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Participation, Knowledge and Power in 'New' Forms of Action Research: Reflections on an Offender's Social Reintegration Project¹

Abstract:

The paper uses the Offenders' Social Reintegration Project, run between 1988 and 1998 by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, to discuss the characteristics of new forms of action research and to reflect on the main debates within action research literature. Firstly, new forms of action research dealing with community issues tend to take place within complex systems, aiming to bring potential partners together and to facilitate the development of networks of organisations. Networking presupposes a more open-ended mode of research and opens the question of participation of the social groups concerned. The varying and changing degrees of participation within the Project are described with reference to the role of the researchers and the discrepancy between formal and informal partnerships. Secondly, the relation between research and action is dealt with via a discussion of the different types of knowledge produced in the course of the Project and their appropriateness for informing and evaluating practice. The implications of these arguments for the scientific status of action research and the paradigm within which it can be located are also addressed. Thirdly, the paper discusses the role of the various institutional contexts in shaping and constraining possible types of research and action. Finally, the

type of change pursued by action research projects is considered with reference to the ongoing debate within action research literature on the role of politics, leading to the acknowledgement of the inevitable implication of political negotiations and power in any initiative towards social change.

Introduction

The principle of action research, now attributed to the 'classic' work of Kurt Lewin (1946), is that research is inconceivable without action towards change. Action research consists of spirals of planning, action, observation and reflection mutually feeding onto one another. Its defining characteristics are problem focus, action orientation, cyclical process and par-

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ticipation (Peters & Robinson, 1984). Action research has flourished in the last decades in education (McNiff, 1988; Zuber-Skerritt, 1991), organisations (Whyte, 1991) and the community (Lees & Smith, 1975; Room, 1993; Stringer, 1996). Each of these trends has developed their own models of combining research and action shaped by the context, the issues addressed and the aims pursued. Delineating the different models is beyond the scope of this paper. The reflections offered here cut across the different fields of action research development in an attempt to engage with general issues that all forms of action research have dealt with in different ways.

A helpful distinction, however, which will be used as a template in the course of this paper, is one between 'classical' and 'new' forms of action research in the organisational field (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Chisholm & Elden, 1993). In the classical model of action research a researcher is called into an organisation and works in collaboration with the organisation's members studying the problem, formulating hypotheses, initiating relevant actions, collecting and evaluating data, forming new hypotheses etc. In the last decades new forms of action research have emerged, which while following the basic principles of action research, considerably depart from the classical model. According to Elden & Chisholm (1993) the characteristics of emerging varieties of organisational action research are:

- expansion of work to highly complex systems, such as groups and organisations at local, national and/or international level
- engagement with community issues, such as education, unemployment, discrimination, which involve operating within loosely organised systems and building networks
- considerably more open-ended and emergent process

- adoption of a more fully collaborative style
- reorientation of targets from the improvement of a system's functioning to restructuring of systems and wider social change
- dissemination through strategic intervention involving wider social networks

The Offenders' Social Reintegration Project

In this paper I will use the Offenders' Social Reintegration Project, an action research project jointly run by the Departments of Psychology and Law of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece between 1988 and 1998, to discuss the characteristics of new forms of action research and to reflect on the main debates in action research literature. The Project arose out of a long-term concern of a team at both Departments with phenomena of social exclusion and a commitment to helping socially disadvantaged groups re-enter the social environment after prolonged social isolation, mainly in closed institutions. It consisted of a number of initiatives, which although technically self contained and separately funded, derived from the same rationale and had a continuity in terms of staff, partnerships and activities.

In its first phase the Project provided on-the-job training for a small number of ex-prisoners in six month placements at the University of Thessaloniki service departments. This was later expanded to placements with a number of regional City Councils. The on-the-job training model was subsequently replaced, in agreement with changing E.U. funding priorities, with intensive short-term training workshops in a variety of subject areas, e.g. clothes making, carpentry, building restoration etc., both in the community for ex-prisoners and in prisons. Training was later supplemented with

setting up small businesses run by prisoners and ex-prisoners in the regional prisons and the community. In the last phase the Project set up a Support and Information Office for ex-prisoners and ex-drug addicts, which operated as a drop-in centre providing advice and support on issues of subsistence, accommodation, benefits, training, detoxification, health, employment etc. The Project emphasised psychosocial support, support towards detoxification (the majority of ex-prisoners are heroine addicts) and raising public awareness on issues of social exclusion throughout its operation.

I was involved with the Project in its initial phase, in 1989, as a student volunteer and then in its final phase, 1996-8, as a full-time member of staff. During the latter phase my duties included setting up the Support and Information Office, co-ordinating and evaluating the transnational network, designing the Project's internal evaluation and co-ordinating media and public awareness interventions. The reflections presented in this paper derive from my first hand experience of working on the Project, my contact with the Project staff throughout its operation and the study of archival documents as part of the internal and transnational evaluations.

I do not claim, of course, that the Project is exemplary of new organisational action research. As will become clearer in the course of the paper, the Project cannot be easily classified in terms of the different fields and models of action research. Moreover, the particularity of the Project and its national and local context might not allow a great degree of generalisation. It is useful, however, as a concrete example, a starting point for reflection on the dilemmas, potentials and problems of action research. The discussion is organised around four groups of issues:

- networking and participation

- research, knowledge and action
- institutional constraints
- dissemination and social change

Networking and participation

While classical action research is conducted mainly with small scale organisations, recent action research initiatives work with groups and organisations at local, national and international level (Brown, 1993; Engelstad & Gustavsen, 1993; Greenwood et al, 1993; Levin, 1993). These initiatives work within highly complex systems, which necessitate complex forms of analysis and action, a more open-ended process and considerably lengthened time scale. Moreover, while classical action research is usually carried out with systems characterised by mechanistic and bureaucratic modes of functioning, where any change would presuppose the loosening and reconfiguration of some of the system's internal mechanisms, emerging forms of action research which deal with community issues, such as education, unemployment, discrimination, operate in a much more loosely organised terrain. The research process, then, is aimed at bringing potential partners together and facilitating the creation of sustainable networks of organisations for the long term tackling of the problems (Elden & Chisholm, 1993).

The open endedness of the research is also the effect of a shift in the role of participants in action research. In the classical model the researcher collaborates with the participants but remains in control of the research process. Recent forms of action research adopt a more fully collaborative style, whereby the knowledge and skills of the researcher are put on the same level as the knowledge and skills of the participants and the two roles are blurred as they both

operate as co-researchers and co-participants (Holly, 1991; Nissen, 1997; Smith, 1994; Whyte et al, 1991). However, as Greenwood et al (1993) very well illustrate, even when full participation is the guiding principle, in practice it is almost never fully realised and its degree of achievement depends on a number of factors, such as the types of problems addressed, the environmental conditions, the aims and capacities of the research team etc. In any case, the degree and type of participation cannot be decided and planned by the researcher in advance; it is rather an emergent process which takes place in the course of action. The role of the researcher, then, is to ensure that the conditions for participation are in place and to keep the process open enough for participation to emerge.

In the case of the Project under discussion, not only were the roles of the researcher and participants blurred, but this distinction was never there in the first place. There has never been a delegated group of researchers and defined groups of participants. In order to discuss participation, I will start by disentangling the different groups involved and their role in planning, implementing and decision making.

Project staff

At the core of the Project was the team of Project staff, which comes the closest to a definition of a team of researchers. The Project team consisted in the last phase of two Scientific Leaders, a Professor of Law and an Assistant Professor of Psychology, who had the overall responsibility of the Project, a co-ordinator and seven members of staff coming from a range of disciplines and with varied background and expertise. Each member of staff had their own delegated responsibilities and were working within informal subgroups depending on their area of responsibility. The overall management

and decision making was mediated by weekly meetings of the staff team where updates were given, issues were discussed and decisions were taken concerning courses of action to be pursued.

The location of the Project at a University facilitated the involvement of a large number of students, initially voluntarily and subsequently in the form of placements validated by the Psychology Department. Involving students was part of the Project team's commitment to pursuing links between the University and the community and encouraging the role of the University not simply as the site of production of knowledge but also as an active intervention agent in social terrains. The students were distributed in the various sites of the Project's implementation and had an active supportive role under the supervision of a member of staff.

Formal partnerships

The issue of offenders' reintegration is multi-faceted and requires the involvement of different types of institutions pertaining to the legal, employment and social welfare systems which operate at local, regional and national levels. The Project, since its inception, has been based on formal collaborations between the University of Thessaloniki and a number of institutions, including the Ministry of Justice, the national Work Force Employment Organisation and Thessaloniki City Council. The formal partnership with large regional and national organisations is meant to guarantee the viability, sustainability and dissemination of the practices generated by the Project. It is based on a clear programmatic statement about the duties and type of participation of each partner either as sponsors or as providing expertise. Participation at this level consisted of top level negotiations between institutions through planning meetings of their representatives. The outcomes of these meetings

had a major impact on setting the parameters of the Project in terms of decisions around the time scale of funding, the availability of resources etc. Each partner provided what was required by the programmatic statement, but no attempt at real reflection, co-operation and planning of common action on the basis of negotiation of vision and direction has been made. While the initial rationale of setting up a formal partnership was to facilitate the creation of a network of institutions which would develop common strategies for tackling the issue of offender reintegration, in practice it proved to be a contingent coalition of institutions, each pursuing their own agendas and prioritising getting some kind of credit for their actions over addressing the social issue at hand. I will discuss specific examples of this in the last section on dissemination and social change.

Grass roots and informal networking

On the other hand extensive informal networking developed over the years between members of the Project's team and members of other organisations working with the same population. Participation took the form of day to day collaboration between members of staff of the Project and members of other organisations in the course of addressing the needs and requests of offenders. For example, while working towards finding employment positions for ex-prisoners, most of whom are drug addicts or in the course of detoxification, the Project staff closely collaborated with staff of the three main regional detoxification agencies. The Project staff would refer offenders for detoxification to the relevant agencies and staff of these agencies would refer their clients to the Project for advice and support on training, employment, benefits etc. Detoxification and social reintegration were most often parallel processes, which re-

quired members of the detoxification agencies and members of the Project working closely together to monitor each offender's progress. Apart from the day to day close monitoring of action, these collaborations involved a more strategic working out of duties and responsibilities of each agency and a framework of common action that went beyond each individual case. It entailed a constant exchange of information concerning changes in policies, priorities and ways of functioning of each organisation as well as more general nation wide policy changes and decisions about adjusting our action to them. On a grass roots level this was a mutual learning process for all involved, and the more sustained networks developed there. Although not formally participating in the Project in the sense of taking part in planning meetings or providing formal feedback, these collaborations were fed back into the Project through the Project staff's participation in the decision making processes. Some of these networks were never formalised, due to a large extent to the different agendas and modes of functioning of each organisation. For example, only one of the three detoxification agencies was a formal partner to the Project; collaborations with the other two, however intensive, remained at the level of individual members of staff. Consequently, individual collaborations were never fed through to the level of formal collaboration between organisations, which had debilitating effects for any possible strategic liaising towards designing of common action or pressing towards policy changes.

Transnational networking

The Project in its 1996-1998 phase was also part of a Network of six organisations in different European countries working towards the reintegration of offenders, all of which received E.U. funding for the implementa-

tion of their projects. The setting up of a transnational network was a funding requirement and was initially formed ad hoc to satisfy this. The Network functioned through meetings between representatives of each project and bilateral exchanges of project staff and offenders. The differences between the national contexts within which each project operated and correspondingly the design of each project made planning common actions a difficult task. It took the whole period of the two years for partners to get an understanding of each other and start working out ways in which a real sustained collaboration could develop. Unfortunately, by that time funding reached its end and each organisation had to move in its own direction, seek other funding and work out other transnational collaborations. The results of this collaboration were crystallised in a comparative description and evaluation document of the projects and their national contexts (T.O.P., 1998). Common action between some of the partners is still now being pursued; the Network, however, has ceased to formally exist.

Offenders

Last but not least, the participation of offenders needs considering. In the beginning of the Project, when the number of staff and the number of offenders involved was more limited and manageable, there were regular feedback and planning meetings with all staff and offenders involved. In the subsequent phases, when numbers grew, the fully collaborative approach gave way to only an indirect representation of offenders, via the Project staff feeding their views through in decision making meetings. At the level of implementation of specific actions of the Project, such as running workshops, setting up enterprises, developing services, the approach was relatively open ended and engaged the offenders involved in determining

to some extent and within the existing constraints the parameters of action. At the same time all members of staff developed a direct engagement with offenders, which, according to the overall rationale of the Project, was not restricted to the overseeing of the implementation of specific actions. The informal style with which the Project operated also encouraged offenders to talk to any member of staff about concerns of theirs. The central office of the Project operated largely as a drop in centre, where offenders could come in for any request, advice, mediation, or even a chat over a cup of coffee. This allowed the Project staff to have knowledge of the offenders' views of the Project but also their more general situation, problems and needs. This knowledge was fed back into the Project staff meetings and taken into account when deciding on priorities and courses of action.

The lack of formal participation of offenders was, however, a major concern for the staff, who saw themselves as social activists committed to radical and participatory action. The growing numbers of offenders involved together with the lack of any organisation representing offenders locally or nationally were factors inhibiting formal participation. Participation was mainly hindered, though, for other reasons. A prerequisite to any form of participation is a commitment to common targets, values and agendas, or at least a commitment to working towards negotiating and establishing common ground (Giesbrecht & Ferris, 1993; Israel et al, 1992). Participation also requires some kind of vision and sense of group membership which goes beyond individual aspirations. The offender population operates within a culture of distrust, which included the Project as a University based initiative; however justifiable this may be, it did not help in facilitating the establishment of trust at organisational and group level.

Moreover, the offender culture, coupled with the widespread heroine addiction, promotes individualistic and opportunistic approaches of 'using the system', whenever possible, for one's own personal benefit. Although this opportunism is understandable, given the financial and social destitution of this section of the population, the notion of group membership and the values that result from this culture are adverse to any sense of collective representation, acting on behalf and for the benefit of others and participating in a common long term strategy for change. So while there was an agreement about the problems and needs that had to be addressed, the starting premises as well as the vision and targets for the Project and for the offenders were so different that a common strategic approach proved practically unfeasible.

The discussion above highlights the difficulties of defining and pursuing participation in community projects (Giesbrecht & Ferris, 1993). It also demonstrates the argument that participation is a fluid and emergent process rather than something that can be decided in advance (Greenwood et al, 1993). Although full participation of both the formal partners and the group of offenders was envisaged as essential in the beginning of the Project, the initial prediction had to be considerably modified in different ways for each of the groups in the course of the Project by being adapted to the culture, modes of functioning and values of the participating agents. On the other hand unforeseen informal networks of participation developed at a grass root level as a response to the continually changing demands of action. Finally, the reflection over the nature and process of participation in the Project supports the argument for the necessary openness of action projects which deal with social issues. As commented by Chisholm & Elden (1993), new forms of com-

munity action research find themselves operating in a loosely organised, turbulent environment and have to come to terms with the fluid and proliferating character of networks and the acknowledgement that the direction of action can never be predicted, designed and controlled.

Research, Knowledge and Action

Forms of knowledge in action research

Action research is characterised by the inseparability between research and action; courses of action are reflected upon and evaluated, producing knowledge which leads into planning of further action. Reason & Heron (1995) define four forms of knowledge that are appropriate to participative research: propositional (knowing about), experiential (knowing through encounter), practical (knowing how to), representational (knowing expressed in images and stories). Action research is described as a process which moves between these four forms of knowing, whereby each gets mobilised and enhanced resulting in them being knit together in an integrative approach (Reason, 1993). These forms of knowledge can be easily recognised as what writers in action research refer to as the local knowledge of participants, a functional knowledge which is indispensable for operating within any given context. Action research is then seen as a process of integration of two forms of knowing: the researcher learns from participants about the field and the participants learn from the researcher systematic methods of investigating their field (Elden & Levin, 1991).

At a more general level there is an argument about the relative priority of the two kinds of knowing and the research practices pertaining to them. On the one side, it has

been argued that action research is a scientific mode of enquiry which should generate both context specific action oriented knowledge and generalisable, reliable and potentially replicable information, contributing, thus, to both changing the field and social science (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Heller, 1993). The result of this is an emphasis on carefully designed scientific methodology, which quite often takes the form of quantitative data (Dowel & Farmer, 1992; Ledford & Mohrman, 1993) and arguments that action research is an extension of the scientific method into social fields (Aguinis, 1994). On the other side, the emphasis on generalisability, reliability and replicability is seen as an expansion of positivist thinking into the investigation of social life (Stringer, 1996; Winter, 1989). Action research, as much as any form of research in real life situations and with people, necessitates a different epistemology and research ethics (Altrichter, 1991; Mangham, 1993; Reason, 1993; Reason & Rowan, 1981a). In participative research the participants' local knowledge should be prioritised over the researcher's theoretical and methodological knowledge, and adaptable, context specific modes of enquiry should be developed. The inquiry should be systematic and valid; validity, however, is defined as pragmatic and social (Hoshmand & O'Byrne, 1996). A research project's validity is judged by its relevance to the context and usefulness for action and it is guaranteed by adopting a critical self-reflexive stance, maintaining a collaborative approach and developing a dialectic analysis of the complexity of the field (Bawden, 1991; Reason & Rowan, 1981b; Winter, 1989).

The distinction between the researchers' scientific knowledge and the participants' local knowledge does not apply to the Project. Apart from the fact that there were no designated researchers, even the members of

staff who came the closest to the definition of researchers, contributed less their social science knowledge than a range of different types of experiential, practical, representational and propositional knowledge. Given the varied work that the action researcher is called to do, ranging from collecting information, liaising with organisations, running groups etc., multidisciplinary teams are considered a necessary prerequisite (Israel et al, 1992; Whyte et al, 1991). The Project staff had an amazing range of background knowledge and expertise: they ranged from academics in psychology – like myself – and law to practising solicitors, psychologists with a specialisation in addiction and encounter groups, community activists and one ex-prisoner and ex-drug addict. Staff members came into the Project with a variety of different types of knowledge in a range of fields, which was valued and put to use; there was continuous consultation between members of staff and referrals of offenders from one member of staff to the other depending on the nature of their request. Law graduates, for example, were consulted on policy and legal issues, psychologists on support and addiction interventions, community activists on referrals to other organisations and networking, and ex-prisoners on approaches to prison and drug cultures. On the other side the various participants, formal and informal partners and offenders, contributed their own 'local' forms of knowledge: knowledge of their context, their local culture with its implicit rules of functioning, appropriate ways of pursuing action etc. The day to day transactions between all these different participants produced a blending mill out of which new context specific and action oriented knowledge was generated.

The action-reflection-evaluation cycle

In the course of the Project there were clearly identifiable phases of action, reflection

and evaluation. Each specific implementation site had its own timing of hypothesis formulation, design, action, evaluation and re-design of action. But there was no overall time for stopping action to reflect, which gave the Project a feel of continuous activity, whereby the reflection and evaluation had to always take place in the middle of parallel ongoing action. Neither was there a formalised evaluation design put in place. Evaluation was a continuous activity pursued in informal conversations between participants and colleagues, consultations with the leaders of the Project and in its most formal in the staff regular feedback and planning meetings.

A systematic pattern of action reflection and evaluation, typical of descriptions of the process of action research (Stringer, 1996) emerged quite early on. At some site of the Project some discontent would be expressed or problematic situation be encountered. At the level of practical, representational and experiential knowledge the members of staff directly involved with that activity would start expressing their uneasiness, consulting informally with colleagues and forming hypotheses about the nature of the problem. Gradually, through extensive networking and consultation, the problem would be translated in propositional knowledge terms, some consensus among staff members would come about regarding its nature and suggestion would be formed about ways of resolving it. Eventually, it would be brought to the staff meeting, where the hypotheses would be discussed, alternative forms of actions considered and subsequent action decided. These systematic, yet informal, cycles of inquiry and action were based on reflection, extensive peer review and consultation, and were driven by a sense of responsibility and commitment both to all parties involved and to the social issues set to be addressed.

I will provide here only one example which is indicative of the action-reflection-evaluation cycle and the interweaving of different forms of knowledge. The Support and Information Office was set up by the Project as a drop-in centre for ex-prisoners and ex-drug-addicts to address issues of accommodation, subsistence, detoxification, training etc. through advice, support and referral to relevant agencies. Its main function, however, was to encourage and support employment, since financial independence and work were seen as crucial to social reintegration. The Office launched an employment campaign through sensitising employers on offenders' issues, informing them on available State subsidies for the employment of ex-offenders and guaranteeing monitoring the first stages of employment. As some employers started responding positively, we reviewed the records of offenders who had approached the Office requesting employment. We realised, to our surprise, that the few offenders who were able to work had already found some form of work, while the majority were judged by both the Office staff and the detoxification agencies as unable to sustain employment in normal conditions due to ongoing drug addiction. Of the few who the Office initiated employment for, a large percentage dropped out or were laid off due to erratic attendance. Over a period of about a month the Office staff was overwhelmed by surprise, anger, frustration and disappointment. Gradually, and as the failure to secure employment was becoming repetitive, the staff moved from feeling frustrated with the individual employers and offenders to realising that this pattern reflects a wider issue, that due to extensive heroine use coupled with the prison culture, ex-prisoners were in their majority unable and/or unwilling to work. Eventually, and through informal consultation with colleagues, it was acknowledged that, while employment

remains the end target, it cannot be prioritised before other conditions – i.e. detoxification, psychosocial interventions, training and sheltered work – are met. Then the issue was discussed in the Project staff planning meeting resulting in a major restructuring of the Office, with more emphasis on links with detoxification agencies and one-to-one support, and re-shaping the plans for the overall development of the services provided by the Project in its next phase.

Formal research versus reflective practice

The two 'formal' research attempts were the evaluation of the transnational network and an internal evaluation process based on semi-structured interviews with staff, partners and offenders, both of which were to be designed and co-ordinated by myself. The transnational evaluation was carried out according to plan, as it was based exclusively on the comparison and compilation of information on each project and its national context provided by an assigned member of staff of each project. Regarding the internal evaluation, it was agreed by the Project team that, apart from the quantitative statistical data routinely obtained, a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with all participants would provide valid and reliable information both on the offenders' needs and on the effectiveness of different sites of intervention. Staff and students were trained to interview the offenders they were already working with in order to minimise the distance between a designated researcher and research subjects. This, however, fell through midway, as carrying out such extensive interviewing was too time consuming for the Project team which was already overloaded.

Although the failure of an attempt to a more formal evaluation was frustrating at the time, with hindsight it is debatable what employing formalised data gathering would have contributed to practice. Observations, interviews, studying documents, shadowing etc., the methods invariably suggested in action research literature (Bannister et al, 1995; McNiff, 1988; Stringer, 1996), were routinely and informally carried out, discussed and reflected upon in the course of action. Introducing them as part of a formal research design would have interjected an element of artificiality, polarised the positions of researchers and participants and prioritised a limited range of conclusions as the most reliable and relevant.

This fluid, context specific, reflexive practice, however, has its limitations. There is the question of how the lessons learned can be disseminated beyond the time and space frame of the Project and be put to use in justifying the courses of action undertaken and those proposed in new funding submissions, pressurising for policy changes etc. in the absence of any formalised conclusions. The Project attempted to perform all these actions on the basis of a claim to acquired experience and expertise, but this argument is hardly persuasive in a hostile political environment and in the absence of scientific looking data to support one's claims. Furthermore, now that the Project has ended little has remained as tangible results, conclusions and suggestions to be read, considered and put to use by others who might want to do similar work. The staff and participants have acquired knowledge and expertise which they will presumably carry with them in their subsequent engagements with action. Little of the Project and the collective knowledge gained from it, though, has remained.

Institutional Constraints

The impression typically given of action research in one of an open, flowing process whereby action is evaluated and redesigned on the basis of the knowledge gained. What is rarely talked about is the crucial role that contextual, and especially institutional constraints have in shaping action (Dowell & Farmer, 1996; Lees & Smith, 1975; Room, 1993). Action does not simply flow from evaluations; it is framed and conditioned by available resources, institutional and inter-institutional dynamics, and at the end of the day the politics of the institutions involved. In the case of the Project the contextual constraints ranged from enhancing to limiting and in some cases nullifying conclusions drawn from the evaluation of action. I will start by discussing the constraining role of the requirements by the Project's funding body and then move on to describe other types of institutional constraints.

E.U. funding and priorities

E.U. funded projects for combating social exclusion commenced in 1988 with prioritising dispersed on-the-job training schemes. This was adopted by the Project which placed a small number of offenders in the University and City Councils' service departments in six month placements. A subsequent shift in E.U. policy required training to take place in group intensive workshops. Implementing this training model proved inappropriate for the offender population. Feedback from both offenders and Project staff culminated in the view that intensive training in groups maintained the sense of marginalisation, encouraged crime and drug relating cultures and operated more like a money earning parenthesis in offenders' lives than a gradual route to employment. Despite repeated attempts to feed this

through to national and E.U. funding agencies, the framework continued being the same throughout the duration of the Project and the Project had to act against its best knowledge, as it was the only way to attract funding for training activities.

Another lesson learned out of training activities is that training as such does not have major effects in subsequent employment and that it is more important, firstly, to establish services and support structures, and secondly, to facilitate the establishment of new employment positions, through subsidising the setting up of offender run enterprises which would be self-sustained after the end of external funding. This, luckily enough, was also a general conclusion that the E.U. reached, and the frame that governed the last phases of the Project prioritised the development of new systems and the creation of new employment positions.

The importance of psychosocial support was perceived by the Project quite early in its work. The establishment of a stable supporting network of relations that would slowly facilitate the process of reintegration and would work towards mobilisation against drug addiction was seen to be a necessary complement, or even a prerequisite, to training and employment. This initially theoretical position proved right in practice with the failure of the Support and Information Office's attempts to secure employment mentioned earlier. This partly corresponded with the additional budget for psychosocial support that the E.U. provided, but the priorities had to be reversed. While, in so far as the E.U. was concerned, the Projects' target was to provide training, services and employment coupled with elements of support, the Project used training, services and employment as a frame within which to establish a trusting supportive environment. Members of staff and students in placement who worked within a specific site

of implementation would operate as 'reference persons' to a small number of offenders, establishing a relationship that would address a variety of issues and last beyond the duration of the specific activity. Reference persons were not assigned prior to the beginning of the activity; they rather took on that role as relationships between staff, students and offenders developed in the course of ongoing activity. Moreover, support was never imposed; it was rather provided on demand, while obviously the articulation of demand is facilitated by the establishment of trust. The way of addressing the issue of psychosocial support is an example of the Project moulding itself to accommodate funding requirements, while in practice operating with different priorities, working with a rationale which has been proved by practice to be the most effective.

Institutional constraints in prison interventions

The work of the Project in prisons was the clearest show case of the way institutional dynamics and constraints can have fatal consequences for action. In the last two phases of the Project a number of training workshops were set up in prison, aiming to prepare prisoners for employment after release and create a trained workforce which could undertake paid work while still in prison. Prisoners who participated in the workshops received a small financial compensation and contributed to the diminution of their penalty, as according to law one day of work or training within prison counts as two days of penalty; consequently, competition for participation was high. The prison, as a condition for allowing the workshops to run, reserved the right to select prisoners for participation. The result was disastrous, as the most inappropriate prisoners were selected; the prison management used the presence of workshops to reward the 'good

prisoners', including 'informers', those who feed back to prison authority information on other prisoners. The training environment was permeated by distrust which debilitated the attempt to enable the creation of a different culture. Operating a training workshop, especially by an outside agency, was completely new to the prison culture and inevitably destabilised to some extent the long established prison dynamics. On a day to day basis the Project staff had to negotiate their position in relation to trainees, the rest of prisoners, guards and prison management and mediate in emerging conflicts between them. The suggestion, for example, by Project staff that the guards should pay something for bringing in their clothes to be mended by trainees in a sewing and clothes making workshop, created havoc, as there had been a long tradition of prison staff profiting by prisoners' unpaid labour. As long as the prison benefited from the Project through projecting to the outside the image of being progressive without challenging the institutional dynamics, the Project was hailed as a positive contribution. As soon as the inevitable consequences of such intervention started becoming apparent, the prison establishment started jeopardising any initiative. The end result was a letter from the prison governor to the Ministry of Justice requesting the termination of Project activities on security grounds.

Dissemination and Social Change

The aim of action research projects is not restricted to producing change in the small scale local action they are engaged in. A major consideration is dissemination, the production of knowledge and practice which will inform action in other similar settings at more large scale level (Room, 1993). In what concerns dissemi-

nation, the classical action research assumption that the generation of valid information on examples of good practice in a system will automatically lead to it being adopted by other similar systems, has given way to the acknowledgement that dissemination can only take place in the context of sustained strategic intervention by choosing areas of work that are more likely to have wider impact and by building social networks (Chisholm & Elden, 1993). This is linked to the shift in targets of new action research projects from the improvement of a system's functioning to reorientation and restructuring of systems. Moreover, a divide can be detected between First World initiatives which aim at changing organisations and generating new types of social science information and Third World initiatives which aim at raising consciousness, exploring new ways of tackling social problems and empowering the oppressed, that is to say, social transformation (Brown, 1993).

Dissemination

The Project, more than a local attempt to ameliorate the conditions of offenders, was meant to be a pioneering initiative that would generate lessons to be adopted by regional and national policy. The structures and models of practice established were envisaged to continue in a more permanent form as structures funded by local, regional and national government. Moreover, they were to be disseminated through the establishment of networks and the generation of suggestions for law and policy changes around the penitentiary and post-penitentiary system. For example, setting up enterprises and training workshops for prisoners and ex-prisoners was meant to provide an example that would lead to its adoption by the Ministry of Justice, which was one of the Project's partners, and would be replicated in other prisons and communities in Greece.

Pioneering the Offenders Support and Information Office in collaboration with the Thessaloniki City Council was envisaged to lead to its continuation as one of the services provided by the City Council and eventually its adoption by other City Councils in the country. It was clear for the Project that simply providing an example of good practice was not enough. Throughout its operation there was intense networking with other organisations, lobbying, interventions in local and national newspapers and the media, organisation of public events aiming towards raising public awareness. Apart from providing an example of good practice, the Project attempted to keep the issue of social marginalisation of offenders on the agenda and keep hammering away the need for changes in the penitentiary and post-penitentiary system to facilitate their social reintegration; and this is a clearly political position.

The inevitability of politics

The political dimension of action within the social world is not a matter of consensus between action researchers. Some acknowledge that action research is not value free, but prefer to address its commitment to social change in terms of the researchers assisting "people realising their values", which are seen as "democratic, humanistic values" (Elden & Chisholm, 1993: 127); indeed, action research is seen as moving towards a 'radical humanistic' paradigm (Holly, 1991). In this version the value of action research is empowerment, understood as allowing people participation and therefore some control over their environment (Greenwood et al, 1993; Kerruish, 1995). On the other hand, there is a wide acknowledgement that acting and researching in the real world inevitably entails involvement in politics, whereby even the researcher's denial or avoidance of taking a political position is

a political act (Pappaport, 1977). Especially in action research, whose explicit aim is change, the issue of politics cannot be avoided, since any decision on the desired direction of change will affect institutional and inter-institutional dynamics, opposing interests etc. The researcher should, thus, reflectively "explore their own political allegiances" as well as "continuously address the issue of which political interests research satisfies" (Reason, 1993). A response widely adopted is that the researcher should be aware of the effects of their actions on the systems they are engaged with and of the politics of the organisations they are working within, but should remain neutral by avoiding taking side with one of the opposed social groups. The management of neutrality is seen as suitable to the researcher's position and as the only practical way of pursuing change without having it jeopardised by potentially threatened groups (Israel et al, 1992; Stringer, 1996). While neutrality may be appropriate and useful for work which is internal to organisations, although its ethical justification questionable, taking sides is unavoidable when projects aim at social rather than organisational change. Acting against social marginalisation is not a humanistic enterprise, although it contains humanistic elements in the form of concern for marginalised groups; it is a political act. Work aiming towards empowerment at individual, organisational and community level (Speer & Hughey, 1995) is located wholly within the political domain, based on an analysis of the institutions, practices and discourses that enforce and maintain social marginalisation and necessarily takes side by exposing them and acting towards changing them (Burton & Kagan, 1996). Neutrality in this context would consist in nothing less than siding with the status quo.

The Project had a clear political position and aim. It saw the current legislation and

the structure of the penitentiary and social welfare systems as contributing to the social marginalisation of offenders. It argued for the need for changes in legislation, practices and services provided to facilitate the preparation for social reintegration before release and support it in the first stages after release from prison. It attempted to provide pioneering schemes of such practices and services that could subsequently be adopted by national policy. Obviously the process of pursuing this involved intricate negotiations and balancing acts between demands, expectations and agendas of the different institutions involved as the Project's partners and sponsors. Some changes were filtered through. Through setting up training workshops in prisons, for example, training came to be considered by law as equalling work for the purposes of the logistics of penalty duration. Persons recently released from prison were included as a category in the Government's subsidy schemes for new employees and setting up new small businesses. At a more local level, the Thessaloniki City Council has expressed their commitment to ascertaining funding for the continuation of the Offenders' Support and Information Office as part of their services. Overall, though, not only is dissemination not in view, but continuation even of the Project was not achieved. The last bid for the next phase of the Project was turned down; this was hardly unexpected, given the concurrent national political climate. On the one hand the deepening economic recession has resulted in growing unemployment rates and on the other the rapid increase of crime linked to the arrival of a large number of illegal refugees produced racism and a fear of crime in the public which fortified the punitive side of the penitentiary system and made the social rehabilitation argument unfavourable and unattainable.

Apart from the devastating effects for the offender population which learned over the 10 years of the Project's operation to turn to it as a stable point of reference, the discontinuation of the Project in the absence of any political will to take on board any of its contributions, effectively nullifies the whole attempt, and sets the situation back to the conditions that the Project was set up initially to address. The Project staff was left at the end of it with a lot of experience and expertise, but burned out by the continuous struggle to balance out opposing demands and agendas of the different parties involved and the constant disappointment of the inability to provide due to the lack of resources available. The feeling towards the end was one of being crushed down by institutions with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, by a state which pursued different political agendas and by a society which followed its own inertia. But the biggest lesson learned was that the role of power and politics in the form of opposing interests and priorities can never be over-estimated and that good practice is not sufficient for ensuring action towards change.

Conclusion

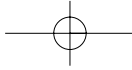
While the definition of action research is far from settled (Altrichter et al, 1991) and its principles hotly debated (see discussion on special issue on action research, *Human Relations*, 46(2), 46(10) & 46(11)), this paper attempted to contribute to the discussion of central issues around research and action through reflecting on the experience acquired from participation in an action research Project. The Offenders' Social Reintegration Project is not offered as an exemplary case of action research; indeed a lot of the reflection developed in this paper points to its problems and limitations. Applied projects are a far cry from the ideal

procedures prescribed in action research textbooks. This paper consciously avoided the rhetoric of the reified production of exemplary case study reports (Hoshmand & O'Byrne, 1996; Mangham, 1993). Instead, it focused on those elements that make the Project an action research project: its openness, looseness, continuous struggle. Action research aims to contribute to knowledge and practice, both local and general; to that effect, reflection on process rather than outcome, dilemmas rather than successes might be more helpful.

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