Preface

Making a Difference: Research in the 21st Century

Introduction

Welcome to the fifth edition of this text! Our sincere hope is that you find within these pages the ideas and practices that will enhance your professional life and enable you to more effectively serve the people with whom you work. We come to the task conscious that we live in an era that, while challenging, provides the potential to engage a changing world that seeks the reassurance of processes that provide more equitable and effective professional practices.

In this text we seek to engage the dynamics that define the 21st century, where alienation between people is becoming increasingly evident, where inequity between the rich and the poor continues to expand, and where grave social issues are ignored in the interest of wealthy and powerful groups and individuals. In this edition we therefore present professional practitioners and community members in all spheres of life with a set of practices and processes that engage truly human and ethical procedures that instill life and energy into their work. We believe the following features of this text provide the means to accomplish these worthy aims:

- Research that engages diverse groups of people in collaborative processes that produce practical, effective, and sustainable outcomes to real-world problems they experience in their work, community, organizational, or institutional lives

- Practice frameworks that clarify the step-by-step procedures presented in the text

- Contemporary theory that builds on past knowledge to assist readers to understand the complex dynamics now evident in social life at all levels—organizational, local, state, national, and international

- An integration of research processes with social and digital media that have become a central feature of modern life

- A clear description of the developmental processes needed to accomplish social change

Enriching Professional Practice

This edition builds on the now extended experience of its authors by presenting an approach to action research that clearly acknowledges the dramatic changes now taking place in our everyday lives. Developments in information technology and social media fuel radical developments in our homes, workplaces, and communities. Rapid change in almost all sectors of our social lives require constant adaptation to the operational requirements now instilled in our agencies, institutions, and commercial operations that accompany economic and political developments in both government and industry at local, state, and national levels. Grave issues such as climate change, ongoing military conflicts, and the consequent displacement and mass movements of populations threaten to unhinge the very institutions created to provide order and coherence to social life on this planet Earth.

In these circumstances we speak to the many practitioners who, in all corners of life, continue to provide programs and services in education, health, justice, welfare, and a wide range of other human services. Often hampered by overly restrictive organizational mandates or poorly resourced programs, they consciously work to overcome the sometimes difficult circumstances they confront to provide for the well-being of the people they serve. The first sections of the text present researching practitioners with well-tested, practical processes that provide a tool kit of skills that enhance their professional capacities as well as a body of theory that enables them to understand more clearly the complex dynamics of the social and organizational environments in which they work.

The practices and processes we present in these pages therefore seek to provide moral and ethical approaches to professional life that have real impact on people's lives. We present an approach to research that not only seeks to extend people's understanding of the issues and problems that they confront in their daily lives but also resolve those issues by taking practical steps to deal with them effectively.

While our own experience has been significantly enriched by the rich body of theoretical work embodied in much of the literature, we believe that the ultimate end of this process must be the active engagement of theory and practice. Theory, for us, is not a process of abstract and disengaged intellectual activity, though at times that has a purpose, but a process of discovery that engages people in communities, agencies, social groups, organizations, and institutions in collaborative processes that assist them to resolve the complex issues they sometimes face. As becomes evident in this text, a primary purpose of action research is not just to gain knowledge but to put the knowledge emerging from research to practical use.

In an age where the publish-or-perish dynamics of university life tend to lock people ever more firmly into the ivory tower, our experience suggests academic life can become more purposefully fulfilling by engaging the social realities of the

people we serve. Publication by itself, we suggest, has become increasingly irrelevant in an age of "fake news," and there is an urgent need for the resources of the university to become more directly relevant to the crucial issues now emerging in all spheres of social life. Recent political events have made it clear that unethical and self-interested elites are able to harness the angst of the disenfranchised using ignorance and violence to serve their own political ends. Research, we believe, can no longer be considered the purview of an intellectual elite but should be embedded in the everyday lives of ordinary people to counter these reprehensible purposes.

In Search of Meaningful Methodology

The practices presented herein emerged from extensive experience in the field, each of us engaging in research activities in a wide variety of contexts for extended periods. Ernie's experience initially focused on his search for more effective approaches to education for Australia's Indigenous people. As he has indicated elsewhere (Stringer, 2015), after he had experienced years of fruitless search for ways for Aboriginal people to gain entry to Australia's universities, he became involved in a community-led action by Aboriginal people:

> The situation eventually resolved itself when I was asked by two Aboriginal men to help them set up a Centre for Aboriginal Studies at the university at which I worked. Almost no Aboriginal people, at that stage, were employed in any academic capacity in any university in my state and Aboriginal people rarely entered a university program. In the following years, working within a set of principles eventually defined as "Aboriginal Terms of Reference" and learning practices defined within what was then known as community development, I worked under the leadership of Aboriginal people to institute university programs and services specifically designed for the personal, social, cultural, and educational needs of the people.
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> In that wonderfully rich and collaborative environment, I experienced the joy and satisfaction of assisting Aboriginal people to achieve wonderfully effective results that transformed their place in the academic life of the nation. Aboriginal faculty worked in partnership with non-Aboriginal faculty to present unique and demanding programs derived from extensive consultation with Aboriginal communities. In following years, the number of Aboriginal graduates soared exponentially and the number employed in senior agency and organizational positions likewise increased dramatically.
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> The processes, practices, and theory developed in this context extended the depth and extent of my own capacities, eventually becoming encapsulated in the family of methods known initially as "community-based research" and became the basis for the action research that I have now practiced and taught in a variety of contexts for many years. The principles and practices that worked so well

with Aboriginal people, I discovered, were at least as effective in other contexts, including developmental work in East Timor, middle-class schools in Australia, a variety of health and welfare projects in other states of Australia, and community projects in Texas, New Mexico, Oregon, and New York in the United States.

Although I have occasionally been prevented from achieving my goals by the obstinacy of rigidly fixed bureaucratic procedures, the overall view as I look back is one of great satisfaction. Many of the friendships I have developed help sustain me, but fundamentally I receive regular feedback that gives me a sense that I have made a significant difference to the lives of the people I have served. It is a feeling that reflects the words of my Aboriginal friend Darryl Kickett: "I take my hat off to them! THEY'RE the ones who did it. THEY did it. No one else did it for them. To see them graduate and go out into the world and conquer the environment around them—in a good way—is so important." Action research, for me, makes all things possible.

Although Alfredo's pathway has been somewhat different, his experiences in the field employed for 9 years in a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Latin America eventually led him to question the effect of the organizational capacity-building services for which he was responsible:

Over time I became a frustrated capacity-building facilitator, believing that I was engaging in change processes that were only scratching the surface. This frustration was a major motivator behind my decision to pursue a PhD in search of a more meaningful and impactful capacity-building methodology, which led me to action research.

I first learned of action research during my PhD process at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), in large part because many members of the Participation, Power and Social Change research team to which I was assigned were action research (AR) proponents. As I became more familiar with AR concepts early in my research design, it became clear to me that AR was my only pathway to get a PhD, primarily because I had not really done formal research before as a practitioner. I had a lot of work experience and had produced a lot of written materials along the way, but my main strength was not going to be in learning formal "scientific" research methods and putting them to use for the first time as a PhD researcher. Partly out of intimidation of who I wasn't (scientific researcher), and partly in vindication of who I was (experienced capacity-building practitioner), I decided that my research process had to build strongly on the things I knew how to do well—namely design and facilitate capacity-building change processes but now using action research! My research ended up doing just that, although in a much more critical, reflective, and participatory way than I had done before.

Action research principles and practices have helped me to approach shared capacity-building spaces such as workshops more slowly and emergently, engaging in more open questioning, reflection, active listening, and systematic documentation of the active stories in the room, which are found in the

conversations, patterns of behavior, energy, and power relationships that emerge in real-life interactive drama of which I am a part. Action research has made me more aware of who participates, whose knowledge counts, and who calls the shots or decides what to do in different moments of the process. I am more aware of the deep connections between culture, identity, and methodology. And I am cognizant of the power of knowledge as an input into purposeful action and action as a powerful source of knowledge. Through this book I am excited to share more about how all practitioners can become action researchers and leverage action and knowledge in new and transformative ways.

Building from a "politics of hope," we therefore present practical procedures that more clearly illuminate the dynamics embedded in social settings but, in addition, define clear steps to take action to ameliorate the impact of many of the more onerous issues emerging from the impact of the ineffective and sometimes obfuscating narratives now embedded in the public arena. We trust that in working through the procedures suggested, you experience the joy and fulfillment that comes with work that is truly satisfying and effective, providing tangible ways in which you improve the well-being of the people you serve.

The Structure of the Text

Although this edition provides the basic materials including the original text, we have altered the layout of contents somewhat. The text is organized in three main sections, each of which provides explanatory notes related to the issues included:

Section I: An Introduction to Action Research provides a general orientation to the first two chapters.

Chapter 1: Understanding Action Research introduces readers to action research, including the principles that provide the foundation for our particular orientation to the field and examples drawn from the wide range of contexts where it has been applied. In the process it introduces the Look–Think–Act framework that guides data gathering, analysis, and action.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Foundations of Action Research explores the philosophical and theoretical foundations of action research to assist readers to understand how the application of practically grounded research procedures distinguishes it from other approaches to investigation.

Section II: Action Research Practices and Processes provides an overview of Chapters 3 through 6, which provide detailed procedures and practices for engaging real-world environments in ways that make a difference in people's lives.

Chapter 3: Initiating an Action Research Process presents detailed procedures for initiating a research project.

Chapter 4: Look: Generating and Gathering Data guides readers through a set of practices for generating and gathering data.

Chapter 5: Think: Reflecting and Analyzing focuses on data analysis that enables research participants to develop an extended understanding of the issues and dynamics effecting the issues under investigation.

Chapter 6: Act: Implementing Practical Solutions suggests how knowledge emerging from the process of investigation provides the basis for taking practical and effective action to resolve the issues and problems that were the focus of investigation.

Section III: From Local to Global—Action Research for Social Change is intended to enrich and extend the capacities of experienced researchers. It first provides an extended discussion of the complex issues now facing the global community, recognizing the need to reframe the work of the university to counter the impact of the disturbing ideologies increasingly evident in many parts of the world. It introduces strategic developmental processes through which action research might provide a "politics of hope" that counters the impact of socially divisive knowledge production.

Chapter 7: Reporting: Informing Stakeholders and Other Audiences describes formal and informal procedures using traditional reporting processes and creative multimedia presentations for disseminating research information, not just to academic and professional communities but to the populace at large. Research information, we suggest, can no longer be considered only the purview of elite audiences.

Chapter 8: Developmental Approaches to Social and Organizational Change presents strategic developmental processes, moving from personal reflection through micro and mezza levels of practice at the small-group level to macro processes of organizational change that are the basis for meta-level institutional change.

Chapter 9: Action Research and Digital Media brings action research into the 21st century. With digital media so rapidly becoming a dominant force in public and private life, we provide detailed descriptions of practical ways these technologies can be used to enhance the power and reach of action research.

Enriching the Learning Process

Reflection and Learning activities presented at the end of each chapter are intended to capture the spirit of action research. They seek to assist people to learn from experience by reflecting on their use of the procedures we present in real-life situations. In doing so we hope to extend the power and application of abstract ideologies and theories, illuminating the way they apply to the realities of people's own experience. In this respect they may be interpreted as processes of action learning—learning not just from the literature or lectures of "authorities" but from reflection on their engaged experiences.

Each chapter finishes with a Chapter Review that summarizes the key issues presented to assist readers to understand and actively engage the simple procedures of action research in the grassroots work of their everyday professional and community lives.

This edition takes a giant leap into the 21st century by acknowledging the changing world in which we now live, where information technology and social media have transformed our lives, providing multiple ways of communicating and opening us to an incredible array of resources. In this edition we now complement the array of information included in this text with a range of interesting and useful internet sources and other materials provided on a website directly associated with our book. Please visit **https://www.actionresearch5.com/**