sweat from assembly workers. His own methodical experiments highlighted a basic law, he claims: workers will predictably work harder only if 'they are assured a large and permanent increase in their pay' (Taylor, 1911, pp. 104, 119–121). Economic self-gain explains all human behaviour.

Traces of Taylor's system can still be found in the use of empirical fact-finding and research to promote efficiency in bureaucracy and systems of mass production. Measures include the rationalization of workflow, the standardization of 'best practices' and a focus on effective knowledge transfer. However, Taylorism is no longer a stand-alone model of managerial wisdom. It became obsolete by the 1930s. As Michelot (2016) explains in his in-depth essay on the early history of action inquiry, the 'Taylor system' could not withstand many transformations affecting our understanding of the interface between science and human factors and relations. Some of these transformations date to the rise and growth of liberal and utilitarian philosophy. These hold the conviction that all human beings, managers and workers alike, are rational creatures capable of matching the ends pursued and the practical means to attain them, using logic, experience and empirical evidence in the process. As we shall see, the Lewinian perspective picks up on this more inclusive theme, with an emphasis not so much on what individuals can do on their own to achieve their ends but rather on cooperative human relations as a powerful lever for rational behaviour and organization. This is in line with the Hawthorne factory study conducted by Elton Mayo in the 1920s, an experiment that was particularly important in broadening our knowledge

of workplace psychology. It showed increased motivation and productivity in employees when placed in a team setting, thus propelling the Human Relations Movement into a cornerstone of action research thinking (Mayo, 1933).

New thinking on how science actually works reconnected the creation of knowledge with the proverbial 'human element'. This critique of positivism came from many sources, including the works of philosophers such as Wittgenstein who emphasized creativity in language. More importantly, relativism and acknowledgement of human meddling in 'exact science' started growing in the world of physics and mathematics, starting with Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty, first introduced in 1927. The principle concerns limits to the precision with which physical properties of a particle can be known – limits that are part of all quantum objects and wave-like systems. Another damper on precision in science is the observer effect in physics, or the idea that observation and instruments used to measure an object can actually change the phenomenon under observation. Gödel's incompleteness theorems should also be mentioned. They point to the inherent limitations of axiomatic statements built into mathematical systems. While axioms are essential, they are neither demonstrable nor refutable. To influential philosophers of science such as Karl R. Popper, theoretical propositions built into science can never be proven either. They must be imagined and can be tested only indirectly, by reference to their implications formulated as testable hypotheses. In his own way, Freud adopted the same position. 'It is a mistake', he once said,

> to believe that a science consists in nothing but conclusively proved propositions, and it is unjust to demand that it should. . . . Science . . . consists mainly of statements which it has developed to varying degrees of probability. The capacity to be content with these approximations to certainty and the ability to carry on constructive work despite the lack of final confirmation are actually a mark of the scientific habit of mind.
> (Freud, 1955, p. 47)

The implications are many. Measurements have an impact on what we observe. The laws they seek to reveal are approximations and abstractions that cannot be directly demonstrated let alone directly observed. Theoretical propositions are products of the human mind defined as the centre of unobservable thoughts and emotions. Contrary to positivism, mental life becomes a vital element in the making of science. It is also worthy of philosophical and scientific interest. Our understanding of mental processes adds of course another layer of complexity to the quest for knowledge and its application to everyday life, well beyond Taylor's views of industrial psychology. This is clearly evidenced by the work of Sigmund Freud. While debates regarding the scientific status of psychoanalysis persist to this day, Freud's investigations into laws of the psyche have left a deep imprint on our understanding of the complexity of human thinking and emotions. They show how probing into the deep recesses of the mind, past the gate of consciousness and reason, can help not only advance knowledge but also improve well-being and stimulate research at the same time. Thus, faculties other than logic and conscious reasoning can shed light on the workings of science itself. As Poincaré (1958) and Bergson (1911) argued, the process of scientific discovery actually depends on the power of imagination, intuition and creativity.

PHOTO 1.1 Researchers with Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development, Pokhara, Nepal (Source: D. Buckles)

These insights were to become a major influence in the history of PAR, at least in its formative years.

Science no longer exists in a vacuum. This general statement is a basic premise for the sociology and the history of science, fuelled by Thomas Kuhn's 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, one of the most cited academic books of all time. In Kuhnian theory, all scientific frameworks are shaped by the history of ideas and the changing circumstances of social, cultural and political history. As they reflect on their involvement with the world, scientists can apply rules of inquiry to cross-examine changing standards of reasoning, investigative procedures and views of the world. They can do so with a view to serving a critique of culture and society, as many have done. The idea of 'one science' so far up the ivory tower that it can exist independently of social life is no longer tenable. Science is no longer an enclosure of the mind ruled by fixed ways of knowing. Actually, it never has been. Science was and is more than ever an open and pluralistic approach to knowledge creation achieved methodically, with different mindsets and purposes that vary and evolve over time.

Breakthroughs in mathematics also inflicted heavy blows on hard scientific views of the world and interventions designed to make things 'work better'. Our understanding of workplace efficiency and psychology has evolved considerably since Taylor, in part due to the insights of W. A. Shewart, the father of statistical methods of quality control. A physicist, engineer and statistician working for Bell Labs in the 1920s, Shewart showed how production is always in some measure a roll of the dice. Variations in quality are bound to arise. In order to explain this, Shewart makes the distinction between two sources of variations.

A 'chance cause' of variation in production is the equivalent of unavoidable noise in a system. Like the wear and tear of any equipment, it is natural, statistically calculable and ultimately unavoidable. By contrast, a worker that falls asleep while on the job is an 'assignable cause' of variation in production; this is an 'unnatural failure' that can be corrected but cannot be predicted. A system is said to be in statistical control when it features only chance-cause variations and remains so, that is until another assignable source of variation (workers falling asleep because bored to death, for instance) starts giving trouble, subject to be found and removed. Quality production is a continuing, self-correcting process of making the most efficient use of raw materials and fabrication processes, approaching the idealized state of statistical control (Shewart, 1939, pp. 24, 111).

In the Epilogue to his book entitled *Statistical Method from the Viewpoint of Quality Control*, Shewart concludes that the process of quality control in mass production, from specification to production and inspection, is of a statistical nature. Since the act of control 'cannot be predicted with exactness, we must introduce into science statistical hypothesis, statistical experimentation, and statistical tests of hypotheses' (Shewart, 1939, p. 149). From this perspective, management becomes a science of probability and an art of relative control, exercised within tolerance limits. It involves constant learning and an improvement process dubbed by Deming as the Shewart Cycle, also known as the PDSA cycle: that is, Plan, Do, Study and Act. A leading figure in Japan's 'post-war economic miracle', Deming championed a scientific approach to business effectiveness, but also the full involvement of all company members in spirals of increasing knowledge of the system, creating constancy of purpose towards improvement of product and service. This meant introducing training on the job, encouraging leadership instead of merit ratings and eliminating 'all barriers that rob people of their right to pride of workmanship' (Deming, 1986, p. 24). In the same spirit, Toyota and other 'lean production' companies (Liker, 2004) held and still hold that innovation and staying ahead of competition requires the opposite of what Taylor advocated: not docile assembly line workers but rather an engaged, problem-solving workforce immersed in a culture of critical thinking using PDSA combined with statistical thinking and measurements. The Quality Movement forged new paths by introducing participatory tools for causal analysis as well, such as Ishikawa's fishbone diagram discussed in Chapter 7.

Acknowledging the need for everyone's input into the constant evaluation of production and management practices was a major shift in workplace thinking. It paved the way for the rapid and exponential growth of training services, research and innovation in the field of Organizational Development (OD) in the decades to follow (Coghlan, 2015). World War II created the perfect conditions for the U.S. Department of War to support this emerging trend, by offering job training in rational problem solving and quality control. The War Manpower Commission ran the Training Within Industry programme from 1940 to 1950, reaching 1.6 million workers in over 16,500 plants. Its aim was to compensate the loss of skilled personnel in war-related industries affected by conscription in the U.S. Army at a time when qualified supervisors were needed most. The programme continued after the war on a massive scale through reconstruction aid in Europe and Asia.

Historically, Mayo's work and the Human Relations 'school' developed in the interwar period were not committed to the ideals of social justice and struggles for genuine democracy. More to the point, the introduction of applied psychology in the world of business

> presented conservative business leaders such as John D. Rockefeller Jr with an innovation designed to enable them to both monopolize authority in the workplace and the wider community and justify this monopoly on the grounds that the minds of workers and citizens lacked the rationality required to participate in a significant manner in management decision making.
>
> (Bruce and Nylan, 2011, p. 183)

In Chapter 2, we discuss the limitations of what we call the rational-pragmatic tradition in the playing field of PAR. For the moment, we turn to the seminal contribution of the German-American psychologist and pragmatist Kurt Lewin in bringing together the three pillars of P, A and R.

LEWIN'S ACTION RESEARCH

While he had his own views on what motivates workers to increase production, Taylor did not attempt to make a contribution to theoretical and applied psychology or sociology. The same can be said of Shewart, Deming and Mayo. They offered not a theory of human and social behaviour but rather a more dynamic framework for increasing business productivity and efficiency. It was left to Kurt Lewin to broaden this frame of reference based on rational problem solving and planned change beyond the world of business and management, to include psychology, sociology and cultural anthropology in the practice of what he called 'action research'. Lewin first used the expression in his 1946 paper 'Action Research and Minority Problems', a year after John Collier's more action-oriented formulation of the same idea (Neilson, 2006). What Lewin had in mind was no less than an integrated approach to social research that brings together 'a symphony of various sciences' in support of 'experimental comparative studies of the effectiveness of various techniques of change'. A change experiment is a cyclical integration of A and R, i.e. a pragmatic and rational 'spiral of steps each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action'. The first step is a problem awareness phase that seeks to 'unfreeze' a situation through fact-finding and diagnostic thinking. Shifts in understanding create the possibility of movement and support the formulation of an overall idea or plan of action to dismantle the existing mindset and overcome defence mechanisms and inertia. Decisions regarding immediate steps lead in turn to a phase of experimentation with transformative action. Progressive learning from these experiments feeds back into earlier plans and invites adjustments between objectives and actions. Iterative motions of 'research in action' and 'action under research' prepare the last phase, a closing of the spiral that 'freezes' new plans and forms of behaviour based on effective corrective action (Lewin, 1948, p. 206).

Lewin immerses research in social life without abandoning the obligations of science. In the same breath, he transforms the world of research by embedding social interaction in the work of science. Reciprocity in the service of complementary ends, those of science and society, is the guiding principle here. The interfacing of action and research calls for group-based methods, using P to shape both A and R. On the lay side of the reciprocity pact, non-scientists learn to think and plan their experiments as researchers do, using the

appropriate methods and empirical evidence to design, implement and test their hypotheses and analyze results. Action research installs 'fact-finding procedures, social eyes and ears, right into social action bodies' (Lewin, 1946, p. 38). Group thinking and experimentation involves feedback mechanisms where learners gather evidence to help them bridge the gap between results that are aimed for and those that are observed. The views and voices of participants play an important role when it comes to taking a step back, interpreting group dynamics and monitoring or assessing project outcomes. The change agent and the client group thus carry out all phases of the action research process jointly. The analysis and interpretation of data and observed behaviour is no longer the prerogative of the expert alone. Scientific and analytic detachment from immediate experience and emotion is expected from group members and the client system that must work jointly with researchers to identify specific problems and their root causes and develop plans for coping with them realistically and practically.

On the academic side of the equation, researchers pull their weight by contributing scientific ideas and analytical insights. They provide inquiry techniques such as 'deeper interviews' and self-evaluations to gain insight into people's thinking and motivations as opposed to 'superficial methods of poll taking' (Lewin, 1946, p. 37). Researchers also develop general theories that feed into action, knowing that 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory' (Lewin, 1951, p. 169). Lewinian researchers today support social change by providing research tools and insights into real-life situations and the forces that may help or hinder effective problem solving. But their role does not end there. When adopting a PAR approach, they can also offer group training, consulting and facilitation services. This approach to what researchers can contribute, adopted in the 1940s, was groundbreaking at the time. It demanded from social scientists that they leave their comfort zone and develop the skills necessary not only to assess conditions that exist locally, at a given place at a given time, but also to facilitate communication and feedback among participants (Lewin, 1946, p. 44; Kolb, 1984, p. 10). As Lewin remarks (Lewin, 1946, pp. 36–46), all of this calls for 'an utmost amount of courage', the kind that may still hold many researchers back from making the shift.

Lewin's work is a meshing of scientific theory with real-life experimentation and the ideals of democracy. More than a method, action research became a commitment on the part of both researchers and actors to jointly observe, problematize and transform behaviour in the interest of all. The goal of academic life is no longer to generate and share scholarly theory and findings for their own sake. The view coincides with key ideas and practices developed at the influential Tavistock Clinic and Institute (created in 1947), save perhaps for the clinical orientation of Tavistock. Initially Tavistock broke new ground by combining general medicine and psychiatry with Freudian and Jungian psychology and the social sciences to help the British army face various human resource problems, such as low morale, officer selection and resettlement for repatriated prisoners of war (Dicks, 1970). Led by multidisciplinary, democratically functioning work groups, the Tavistock approach began with preliminary studies of critical problems, followed by the co-design of innovative solutions with military staff, handing over the developed model to the army and disseminating it to other units and branches of the organization. The same process – action-oriented inquiry, group-based and democratic – was extended later to civilian society,

starting with a focus on the National Health Service in the United Kingdom and crisis management applications within the Tavistock Clinic and Institute. Difficulties in obtaining untied research funds eventually forced the Institute to develop projects with private industry and diversify its action research portfolio while maintaining the goals of scholarly thinking, publishing and capacity building.

THE THREE PILLARS OF PAR

Lessons learned from Lewin and the Tavistock Institute seemed clear: action research is meant to reconnect science and society, thereby expanding the 'experimental, scientific attitude to everyday life' (Eikeland, 2015, p. 386). People come together using scientific inquiry and real-life experience to understand and shape the world in which they live, bearing in mind the ideals of modernity and democracy. The acronym containing the three defining letters reflects these goals. As Figure 1.1 shows, PAR works at reconciling and integrating research (R) and the advancement of knowledge with people's active (A) engagement with social history and the ethics of participation (P) and democracy. In the words of Embury (2015, p. 530), (participatory) action research 'is both the medium for change and the method of analysis of the change'. Given this description, there should be no problem in recognizing PAR for what it is, what it does and what it stands for. But this is far from being the case. In reality, convergence in thinking about PAR is more apparent than real. As it is, 'the flow and cross-fertilization of ideas is very limited' and further developments in the field are 'held back by fragmentation and disconnection' (Bammer, 2015, p. 547). In other words, the convenience of the big tent comes with a cost.

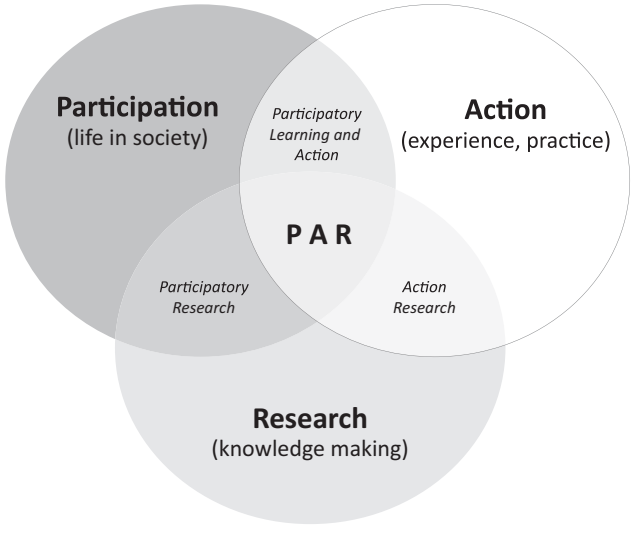

FIGURE 1.1 Participation, action and research

A quick scan of the action research literature reveals a united front on a loose set of principles:

- methodical inquiry is not the sole prerogative of professional scientists;
- all stand to gain from trained researchers and facilitators closely interacting with non-scientists;
- the inquiry process involves either hard mainstream data gathering techniques, qualitatively soft methods or novel tools and frameworks designed to be as user-friendly as possible;
- the process must factor in the workings of human emotions, imagination and relations;
- lessons learned can guide and build on human experience and experimentation in real-life situations, towards enhancing personal well-being and egalitarian relationships;
- no inquiry can eliminate all risks and problems from society and history, however useful it may be.

These principles are insightful and provide solid ground to create and maintain a recognizable 'school of thought', one might think. But they don't. As puzzling as this may be, practitioners can apply all these principles without seriously engaging non-scientists in the process, dedicating time to ongoing action or actually doing research. At stake here is the substance attributed to the three pillars of PAR and the extent to which they are effectively combined, or not. Despite its common edges, the big tent approximation of PAR leaves much latitude for radically different interpretations of what *research*, *participation* and *action* actually mean, to the point that each term may lose much of its significance and contribute little to a shared vision of science-in-society. While most practitioners agree that PAR is not monolithic, a 'school' or an 'ideology apart from others' (Eikeland, 2015, p. 381), hazy definitions allow each component part of PAR to be stretched far beyond the original concept and intent.

Scientific research

Let's first look at how the idea of 'doing research' plays out in the catch-all approach to PAR. According to Elliott, action research is 'the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it' (Elliott, 1991, p. 69). Similarly, Coghlan and Shani (2015, p. 48) consider that inquiring into an organization in order to change something in it is by definition an exercise in action research. Given this understanding of the field, Tripp concludes that the term action research is often loosely applied to any kind of attempt to improve or investigate practice' (Tripp, 2005, p. 444). He goes on to argue that *action research* should not be confused with *action inquiry*, 'a generic term for any process that follows a cycle in which one improves practice by systematically oscillating between taking action in the field of practice, and inquiring into it'.

We agree. Action research is set on a slippery slope when the term 'research' becomes a synonym for any process of methodical observation and thinking that guides action. The

core of action research is not just praxis, i.e. 'the knower-practitioner self-reflection extracting and articulating practical patterns from accumulated practical experience' (Eikeland, 2015, p. 382). A systematic inquiry or investigation undertaken to discover facts, make sense of them and inform ongoing practice – which is what physicians do on a daily basis, for instance – turns into research only on two conditions. Firstly, it must meet 'standards of appropriate rigour' (Argyris and Schön, 1991, p. 612; see also Coghlan, 2015, p. 419). Secondly, it must be designed to advance general knowledge. Nevertheless, there is no consensus among scientists as to how these two requirements should be met. Empiricists, logical positivists, rationalists, humanists, phenomenologists and sceptics have competing and conflicting views on the matter at hand. All the same, the forward march of science is a key focal point in PAR discussions and should not be skirted around even if it is the subject of much debate in the philosophy of knowledge.

Our position on this matter is that action inquiry and action research are both equally valid but have different intents and sets of tasks to carry out. One intent is to assess and address real concerns. The other is to set up processes where the goals of problem solving and scientific advancement complement each other. Achieving complementarity has its own requirements. For science to find value in participatory problem solving, general lessons need to be learned and added to existing bodies of knowledge and related debates. Given its explicit commitment to 'research', PAR is also obliged to mediate between theory and practice, ensuring that 'practical measures and theoretical reflections pull each other towards continuously new heights of knowledge' (Gustavsen and Pålshaugen, 2015, p. 414). This can be done in several ways. Testing and enhancing a particular method and intervention framework – say, for instance, participatory mapping or Citizens' Juries – is doing research on existing or new methods. This is by far the most popular path that PAR practitioners follow when trying to advance general knowledge. Options that attract less interest in the world of PAR include uncovering patterns or principles that concern a substantive topic, say accident causation and prevention in the construction industry (see Chapter 10). Another neglected option consists in drawing lessons to improve on the general framing of PAR, comparing and transcending the Lewinian, Freirean, Habermasian or feminist contributions to the field, for instance.

When it comes to topical issues and PAR as an overall approach to science in society, the 'ideal interaction between theory and practice . . . does not often fully materialize' (Gustavsen and Pålshaugen, 2015, p. 414). This is partly because the task is not an easy one. Lewin's 'topological speculations', heavily loaded with notions borrowed from mathematics and physics, illustrates the failure to deliver on this goal. We suggest as well that the pluralistic, action-oriented ethos firmly engrained in the history of PAR partly explains the weakness of theory in PAR. In a culture where pluralism and practical contributions are given primacy (Bradbury, 2015, p. 7), practitioners are naturally sceptical of any grand PAR theory that takes priority over differences in concepts and perspectives. As for substantive issues, most PAR practitioners are concerned first and foremost with supporting social change in complex settings where there is a need to break loose from mainstream science. They stand in opposition to research that serves mostly the interest of socially irresponsible business or academics working in silos, advancing scholarship and building their careers. Given that science keeps 'running away' from or against society, PAR practitioners thus find

it hard to design initiatives aimed at achieving specific social outcomes and supporting academic research at the same time.

Lewin's 'original intention for scholarly contribution got lost', says Coghlan (2015, p. 419), abandoning the pursuit of knowledge through research to the particular interests of 'runaway science'. Acknowledging this is not to say that the goals of science should be on every practitioner's agenda at all times. We stress that not all action inquiries must meet the requirements of scientific knowledge making. Accounts of action inquiries and the results obtained should be appreciated for everything they offer, including contributions to a better world. To paraphrase Revans (1980, p. 3), to do a little good is better than to write meaningless articles and books. On a personal note, we often find ourselves in situations where rigorous and thoughtful problem solving is the focus of all the parties involved, and we have no hesitation in committing to achieving these objectives even if they do not incorporate a 'research' component. Not unlike adepts of PLA, Action Learning, Appreciative Inquiry, Learning History, T-groups, The World Café or Design Thinking, we use a host of dialogical and analytic tools that support reflexive action rather than action research. We are conscious that the same tools can be integrated into action research initiatives, which is what we do in settings where the goals of scholarship actually matter. But the tools have to be adapted and framed to reflect a different set of goals, which include scientific pursuits, if and when the situation warrants it.

In short, putting the 'research' label on every inquiry we facilitate does no one any favours and makes it difficult to establish clarity of purpose. Too many researchers committed to action research get trapped into using 'research' (scientific), 'inquiry' (formal investigation), 'reflection' (careful consideration) and 'thinking' (conscious mental activity) as interchangeable terms and processes. This creates the illusion that the relationship between scientific investigation and other forms of knowing is not a complex playing field in its own right. To avoid watering down the concept of research and changing it beyond recognition, PAR should support open discussions and debates on the role and the politics of science in the global age.

Genuine participation

Caution and rigour should also apply when it comes to unpacking the idea of participation. This pillar of PAR is in many ways more complex than the call for 'doing research'. Temptations to water it down beyond recognition take several forms. One apparently minor form, easily missed, consists in treating participation as that which 'goes without saying'. The principal modality of action research is tacitly 'participative and democratic, working with participants and towards knowledge in action' (Bradbury, 2015, p. 7). In other words, action research is participatory by definition. While many assume as much, some don't. According to Argyris and Schön, *participatory action researchers* involve 'practitioners as both subjects and co-researchers'. Subjects participate in building and testing causal inferences about their behaviour. By contrast, *action researchers* who engage in non-participatory initiatives take the lead in designing and conducting intervention experiments based on questions, puzzles and problems perceived by practitioners in their 'particular, local practical contexts' (Argyris and Schön, 1991, p. 613). In Action Science, action researchers are

free to point out inconsistencies built into people's discourse and behaviour. They can do so by being quite blunt in giving feedback, 'simply telling the hard truths and letting the chips fall where they may' (McGonagill and Carman, 2015, p. 655). This can easily generate 'unproductive defensiveness' on the part of those concerned but not directly involved in the assessment as co-researchers (McLain Smith, 2015, pp. 148, 152). Acting as though one has a monopoly on truth has its consequences. A similar caution concerning the distinction between AR and PAR was made by Chein, Cook and Harding as far back as 1948: action research revolves around diagnostic inquiries, change experiments and the formulation of 'generally valid principles' that do not require the direct involvement of practitioners (Chein *et al.*, 1948). Parenthetically, the same distinction applies to different forms of 'action inquiries' where scholarly research is on no one's agenda. While some are participatory, others are led by experts. This is the case when teachers or psychologists apply established educational or therapeutic approaches affecting people's learning behaviour, without inviting 'participants' to debate the diagnostic methods used let alone their overall relevance to the situation at hand.

Doubts as to whether an action research undertaking is truly participatory keep surfacing in the literature. This should not come as a surprise. A majority of action research initiatives rely on mainstream methods designed by experts to collect and analyze quantitative or qualitative data, namely questionnaires, participant or non-participant observation, focus groups and interviews (centred on key questions or themes, life histories, etc.). However well tested they may be, these mainstream methods impose serious limitations on meaningful group engagement in designing the research goals and process, collecting and analyzing data and interpreting the findings so as to plan and assess further collective action. If one stands back a little, the notion that participation can be obtained by merely submitting questions to subjects makes little sense. If so, practically all studies in the social sciences involving human subjects could be seen as 'participatory'. The attribute would become so hazy as to have no consequence at all. Its meaning is also lost when the term is generously extended to action inquiry or research in first-person voice, such as self-studies and auto-ethnographies (Erfan and Torbert, 2015, p. 70). Let's be clear: there is a wealth of knowledge to gain from non-scientists taking charge and analyzing and interpreting their own behaviour. Still, self-analysis in the first-person singular – a categorical (third-person like) imperative in many formulations of action inquiry – can hardly be considered 'participatory' in its dictionary sense, which denotes 'sharing in the activities of the group', hence thinking and action in the first-person plural, as Edwards (2010, p. 121) remarks.

Action research differs from action inquiry, and both can be developed according to participatory principles or not. Assuming the parties commit to walking the talk of PAR, they must be prepared to deal with debates about the nature of research activities and the implications of genuine participation. At the risk of oversimplifying, there seem to be two ways of defining what the letter 'P' stands for in the PAR acronym. Either participants 'partake' equally in all project activities; they are co-researchers or 'co-inquirers sharing power and collaboratively making decisions' at all steps of the cooperative action inquiry process (Yorks, 2015, p. 257; Ledwith, 2017). Or they 'partner' in the sense of making distinct, complementary and closely coordinated contributions to achieving shared goals. Once again, consensus seems far from being reached on determining the right terms of engagement.

There are those for whom equality among participants means that every party must act as a co-researcher 'taking full part' in all aspects of the process. The only exception to this rule is the academic researcher who may want to underplay his or her presence as much as possible, with the objective of letting the real actors voice their concerns and views (especially those from the margins) and empower themselves to change things on their own. For those who adopt this stance, everyone is a passenger in the vehicle, but the professional researcher must ride in the rear seat and leave the car at the right moment, as soon as his or her presence is no longer required. In the Cooperative Inquiry approach, for instance, the facilitator's role is to help the group self-organize and adopt or move towards an autonomous mode of facilitation. This means providing minimum structure and guidelines and getting out of the way of group discussions as much as possible (Yorks, 2015, pp. 259–260). While PLA practitioners are less timid about using a host of techniques to guide group assessments, they too insist on giving priority to group thinking and action rather than any research or academic interests that facilitators may have (Chambers, 2015, p. 38; see Pedler and Bourgoyne, 2015, p. 182).

Anti-elitist sentiments built into many PAR experiments are understandable given how insensitive modern science can be to social issues and human needs. Investigative frameworks that insist on being actor-driven should nonetheless resist falling into the trap of populism and its unintended consequences, such as leaving in place existing power structures, including those of mainstream science, and serving the interests of the few through subtle forms of co-optation (McNiff, 2017, p. 254). Commenting on the rapid spread of PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) in the 1980s and 1990s, Chambers sadly observes that 'bad practice became rampant. The methods were so attractive, often photogenic and so amenable to didactic teaching that methods gained priority over behaviour, attitude and relationships, especially in training institutes . . . PRA was routinized, people's time was taken and their expectations raised without any outcome, methods were used to extract information, not to empower and consultants claimed to be trainers who had no experience. Communities were "PRA'd". Some in Malawi were said to have been "carpet-bombed with PRA" ' (Chambers, 2015, p. 33; see also Swantz, 2015, p. 491). The same 'instrumentalization' and 'co-optation of AR for social science business-as-usual' (Boden *et al.*, 2015, p. 289) can undermine any participatory method, including Photovoice (Lykes and Scheib, 2015, p. 134, 138; Mejia, 2015, p. 671) and Citizens' Juries (Wakeford *et al.*, 2015, p. 232).

Cases of a spontaneous, tacit theory-in-use undermining PAR's 'espoused theory' are by no means rare. The working theory-in-use involves 'strategies of unilateral control, unilateral self-protection, defensiveness, smoothing-over, and covering-up, of which their users tend to be largely unaware' (Argyris and Schön, 1991, p. 613). Illustrations of inconsistencies between the ideas that guide the participatory walk and those reflected in its talk are discussed in critical reviews of the works of Kurt Lewin, Elton Mayo and the 'school' of Human Relations (Bruce and Nylan, 2011; van Elteren, 1993). They are addressed at some length in the polemic around *Participation: The New Tyranny* (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Hickey and Mohan, 2004). They also explain Coghlan's call for Organizational Development to 'rediscover and restore its earlier passion and its identity as a progressive social movement to address itself to the big issues of our day, such as sustainability, climate change and creating ethical organizations' (Coghlan, 2015, p. 421).

The gap between walk and talk is so frequently observed in the literature that 'single-loop learning' will not be of much help here. That is, correcting deviations from the rule of 'laypeople's needs and goals above all' will not address the reasons why the rules aren't followed in the first place. Double-loop learning would be more appropriate. This involves uncovering existing patterns, thinking outside the box and changing the rules of engagement (Burns, 2015, p. 437). A step can be taken in this direction by defining participation as people not 'partaking' but rather 'partnering' with each other in action research. In Community-Based Participatory Research, for instance, the focus is on equal partnerships where 'equal' does not mean 'the same'. In writing about her research, van der Meulen (2015, p. 747) points out that 'the sex workers and allies that participated in the study in the research process did not have the time, resource and/or interest in data analysis or interview coding'. We can assume that doing critical literature reviews was not their cup of tea either. The lesson here is clear: 'Equal weight and consideration may be given to the contributions of both the community and academic partners, but the nature of those contributions covers different areas' (Nicolaidis and Raymaker, 2015, p. 170). Balancing scientific rigour and community control is fundamental to this vision of PAR (Coghlan, 2015, p. 421).

We share this view, but with one very important caveat. PAR must create the conditions allowing all partners to navigate the porous border between science and community thinking and action. This means 'breaking the division of labour between the researcher and the researched' (Eikeland, 2015, p. 387), thus ensuring that 'community members are neither tokens nor advisors but co-creators in the research process' (Nicolaidis and Raymaker, 2015, p. 171). For this to happen, it is not sufficient that non-professionals familiarize themselves with standard forms of scientific investigation and reasoning and the latest developments and debates surrounding the substantive issues at stake. Boundary crossing will make a difference only if new boundaries are drawn – by imagining, setting up and testing new interactive grounds that overcome the limits of routine methods of scientific investigation involving human subjects. New ways of doing research systematically and dialogically are needed to reorganize the terrain.

Conventional tools must be questioned and replaced by interfacing methods that create genuine dialogue and break open the private turfs and bunkers of disciplinary data collection, analysis and theory (Greenwood, 2015, p. 431; Rowell *et al.*, 2017b, p. 845). The skilful means of action inquiry and research presented in this book are designed to help achieve that goal. They show the way to some degree of 'role reversal', by turning researchers into facilitators and participants into leaders and learners of the action research process, among other measures (Chambers, 1993). This is essential because in the absence of new ways of conducting research, well-established theories-in-use and related habits are bound to create problems on roads otherwise paved with the best of intentions.

We espouse the idea of partnering creatively, towards the *interfacing* of views, goals, skill sets and forms of knowledge and experience that can be brought to bear and evolve through action research. PAR offers a theory of social intervention negotiated and grounded in the ongoing experience, skill sets and multiple perspectives advanced by the concerned parties, including researchers (Dubost, 1987, pp. 55, 164–165, 233–234). Essentially, the PAR standpoint emphasizes the ways in which researchers and the parties immediately

PHOTO 1.2 Community members and researchers discuss the threats to the Bonnechere River system, Renfrew, Canada (Source: J. Wonnacott)

concerned can contribute to investigating and making sense of reality and ways to change it, each in their own manner and through conversations bound to overlap and interconnect.

Our own theory-in-use seems to fit this 'partnering' model. At least, this is what we used to think. On further reflection, the idea of establishing cross-border partnership rules and abiding by them does not capture the way full engagement plays out in our work. An exercise in triple-loop awareness might be needed here, towards developing innovative and effective ways of dealing with the longstanding and complex issue of participation. Simply thinking about whether the rule of participation can be better applied or even changed is not enough. Instead, we need to question the way we go about exploring the rule, starting with something that is rarely looked at: the task that lies right under our noses, which consists in writing about our views on the matter at hand. As we write these lines, we might ask a simple and immediate question: are we 'partnering' with others in spelling out what we believe to be our guiding principles? Well, not really. Partnership signifies a direct relationship between known persons that is characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility in achieving shared goals. Writing this text, in the hope it will be of interest to our readers, does not meet this definition by any stretch of the imagination. This chapter and others to follow are informed by countless interventions in real-life situations and discussions with hundreds of people. Yet others are not full 'partners' or 'participants' directly involved in planning and producing this publication. We owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude, of course, but we must assume full responsibility for the views we express and all the work it takes to articulate them as best we can. The same can be said of the many authors we cite, including Erfan and Torbert (2015) on the matter of loops and levels of learning. Their names show up in this chapter, and discussing their ideas is part of the work we do to advance action research. But we and the people we have partnered with in real life are not 'partnering' with Erfan and Torbert in writing this book, let alone all others active in the field as a whole.

When we stop and think about it, our engagement with PAR is not always guided by the rule of participation, however it is defined. For one thing, our work includes communications of a scholarly nature, in a delayed mode, with readers and authors we have never met and that may never cross our path directly. Our approach to writing about the rule of participation strays far from the spirit of partaking or partnership that lies at the heart of PAR. Ironically, when we talk about walking the talk, we end up walking elsewhere.

While this cognitive dissonance is writ large in much of the PAR literature, it is largely unspoken. Now that we have become aware of it, we might decide to attempt to actually walk the talk of full and complete partnership in all aspects of our work, even if it means starting from square one in the process of sharing 'our' views. We could also change the extent to which we ourselves, as researchers, engage in all aspects of the action component of PAR for as long as it takes. As readers can imagine, choosing this path would be tantamount to opening up a Pandora's Box full of unrealistic expectations. A much wiser alternative perhaps lies elsewhere, at a deeper level – in drawing lessons from the response built into what we actually do. This happens to be a case where Action Science may have to be turned upside down – by recognizing that 'our espoused-theories aren't as good as we assume and our theories-in-use aren't as bad' (McLain Smith, 2015, p. 151; see McGonagill and Carman, 2015). Whether it be our own or someone else's, 'ordinary behaviour' and 'common sense' have a lot to teach, just like 'ordinary language' and 'common people' do.

This brings us to the reflex we have of signing 'our own' work, starting with this first chapter. To be sure, the decision to claim authorial rights over what we write serves our professional interests. Thinking otherwise would be lying to ourselves and our readers. But the habit we have of affixing our signature to published work enables us to deal with issues that are much bigger than we are, and attempt to make a contribution to the goals of science in society, however modest the contribution may be. In doing so, we assume full responsibility for the ideas we advance, the words we use, the actions we take and the errors we make. The expression of authorial intent and related obligations contradict conventional thinking on the question of shared responsibility in the spirit of PAR. The latter suggests a box-like view of project-based participation: all activities must evolve within clearly-delineated boundaries, on the basis of shared rules that dictate how people interact and coordinate their efforts inside the box. The community of all partners or members is the unit of identity (Nicolaidis and Raymaker, 2015, p. 168). This view simplifies life for everyone, but at the expense of our ability to make sense of deviations that keep staring us in the face. Even when it creates a tight circle, it can never actually close the circle. The plain language of 'partners in a project' masks the more complex reality of 'partnering projects'.

Lewin's field theory will help articulate the latter concept. In our view, PAR is an invitation sent to people whose life spaces may intersect around shared concerns. Those who accept the invitation meet at a crossroads and choose to interact according to shared rules. But they do so with many other considerations in mind. The gathering is like a nexus, a focal point where lines and paths intersect for a period of time. All those taking part spend time at this junction, but the way they interact, the things they do and the rules they follow are directly affected by their respective origins and destinations and the many other people they interact with. By way of example, researchers may join with non-scientists to address problems of safety at work in the construction industry. But they can engage in the process while having pursuits of their own. This means that their rules of engagement are not just about the immediate project at hand. Revisiting general models of accident causation and prevention may also be high on the radar screen. The same reasoning applies to non-researchers such as construction workers, site inspectors and employers. They too come to the junction with working terms, conditions and relationships of their own – company productivity and State-enforced rules and regulations of accident prevention at work, for

instance. Their rules meet and merge with other rules and associated goals and disputes, those built into the world of research. In PAR, *specific rules of association are the end product of a specific association of rules*. Promoting the spirit of internal sharing and partnering is certainly a trademark of PAR. But so is acting intelligently in response to each and every situation, knowing that crossroads are buzzing with movements in many directions and that no single community pathway and catch-all provisions for partnership can bring order and closure within the group apparently in control, as good as the intentions may be.

Like all others, engaged researchers cannot tread a single community's path alone. They must take part in other conversations and communities as well, including those concerned with investigating theory. In the end, PAR practitioners are more like brokers than partners. They do not merely sit at and facilitate tables of thoughtful action. They also bring something from other tables (the insights of theoretical practice) and take something away, as input into other debates and cross-examinations of thoughts and actions in social history.

A plea for conversations in the plural may seem so obvious as to be harmless. Yet the notion of 'rules associating according to circumstances' flies in the face of every PAR approach that defines participation as accountability within a single, well-delineated and self-directed community that carries out all phases of the action research cycle. In reality, genuine participation brings together partnering projects, not partners in a single project. It is not about inviting laypersons to join the research project or simply joining the projects of others. Rather, the map is one of many people moving along cross-cutting paths. Related plans involve everyone trying to do the right thing at the right time with the right people, knowing well that the things, the time frames and the people involved can never be always the same.

Tangible action

Action is another pillar of PAR that risks losing its edge in the big tent. It is not rare for action researchers to read into the word 'action' a mere 'potential for action and its expected or possible outcomes', that is, what might be done and what might happen if participants were to act on their newly gained awareness of the problems they face and the future they want for themselves and others. The notion is so vague it creates fertile ground for a 'carnival of participatory methods that . . . leaves everything essentially the same' (Wakeford *et al.*, 2015, p. 232). A wealth of learning ends up residing 'on the shelf, forlorn and recriminating as it gathers dust' (Bradbury *et al.*, 2015, p. 27). To avoid a 'dearth of follow-up mechanisms' and positive actions that will benefit participants other than 'greedy' researchers (Guhathakurta, 2015, p. 107; see Lykes and Scheib, 2015, pp. 134, 140; Martin, 2015, p. 505), we stress the importance of distinguishing PAR from 'participatory inquiry' or 'participatory research without action' (Swantz, 2015, p. 495). As in Lewin's work, PAR must set up a 'change experiment' to advance knowledge and push action in the right direction. This is not the case with participatory inquiry or even collaborative research, which denotes any investigative process where collaborative learning is achieved by reflecting on practice and behaviour, past or present, often with a view to supporting future action, in due time, if at all possible. The primary aim of 'research-*toward*-action' (Fetterman, 2015,

p. 87) is not to change practice in the course of research. Rather, the aim is to produce insights and knowledge, especially tacit or formal theories 'about' action, in collaboration between scientists and practitioners (Bergold and Thomas, 2012). No testing of new problem-solving behaviour is required. Many awareness-building approaches to group training on topics such as group dynamics, gender relations or leadership styles are of this type, that is to say self-inquiries or skill-building that *may lead* to collective action (Guhathakurta, 2015, p. 100; Nicolaidis and Raymaker, 2015, p. 175). The same comment applies to expert-driven experiments in Citizen Science, studies of local knowledge systems and programmes in service learning and education (Moely *et al.*, 2009; Stanton *et al.*, 1999; Koliba, 2004). These contributions to knowledge and education may be invaluable, but their relationship to social action is entirely different. In most cases, learning 'through' action gives way to learning 'on', 'for' or 'toward' action. Lumping these initiatives into the same category as PAR causes more confusion than clarity of purpose. It also lends credence to the critique often directed at action research: that it is all talk and no action. 'What acts research should actually perform' is left hanging in the air (Gustavsen and Pålshaugen, 2015, p. 414).

As with P and R, A must be taken seriously if the word it stands for is to carry any weight and foster a new relationship between science and society. PAR means little as a descriptor if it does not meet and integrate the minimum threshold of genuine participation, tangible action and scientific research. The observation should be a wake-up call, with a view to fully appreciating all forms of knowing without turning PAR into a glory hole of virtually any odds and ends in the world of well-intended inquiry. A good way to start is by asking the following question: how do we handle those contributions and frameworks that, as rich as they may be, do not involve research efforts immersed in action and authentically participatory? Our response to this question, already announced in the introduction to this chapter, is that we should keep a sense of perspective and purpose at all times. We mean this literally, as when a painter focusses on a subject knowing that elements on the periphery may be considered but get less attention and therefore less light.

Our Venn diagram (Figure 1.1) depicting the tripartite character of PAR captures the medial and lateral view of a perspectivist approach to the field. In the centre are processes that integrate all three components, without loss of meaning. Since all three circles intersect when taking this perspective, practitioners may feel free to borrow and integrate companion concepts, tools and practices located elsewhere in the diagram – say, for instance, T-groups or wiki tools (otherwise applicable without engaging in action or research), Citizens' Juries or Search Conferences from experiments in deliberative democracy (immersed in neither action nor scientific research) or the loops-of-learning and awareness-building framework from Action Science (often used with no immediate commitment to participatory action). PAR practitioners may also feel free to head in a lateral direction, by moving away from the centre and doing things that resemble but do not include the full intent or meaning of PAR. This is what we ourselves do when we choose to engage in participatory action *inquiries* that leave out research goals proper, when they are not essential to achieving success. While we have great faith in what full-fledged PAR can do to reconnect science and society, we do not wish to convert it into the panacea for all the world's ills. Time out for research may be essential to transforming social lives,

but there are times when collective action must take priority over everything else, for the greater good of all concerned.

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