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**Abstract:** In this chapter, I present a set of arguments about action research drawing connections to aspects of critical theory – generally the view of critical theory associated with the Frankfurt School, and particularly the work of Jürgen Habermas. In the chapter prepared for the first edition of this Handbook, I described some of the ways in which developments in Habermas's theorising were refracted in my changing views of action research. In our chapter for the Third Edition of the Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), Robin McTaggart and I also reflected again on how our views of action research had been changed by our reading of Habermasian critical theory. In what follows, I hope to draw together a succession of ideas about action research and the study of practice that have led me to a new overall view of critical participatory action research, synthesising them in a new definition of critical participatory action research – or perhaps as a new thesis about what it is. The discussion draws attention to specific problems and issues which I believe to be crucial in understanding the nature of critical participatory action research and much other action research as well.

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# Critical theory and participatory action research<sup>1</sup>

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In this chapter, I present a set of arguments about action research drawing connections to aspects of the view of critical theory associated with the Frankfurt School (Jay, 1973; Wiggershaus, 1994), particularly the work of Jürgen Habermas. In my chapter in the first edition of this Handbook, I described ways in which developments in Habermas's theorising were refracted in my changing views of action research. In our chapter for the Third Edition of the Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), Robin McTaggart and I reflected again on how our views of action research had been changed by our reading of Habermasian critical theory.

In what follows, I draw together a succession of ideas about action research and the study of practice that have led me to a new overall view of critical participatory action research, synthesising them in a new definition of critical participatory action research – or perhaps as a new thesis about what it is. The discussion draws attention to specific problems and issues which I believe to be crucial in understanding the nature of action research.

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## PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

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Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) defined action research as:

a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out (p.1; emphases added).

This definition emphasised that the research should be undertaken by participants in social practices following Kurt Lewin's (1952) views of action research as involving participants collectively in researching their own situations, stemming from his findings about the role of group decision in securing participant commitment to social change. It emphasised self-reflection in the light of Lawrence Stenhouse's (1975) notion of the teacher as researcher, Donald Schön's (1983, 1987, 1991) views of the reflective practitioner, and also Jürgen Habermas's (1972) views about the interests that shaped the generation of knowledge (knowledge-constitutive interests) through different kinds of natural and social sciences – technical, practical and emancipatory interests.

Recent thinking about action research gives increasing emphasis to the social. Some views of action research focus on practitioners as individuals and on a naïve opposition of the individual and the group (construed as an aggregate of individuals) within a general view which Habermas (1987b, 1992) characterised as 'the philosophy of the subject'. This is the view that truth is the kind of category that can be applied to propositions apprehended in consciousness by knowing subjects – a matter on which advocates of the opposing perspectives of positivism (and its philosophical successors) and interpretivism agree. Habermas (1984, 1987a, 1987b) showed how 'the philosophy of the subject' can no longer be sustained, and proposed instead a 'post-metaphysical' philosophy in which 'truth' becomes manifest only in attempts at 'truth-telling', that is, through exploration of the validity of propositions in communicative

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action in which participants aim at intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and unforced consensus about what to do.

Moreover, Habermas has made a strong case against 'praxis philosophy' – the philosophy that, since Hegel and Marx, has supposed that a state (or other social 'totality') as a self-regulating macro-subject, could, through its own self-reflection, achieve a grasp of reality that would allow it to steer itself differently or transform itself in a coherent way out of unsatisfactory conditions, irrationality or contradiction. In *Truth and Justification* (2003c), Habermas argues against 'praxis philosophy', and in favour of a pluralism that he believes has replaced the kind of 'collectivism' that propelled communism in the twentieth century.

Habermas's (1984, 1987a) analysis of social life in late modernity shows that no social structures of government or civil society can any longer claim to be fully integrated as 'wholes' or 'whole systems'. Instead of these totalities, we have only organisations and institutions and groups interacting and contesting with one another. Although he is a constitutionalist who believes that democratic societies can operate as if they were social wholes through basic law and a constitution, he recognises that, in practice, there is no single steering centre that in fact has decisive and unitary steering power in contemporary Western democracies. Against praxis philosophy, he thus proposes (especially 1987b, 1996) a discourse theory which recognises the existence of various kinds of open 'public spheres' or 'communicative spaces' in which individuals and groups thematise and explore issues and crises, not from the perspective of whole systems (either people or states or other social totalities as 'systems') but in terms of public discussions aimed at greater understanding and transformations of social life at the moments and places where specific crises occur. In particular, he has been interested in the 'boundary crises' that arise at the points where social systems (organisations, institutions, states and their structures and functions) collide with the lifeworlds (the forms of interpersonal, social life of real people and groups) which give meaning, solidarity and identity to those who inhabit them.

These arguments pose challenges to action research. They deprive action research of a simple understanding of itself as (a) transforming individuals as self-regulating persons and (b) transforming institutions, organisations or states as self-regulating social 'macro-subjects'. To be regarded as a rational enterprise, then, action research must find a way to work not just on the self-realisation of persons or the realisation of more rational and coherent organisations, but in the interstices between people and organisations, and across the boundaries between lifeworlds and systems. It must work in the conversations and communications of participants about crises and difficulties confronted by social systems and the lifeworlds in which people find meaning, solidarity and significance. It must become a process of facilitating public discourse in public spheres. To do this it must be rather different from what it has been.

Critical participatory action research, as I conceptualise it here, is a particular form of action research that aims to respond to these challenges. In the sections that follow, I present a number of arguments that suggest the form that critical participatory action research must take. The final part of the chapter synthesises discussions presented in each preceding section, culminating in a new definition of critical participatory action research.

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## 1. PARTICIPATORY AND COLLECTIVE RESEARCH TO ACHIEVE EFFECTIVE- HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN AND OF PRACTICE AS *PRAXIS*

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### STUDYING PRACTICE/PRACTIS

The Kemmis and McTaggart (cited earlier) definition of action research emphasised three foci for observation and possible transformation through action research: practices, understandings and situations. While the term 'practice' is ubiquitous, different theorists of practice understand practice in very different ways (Kemmis, 2005, 2006a). Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) showed how practice is variously understood from either an 'objective' (external, outsider, observer, other) perspective or from a 'subjective' (internal, insider, participant, self) perspective – or dialectically in terms of both. To understand practice 'subjectively' is to focus on the person/s involved, as they see things; to understand it

'objectively' is usually to focus on practice as others see it; to understand practice dialectically is to attempt to understand practice in terms of the mutual-constitution, tensions and connections between the outside/inside and observer/participant perspectives. Similarly, practice is variously understood from the perspective of the individual (often a psychological perspective) or the perspective of the social (usually a sociological or systems-theoretic perspective) – or, occasionally, a dialectical perspective connecting both. Critical participatory action research aims at gaining a dialectical perspective on practice in both dimensions together (from outside and inside perspectives on individual participants and the social construction of their practice).

According to Carr and Kemmis (1986),

'Practice' in its commonsense meaning, is usually understood to refer to habitual or customary action. But it also means 'the exercise of an act', referring back to its origins in the Greek notion of praxis, meaning 'informed, committed action'. The action researcher distinguishes between practice as habitual and customary, on the one hand, and the informed, committed action of praxis, on the other. One way to describe the general aim of ... of educational action research would be to say that [it is] interested in a critical revival of practice which can transform it into praxis, bringing it under considered critical control, and enlivening it with a commitment to educational and social values. (p.190)

A special issue of the journal *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* (vol.13, 2005) was devoted to exploring neo-Aristotelian views of praxis, and its distinction from *techné* (or technical, instrumental, means-ends, 'making' action). Contributors argued that the technical understanding of practice has now become so widespread as to deprive practitioners of a full understanding of the moral basis of their work, and of the traditions that have informed what it means to 'do' a practice or to 'be' a practitioner, especially the practitioner of a profession. To highlight the tensions and connections between these different perspectives, I use the term 'practice/praxis' to remind the reader that we are almost always concerned with practices as they are seen from the external ('objective') perspective of the observer as well as the internal ('subjective') perspective of the practitioner engaging in praxis.

#### RESEARCH THAT IS PARTICIPATORY – INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION

In action research and in the social and educational sciences generally, we are normally concerned not solely with practices as the behaviour or intentional action of individuals, but also with the ways those practices are socially-constructed and 'held in place' by cultural-discursive, social and material-economic fields that precede and shape the conduct of practice/praxis.

If, as Carr and Kemmis (1986, p.191) suggest, "action research ... cannot be other than research into one's own practice", it also follows that if practice/praxis is collectively constructed, then practices must be understood not solely from the perspectives of the individuals involved, but also in terms of the collective understandings and collective effects of those involved and affected by the practice. Thus, action research must take into account the perspectives of the range of people involved or affected, or, preferably, involve them collectively in the research process. Since its inception, action research has been understood as a process in which participants can be or become researchers (see, for example, Lewin, 1952).

Furthermore, since changing or transforming practice/praxis requires not only changes by individuals but also by those with whom they interact, changing practice/praxis also requires extra-individual changes – that is, changes in cultural-discursive, social, and material-economic dimensions in which practice/praxis is constituted (Kemmis, 2005, 2006a). The transformation of practice/praxis is therefore necessarily a social process, and, since changes are likely to have different consequences in terms of the self-interests of the different individuals and groups involved, the transformation of practice/praxis is also, inevitably, a political process.

#### UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETATION: TOWARDS EFFECTIVE-HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Since the dawn of modern social science, researchers have confronted the problem of how to understand the Other – whether a person, an object of art or social life (Outhwaite, 1975). The case is even more difficult when a participant in practice/praxis aims to understand her- or himself as both a

subject and an object. Such a person can ‘understand’ themselves and their situation only from within their own conceptual resources, their own language and discourses, their own familiar ways of seeing.

Moreover, participants’ interpretive categories are not theirs alone. Their ideas are generally the products of long histories and traditions of usage, carrying meanings that existed long before they came to use the ideas to understand their particular practice/praxis situation. So, too, particular practice/praxis situations are always pre-formed in local and wider histories. Thus, the person wishing to understand their own practice/praxis clearly must also attempt to understand the prejudices or perspectives built into their own ways of understanding – a task which may seem impossible. At one time, positivist science hoped to break free of misunderstandings by developing a transcendent ‘objective’ perspective – a hope that proved unattainable. By contrast, the perspective of interpretive science and history has sought ways to loosen the bonds of misunderstanding through the hermeneutical approach (hermeneutics being, historically, the interpretation of religious texts, but now applied to the interpretation of works of art, cultures and people). The contemporary classic account of hermeneutics is Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (1975) book *Truth and Method*<sup>4</sup>. Gadamer rejects the notion that interpretation can be understood as a ‘method’ by analogy with ‘scientific method’. He explores the nature of interpretation in a variety of contexts, with particular reference to the problem of interpretation faced by the historian who aims to understand a tradition while also being a product of that tradition. In particular, Gadamer describes the historian’s (self-) consciousness of how history is effective in her or his own historicity, actively influencing her or his interpretations (via “prejudices” or taken-for-granted assumptions) – a state of intense historical self-awareness that Gadamer calls “effective-historical consciousness” (pp.267-269).

Action research must similarly conceptualise ‘understanding’ in a sophisticated way, not assuming that ‘understanding’ is a simple, unmediated process of grasping something in consciousness. It means also that we must think of interpretation as a process of interpreting ourselves as well as the object we are trying to interpret. And perhaps, taking a lead from Habermas (1989a; Holub, 1991), we might also conclude that it is possible to explore the linkages between language, labour and domination to discover some ways in which our language and thought are bound by ideology, shaping our ways of seeing and ‘not seeing’. We might thus hope for a view of action research that includes not only a Gadamerian hermeneutics (effective-historical consciousness) but something more – the possibility of interrogating the range and limits of our language and thought by observing not only how they have been shaped by history, in usage, but also in the service of particular kinds of interests that can be read in the structures and consequences of particular kinds of work and political life. As we shall see, Habermas’s (1984, 1987a) *Theory of Communicative Action* and other writings provide resources for this task.

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## 2. RESEARCH FOR CRITICAL (SELF-) REFLECTION

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### CRITICAL

Max Horkheimer (1972), one of the founders of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, described critical theory as a form of theorising motivated by a deep concern to overcome social injustice and the establishment of more just social conditions for all people. He contrasted critical theory and ‘traditional theory’, by which he meant positivistic science which aims to build scientific knowledge progressively by accumulating empirical knowledge of the world, taking for granted a distinction between facts and values. Critical theory, he said,

has no specific influence on its side, except concern for the abolition of social injustice. .... Its own nature ... turns it towards a changing of history and the establishment of justice (pp.242-3).

The notion of ‘critique’ in critical theory means exploring ‘existing conditions’ (Marx, 1967) to find how particular perspectives, social structures or practices may be irrational, unjust, alienating or inhumane. More than this, it means finding how perspectives, social structures and practices are

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<sup>4</sup> Gadamer’s argument against ‘method’ in the human and social sciences is elaborated in Joseph Dunne’s (1993) *Back to the Rough Ground*, a masterful and scholarly exploration of praxis and its endangerment in contemporary times.

interlinked in ways that cause them to produce such consequences. The classical case was Marx's (1867/1887) analysis of class relationships under capitalism.

In critical participatory action research, participants aim to be 'critical' in this way, trying to find how particular perspectives, social structures and practices 'conspire' to produce untoward effects, with the aim of finding ways to change things so these consequences can be avoided. Being critical in this sense means acting negatively against identified irrationality, injustice and suffering, rather than positively for some predetermined view of what is to count as rational or just or good for humankind.

#### THE 'SELF' AND EXTRA-INDIVIDUAL FEATURES OF PRACTICE/PRACTICE

Critical participatory action researchers understand the notion of the 'self' differently from conceptions of the self in some other views of action research, for example, the notion of 'self' that appears in Schön's (1983, 1987, 1991) notion of the 'self-reflective practitioner'. First, on the basis of the argument about the individual and the collective in action research, the 'self' may now be read not as a singular and isolated individual, but as implying a plurality, a sociality that has shaped it as a 'self'.

Second, critical participatory action research understands the self as constructed through developmental-historical, cultural-discursive, social and material-economic interactions between people. As Habermas (1992, p.26) remarks, following George Herbert Mead: "no individuation is possible without socialization, and no socialization is possible without individualisation". Processes of individuation and socialization do not end at some point when a person becomes adult, but continue to shape individuals and social relationships in all settings. Thus, critical participatory action research is as much interested in changing the ways participants in an educational or social setting interact as it is in the changes within each individual.

Third, critical participatory action researchers take seriously the claim that both practices and the understandings of practice that action research aims to develop are formed in cultural-discursive, social and material-economic fields that are extra-individual (Kemmis, 2006a) – fields that exist in social spaces beyond particular individuals, even though the action of individuals may be necessary to (re-) constitute practices. Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1977, 1990, 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) speaks of the formation of social practices in terms of 'habitus' and 'fields'. On the side of the individual, habitus is the set of dispositions or capabilities for action of the individual actor, like the dispositions and capabilities necessary to play football well. On the side of the cultural, social and economic, fields are the cultural, social and economic arrangements that pre-construct and prefigure (Schatzki, 2002, p.210ff.) fields of action for the actors who enter them. The notion of fields draws attention to arrangements that generally precede and prefigure any practice; for example, a school and its resources, curricula and pedagogical practices all precede and prefigure the day-to-day enactment of the practice of education in the school, having 'a life of their own', as it were. As Kemmis (2005, 2006a) argues, transforming practices therefore requires not only changing the knowledge (or habitus) of practitioners and others who participate in a practice, but also changing these fields (and other extra-individual features of practice). Changing extra-individual features of practice can be difficult because cultures and discourses, social connections and solidarities, and material-economic arrangements exist between and beyond the individuals whose particular actions enact, but do not by themselves constitute, practices.

In critical participatory action research, the 'self' must thus be understood as a situated and located self. Each self is formed through a particular and unique developmental history; it is constructed in a particular cultural-discursive history; it is located in a particular and unique set of social connections and solidarities; and it sits within a particular history of material and economic exchanges in the world. 'Subjectivity' and 'identity' likewise must thus be viewed as fluid and dynamic, and as continually re-constructed in cultural-discursive, social and material-economic dimensions of interaction. 'Subjectivity' and 'identity' are not to be understood as fixed attributes of persons.

Understanding the self as situated and located in this way gives greater force to Gadamer's notion of effective-historical understanding. It becomes clear that the situations, settings, conditions and circumstances of practices cannot be adequately understood without also appreciating how practitioners understand them – and how the practitioner's interpretive categories are located in history, culture,

discourses, social networks, material and economic exchanges. This view also gives more force to Habermas's objection against Gadamer that understanding does not occur in some pure form of language that transcends individuals. Understandings and the languages and discourses in which they are expressed are themselves already galvanised by relations of work and power, and they are the vehicles of work and power relations (as also amply evidenced in the work of Foucault; for example, Foucault 1970, 1972, 1977, 1979, 1990).

Habermas (1974, p.29) warns of dangers of solitary self-reflection:

The self-reflection of a lone subject ... requires a quite paradoxical achievement: one part of the self must be split off from the other part in such a manner that the subject can be in a position to render aid to itself.... [Furthermore], in the act of self-reflection the subject can deceive itself.

He thus argues that the organisation of enlightenment is best understood as a social process, drawing on the critical capacities of groups, not just as an individual process drawing out new understandings in individuals. Together, people offer one another collective critical capacity to arrive at insights into the nature and consequences of their practices, their understandings, and the situations, settings, circumstances and conditions of practice. As we shall see, critical participatory action research opens communicative spaces that permit and foster such collective reflection.

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### 3. RESEARCH THAT OPENS COMMUNICATIVE SPACE

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#### COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

Habermas (1984, 1987a, 1987b) describes communicative action as action oriented towards intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and unforced consensus about what to do. It is the kind of communication that occurs when people turn aside from strategic action (getting something done) to ask 'what are we doing?' In these cases, they may explore the four validity claims suggested in Habermas's theory of communicative competence:

- is it comprehensible (do we understand one another)?
- is it true (in the sense of accurate)?
- is it truthfully (sincerely) stated?
- is it morally right and appropriate?

As they work together to explore their practices, understandings and situations, participants in a critical participatory action research 'project' are interlocutors who open communicative space in which they encounter one another in a slightly unusual and slightly formal way – that is, with a shared commitment to communicative action. It is only 'slightly' unusual because people and groups frequently do interrupt themselves to explore questions of meaning, truth, truthfulness and moral rightness together. And only 'slightly' formal because the participants are usually aware in such circumstances that their discussions are moving to a meta-level at which these formal features of their communication and understandings are the objects of their collective reflection.

Placing the notion of 'opening communicative space' at the heart of a view of critical participatory action research is to emphasise the inclusive, collective, transformative nature of its aims – aims which serve and transcend the self-interests of individual participants. It is also to suggest that critical participatory action researchers undertake research into their own practices not just to 'perfect' or improve themselves as individuals, but also in the interests of acting rightly in terms of the historical consequences of their action.

In *Truth and Justification*, Habermas (2003c) gives an updated account of his view of communicative action, including the kind of communicative action we find in everyday life and in wider public spheres of argument about contemporary issues, including new insights about the presuppositions of argumentation:

... the rational acceptability of validity claims is ultimately based only on reasons that stand up to objections

under certain exacting conditions of communication. If the process of argumentation is to live up to its meaning, communication in the form of rational discourse must, if possible, allow all relevant information and explanations to be brought up and weighed so that the stance participants take can be intrinsically motivated solely by the revisionary power of free-floating reasons. However, if this is the intuitive meaning that we associate with argumentation in general, then we also know that a practice may not seriously count as argumentation unless it meets certain pragmatic presuppositions.

The four most important presuppositions are (a) publicity and inclusiveness: no one who could make a relevant contribution with regard to a controversial validity claim must be excluded; (b) equal rights to engage in communication: everyone must have the same opportunity to speak to the matter at hand; (c) exclusion of deception and illusion: participants have to mean what they say; and (d) absence of coercion: communication must be free of restrictions that prevent the better argument from being raised or from determining the outcome of the discussion. Presuppositions (a), (b) and (d) subject one's behaviour in argumentation to the rules of an egalitarian universalism. With regard to moral-practical issues, it follows from these rules that the interests and value-orientations of every affected person are equally taken into consideration. And since the participants in practical discourses are simultaneously the ones who are affected, presupposition (c) – which in theoretical-empirical disputes requires only a sincere and unconstrained weighing of the arguments – takes on the further significance that one remain critically alert to self-deception as well as hermeneutically open and sensitive to how others understand themselves and the world (pp.106-7; emphases in original).

Habermas then outlines (pp.108-9) the universalising capacity of argument as it appeals to wider and wider frameworks of justification, basing the search for justification and truth on a 'decentred' perspective that each participant gains as she or he becomes more sensitive to the views and perspectives of others, and by appealing to a wider community of potential participants who could engage in the discussion.

This taking-into-account of the perspectives and interests of others – what Habermas describes as 'decentring' (p.109) and implying 'egalitarian universalism' (p.107) – is at the heart of moral discourses about what it is right to do in any particular situation. It also describes the kinds of discussions that occur in many critical participatory action research initiatives.

#### FROM SUBJECTIVITY TO INTERSUBJECTIVITY

The communicative space opened by communicative action, and by participatory action research undertaken as a kind of process of communicative action, is an intersubjective space that exists between and beyond individual participants. Habermas (2003a) describes the linguistic grounding of intersubjectivity:

As historical and social beings we find ourselves always already in a linguistically structured lifeworld. In the forms of communication through which we reach an understanding with one another about something in the world and about ourselves, we encounter a transcending power. Language is not a kind of private property. No one possesses exclusive rights over the common medium of the communicative practices we must intersubjectively share. No single participant can control the structure, or even the course, of processes of reaching understanding and self-understanding. How speakers and hearers make use of their communicative freedom to take yes- or no-positions is not a matter of their subjective discretion. For they are free only in virtue of the binding force of the justifiable claims they raise towards one another. The *logos* of language embodies the power of the intersubjective, which precedes and grounds the subjectivity of speakers.

The *logos* of language escapes our control, and yet we are the ones, the subjects capable of speech and action, who reach an understanding with one another in this medium. It remains 'our' language. The unconditionedness of truth and freedom is a necessary presupposition of our practices, but beyond the constituents of 'our' form of life they lack any ontological guarantee (pp.10-11).

The intersubjective is not somehow 'above' individual understandings or self-understandings. The intersubjective exists in the communicative space in which speakers and hearers encounter one another – in speech and writing. The agreements they reach do not negate their individual subjectivity.

In terms of justification, such 'truth' as we can ever find will be in communication, and we will find it only through communicative action – searching with one another for intersubjective agreement, mutual



understanding and consensus about what to do. Our ordinary conversations are never universal in the sense that they are all-inclusive; they never entirely escape the time and space in which they occur; and they frequently run aground in misperceptions, misunderstandings, disagreements or conflict. When they do run aground, all we can do is to pause until we are able to re-engage with one another on the basis of civility and reciprocal recognition of one another as persons worthy of respect. Nor will our conversations be completely coherent, fully argued and complete. The topics, themes and circumstances of our communicative action will forever be changing, leaving all our agreements incomplete and partial – halting steps and limited achievements on a path towards an unattainable complete agreement, complete understanding, and perfect consensus about what to do. Frail and fallible though it may be, all we have, and all we will ever have, is the conversation (Kemmis, 2006b).

This, then, is to take a fallibilist view of truth – a view that recognises that current and new understandings are always open to revision in the light of as-yet-undiscovered knowledge or understandings – and a view that truth must always be justified discursively – through argument. The quality of the argument, and the ways people participate in it is what gives life to being ‘critical’.

#### LIFEWORLD AND SYSTEM

In Habermas’s theory of communicative action, the ‘domain’ of intersubjectivity replaces the idea that truth is something apprehended in the consciousness of an individual. Breaking with this tradition, in Habermas’s view, is the key to escaping some of the dead ends that both ‘objectivist’ and ‘subjectivist’ philosophy and science has been led into. He breaks with ‘the philosophy of the subject’ by arguing that it is in the space of the intersubjective – the lifeworlds we inhabit, and in which we encounter one another as persons – that the possibility of truth and moral rightness resides, not in the consciousness of individuals participating in the discussion – although each individually has the communicative power to take ‘yes’ or ‘no’ positions with regard to the substance of arguments as they unfold.

Each of us inhabits a variety of lifeworlds, and the social world contains an indeterminate variety of lifeworlds – very different ways of life in different places. In Habermas’s social theory and philosophy, the lifeworld is not only to be understood as a ‘real’ social space inhabited by particular people; it is also to be understood as a court of appeal (my phrase, not Habermas’s) in which validity claims can be tested through argument or conversation. This is a convivial and human view of truth and justification that does not depend on appeal to a transcendental perspective (such as an omniscient God) to make a statement true.

The table below outlines the key elements and universal structures of the lifeworld identified by Habermas. It should be noted that he indicates that particular lifeworlds are diverse, characterised by multiplicity and diffusion, and that different lifeworlds overlap and interweave. The universal structures, however, give a clear idea of what is meant by the concept of ‘the lifeworld’.

<i>Components of lifeworlds</i>		
<i>Culture</i>	<i>Society</i>	<i>Person</i>
Reproduced via <i>cultural reproduction</i> which connects newly arising situations to existing conditions in <i>the semantic dimension</i> .	Reproduced via <i>social integration</i> which connects newly arising situations to existing conditions in <i>the dimension of social space</i> .	Reproduced via <i>socialisation</i> which connects newly arising situations to existing conditions in <i>the dimension of historical time</i> .
Cultural reproduction secures continuity of tradition and coherency of knowledge.	Social integration coordinates action via legitimately ordered social relationships and lends constancy to the identity of groups.	Socialisation secures the acquisition of generalised capacities for action for future generations and takes care of harmonising individual life histories and collective life forms.
Cultural reproduction renews interpretative schemata susceptible of consensus ( <i>‘valid knowledge’</i> )	Social integration renews legitimately ordered social relationships ( <i>‘solidarities’</i> )	Socialisation renews capacities for interaction ( <i>‘personal identities’</i> )

In the Theory of Communicative Action (1984, 1987a), Habermas distinguishes communicative action from strategic action (action oriented towards successfully achieving known outcomes by relevant means). In highly differentiated, complex societies, strategic action is usually guided by functional reason.

Functional reason is expressed in a language of goals and means, and, in the context of administrative systems, often in a language of roles, organisational functions and rules. The Theory of Communicative Action provides a critique of functional reason, arguing that communicative action offers a way out of being trapped in functional reason characteristic of the administrative systems that govern so much of contemporary life. Under contemporary social conditions, many different kinds of systems have become 'relatively autonomous' – that is, driven by their own local demands, and freed from their anchors in valid knowledge (claims to truth), social solidarities (morality and claims to justice), and individual understandings and capacities (authenticity). This autonomy means that systems become uncoupled from the lifeworlds that initially grounded them. Once uncoupled, systems thinking and functionality can then colonise lifeworld relationships, creating rationalised models of right action that are inappropriate for relationships between people wherever these should properly be based on valid knowledge, solidarity and personal capacities – as, for example, in relationships among members of a community of practice (like a profession), or in social welfare settings where people should be treated with recognition and respect.

Habermas identifies a number of pathologies in contemporary Western societies that are a consequence of the uncoupling of system and lifeworld and the rationalisation of the lifeworld. In his view, concerns about social integration, and maintenance of social order have become more insistent, pervasive and dominant with increasing social complexity, especially the increasing complexity of social life from the perspective of social systems. Moreover, more and more of the work of coordinating systems has been "handed over" to the steering media of money and administrative power as bases for exchange between social subsystems. While this helps reduce the complexity of practical questions (because they are increasingly handled as questions about monetary exchange and administrative regulation, dealt with by functional reason and rational-purposive action), this transfer also permits further increases in the complexity of system relationships and coordination, to a crisis point – the point where a variety of kinds of crises begin to manifest themselves in the lifeworlds of participants (Habermas, 1987a, p.143). Under these conditions, the smooth reproduction of lifeworlds can no longer be guaranteed because participants experience their lifeworld connections with others as fragmented and overburdened. Under such conditions, the regulation of social systems is increasingly difficult to manage, since the lifeworld anchoring necessary for system operation is no longer secure.

Critical participatory action research, working across the boundaries of lifeworlds and systems, creates opportunities to explore these boundary-crisis by opening communicative space among participants and others involved in and affected by their actions.

#### PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN PUBLIC SPHERES

It is not easy to establish the social and discursive conditions under which people can equally, openly and fearlessly ask and answer questions, and conduct themselves civilly towards reaching intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and consensus about what to do (Kemmis (2006b)). In practice, argumentation is frequently subject to distortion, deadline pressures and practical constraints on 'really' understanding one another's points of view. These limits and interruptions are not fatal, however, they are just aporias or gaps to be explored in other discussions – the openings for new conversations. What holds a group together is members' tacit or explicit agreement to continue the conversation. Intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and mutual consensus are always situated and provisional. Action research initiatives can be understood as fora designed to open communicative space so emerging agreements and disagreements, understandings and decisions can be problematised and explored openly (Habermas, 1987b, 1996; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

In Chapter 8 of *Facts and Norms*, Habermas (1996; see also 1992, Lecture XI) explores this kind of communication in terms of public discourse in public spheres (see also Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). The kind of public discourse he has in mind is communicative action, the kind of public spheres he has in mind are communicative spaces constituted by participants themselves for dialogue; in which there is voluntary participation; in which speakers have or take communicative freedom; and in which participants aim to be inclusive (both socially and in the language they use in addressing each other). Such communicative spaces may be created within an organisation, but only by temporarily suspending, literally 'for argument's sake', the hierarchical roles and rules and the functional imperatives of the organisation as a system directed towards attaining particular objectives. More generally, communicative spaces are to be found at

the margins of institutions, blurring boundaries and connecting with other public spheres. Conversations within these communicative spaces presuppose communicative freedom. They frequently arise in response to legitimation-deficits – in response to circumstances, policies or decisions which lack legitimacy in the eyes of those involved. Legitimation-deficits are frequently the central themes which give rise to social movements, becoming the foci for sustained practical and critical discussions about the nature and consequences of possible courses of action by those involved. And the outcomes of these discussions may be to influence an organisation not directly but indirectly, by “laying siege to the formally-organised political system by encircling it with reasons without, however, attempting to overthrow or replace it” (Baynes, 1995, p.217). Habermas (1996) observes that communicative action in such groups builds solidarity among participants, in turn giving them a sense of communicative power and lending legitimacy to their emerging agreements, understandings and decisions – as a counter to the legitimation crisis which may have provoked the formation of a particular public sphere.

Critical participatory action research initiatives open communicative space beyond the sphere of immediate participants in a project or group. Very likely, their discussions will connect to a wider public sphere to which participants must ultimately refer in justifying their views, foreshadowing a universal public sphere which no actual conversation really reaches.

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#### 4. RESEARCH TO TRANSFORM REALITY

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If praxis is right conduct in response to a particular situation at a particular time, informed by the agent's knowledge and by recourse to relevant theory and traditions, then the fruits of praxis are to be evaluated in history, in terms of its consequences, in hindsight. Action researchers are not passive about action as it unfolds, intervening only afterwards to revise or reconstruct plans that have gone awry; on the contrary, they intervene deliberately and actively in individual and collective practice/praxis with the intention of acting in ways likely to make things better than before.

In this sense, action research investigates reality in order to transform it, as Orlando Fals Borda (1979) put it and, equally, as Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) put it, action research also transforms reality in order to investigate it. Critical participatory action research is a form of exploratory action that takes communicative action into social practice, using social practice as a source of new understandings (Kemmis and Brennan Kemmis, 2003). It aims to ‘write the history of the future’ by acting deliberately to interpret and learn from what happens. It aims to ‘feed’ future reflection by collecting evidence about action as it unfolds, and about its unfolding historical consequences.

Much of Habermas's writing since *The Theory of Communicative Action* has been devoted to exploring contemporary problems and crises to re-think the world as a basis for doing things differently – transforming things. In *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), for example, he investigates theories of law to clarify what basic law constitutions must contain to preserve human and civil rights. In *Religion and Rationality* (2002), he takes up themes about religion raised by his account of religious belief and communities in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. He discusses communities of faith – and whether or not the idea of God can be replaced by intersubjectivity in the form of the *logos* of language. In *The Future of Human Nature* (2003a), he explores the moral and ethical questions posed by genetic modification of embryos, with profound implications for the self-understanding of our species. And in *Truth and Justification* (2003c), he returns to questions about the nature of truth he last addressed intensively in the 1970s, especially in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1972). He revises some of those old arguments, building on developments in analytic philosophy and developments in pragmatism, again through debates with key contemporary theorists in these fields.

Habermas has lived the role of the philosopher as public intellectual he describes in *Truth and Justification*. On the one hand, he has contributed to various kinds of philosophical debates with other leading thinkers of his times – for example,

- with Gadamer about interpretation (in *Theory and Practice*, 1974 and *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 1972),

- with the systems theorist Niklas Luhmann about the extent to which human society can be understood in terms of systems (in *Legitimation Crisis*, 1975, and in other works, including *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 1984, 1987a),
- with various poststructuralists and postmodernists (Derrida, Bataille, Foucault, Lyotard and others) about whether the thinking made possible in modernity is now obsolete and whether their criticisms of modernity and rationality are warranted (in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 1987b),
- with the liberal theorist of justice John Rawls about the nature of justice and the constitutional state (in *Between Facts and Norms*, 1996, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 1998, and *The Postnational Constellation*, 2001), and
- with various interlocutors in the 'domestic disputes' within post-Marxist thought and critical theory (for example, in the Axel Honneth et al. edited volume *Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, 1992).

On the other hand, through books and essays (often in the German press), he has continued to make interventions in the public political arena, commenting on such matters as German self-understandings of the National Socialist (Nazi) period (for example, in *The New Conservatism: Cultural criticism and the historian's debate*, 1989b), on European and international legal and constitutional issues and structures (for example in *The Inclusion of the Other*, 1998), and in discussions of terrorism after September 11, 2001, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (2003b, with Jacques Derrida, edited and introduced by Giovanna Borradori).

These interventions show that Habermas models the critical intention of critical theory – with an emancipatory and transformative intention both in relation to ideas and in relation to states of affairs in the world – whether modernity itself or more specific crises of national identity, international relations, or religious fundamentalism and terrorism. In terms of scale, these are grand interventions in contemporary issues.

Most critical participatory action research initiatives have a more modest scope. Interventions like those in Indigenous education of the Yolngu people of Australia's Northern Territory (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000) had immediate goals of improving Aboriginal education in their communities, but also connected with much wider issues like issues of Indigenous rights and governance, post-colonial issues, and cross-cultural communication and education. The initiative addressed boundary-crises emerging at the point of collision between the lifeworlds of the Yolngu and systems that had colonised their country (government, administration, education, welfare, and of business). It also explored the collisions between the different lifeworlds of the Yolngu and the non-Indigenous teachers, administrators and others who had come to their country – involving different kinds of resources of culture, society and identity. Such initiatives aim to make the lived realities of people less irrational (in the dimension of culture, discourse and rationality), less unjust (in the dimension of society, justice, legitimacy and solidarity), and less inhumane (in the dimension of identity and personal capacity).

People already intervene through action research in many contemporary crises like those that occur at the boundaries between systems and lifeworlds, when identities, lifeworlds and forms of life are threatened by

- changing cultural and discursive conditions that threaten our understanding of ourselves, others and the world;
- changing social conditions that threaten solidarities and the legitimacy of established orders; or
- changing material-economic conditions that threaten the well-being and sustenance of people, families and larger social groups.

Careful, critical and continuously self-critical interventions like those of critical participatory action research create sites in which critical capacities are exercised and expressed. They can be launching-pads for wise and prudent social action on themes, problems and issues of contemporary concern. They offer ways of investigating existing conditions and exploring possible futures.

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## 5. RESEARCH WITH A PRACTICAL AIM

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Critical participatory action research occurs with the practical aim of *phronesis* – the commitment to acting wisely and prudently in the particular circumstances of a practical situation. It follows that participants in critical participatory action research deliberate differently about the situation in which they find themselves than they would if they regarded the situation as calling only for technical reasoning about the most efficacious, effective and efficient means to achieve known and accepted ends or goals.

Practical reason treats both ends and means as problematic. It is the form of reason employed whenever people have to act in a complex situation, in the knowledge that their action and its consequences will be judged in terms of complex and sometimes conflicting values. It is at its most evident in situations described as ‘tragic’ – where actors are forced to choose between conflicting sets of values (such as the classic moral dilemma of the parent forced by poverty to choose between respect for property and care for a family when deciding whether or not to steal food).

Research that aims to support and strengthen practical reason is necessarily addressed to actors as *agents* – people who must act, who must confront practical questions and make decisions about what to do. It addresses these actors as *persons* – knowing subjects – who might make wiser and more prudent decisions given a richer understanding of the situations in which they find themselves. Unlike a science aiming to support and inform technical reason, a ‘practical science’ aims not to achieve control of a situation but to educate actors or practitioners in ways that will help them to understand the nature and consequences of their actions more fully, and to assist them in weighing what should be done. Practical reason furnishes agents with better ways of thinking about action in the particular situations they confront, but its principal aim is to create better, more moral actions. *Praxis* is not a way of thinking about action, but a particular kind of action – morally-informed, wise, prudent, and oriented by reference to guiding traditions of thought and action, theory and practice.

Critical participatory action research is ‘practical’ in the sense that it aims at the production of the good for individual persons and for humankind by aiming for right conduct, the best one can do under the circumstances, knowing one will be judged by history. Action researchers document their actions because they expect to be judged by history and in terms of the historical consequences of their action.

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## 6. RESEARCH WITH EMANCIPATORY AIMS

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In critical reasoning about practice, researchers adopt a dialectical stance with respect to the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ and individual and social aspects of a setting. They treat others involved in the setting as co-participants who can work together collaboratively to change the ways in which they constitute it through their practice. While including elements of technical and practical reason, critical-emancipatory reasoning reaches beyond them. It manifests itself in attitudes of collaborative reflection, theorising and social action directed towards emancipatory reconstruction of the setting (in terms of the personal and the political, the local and the global).

Critical participatory action researchers are committed to “a communicative form of life”; they are committed to exploring and discussing issues relevant to the circumstances of their own lives. It is in their first-person roles as participants, together with others as equal subjects, that they must reach intersubjective agreements, mutual understandings and uncoerced consensus about what to do. They aspire “to consider in each case all relevant points of view impartially and to take all interests equally into account” (Habermas, 2003c, p.290).

It is here, to borrow the final words of Truth and Justification, that people in the end can and do find one another as persons, and thus as subjects who, like oneself, deserve respect:

Given that different directions in life are existentially irreconcilable, it is always difficult for two parties whose identities have been shaped in different ways of life and traditions to reach agreement – be it at the

international level between different cultures or between different subcultural collectivities within one and the same state. Here, it is all the more helpful to remember that an agreement on binding norms (ensuring reciprocal rights and duties) does not require the mutual appreciation for one another's cultural achievements and life styles, but instead depends solely on acknowledging that every person is of equal value precisely as a person (p.292).

The emancipatory impulse arises and finds expression in the light of this insight about the preciousness and indissoluble uniqueness of each human life. It arises in critical participatory action research when people seek to release themselves and others from constraints that narrow their lives and produce untoward consequences. It arises when people confront social structures and practices that are unjust in the sense that they cause or support domination (the constraint on self-determination) and oppression (the constraint on self-expression and self-development; Young, 1990). The emancipatory impulse springs from the eternal hope that things might be otherwise – more rational (in the sense of reasonable), more legitimate, more caring, and less apt to produce differential consequences of suffering and dissatisfaction.

This, in the end, is what makes critical participatory action research 'critical' in the terms in which Horkheimer (cited earlier) described critical theory. This is what motivates the commitment of critical participatory action researchers to cultural-discursive, social and material-economic transformation as well as the transformation of the lives and circumstances of individual people, and of oppressed groups.

Thus, critical participatory action research – and forms of 'engaged research' like it – often occurs in the context of social movements (Touraine, 1981; Habermas, 1987a, pp.391-6; 1992, pp.364-5; 1996, pp.373-384) in which there is a widening consciousness that current social structures or practices are producing untoward consequences; that they are illegitimate; that they exclude, dominate or oppress particular groups; or that they cause suffering or dissatisfaction. Under such circumstances, people do in fact undertake exploratory action to find other ways of thinking, relating to one another, and doing things that might have other, less unsatisfactory consequences. They often do so against seemingly overwhelming odds, often in small and cautious ways, taking heart from the understandings they reach with their fellows, the solidarity of working together, and the rewards of making a difference even if the achievements seem small and local. Out of such small steps, larger movements sometimes grow. These small steps make people feel 'alive' in a universalistic sense – making them feel connected to the circumstances of all people everywhere: alive to history, alive in history, and alive in making history – their own and others'. This is the emancipatory face of an 'effective-historical consciousness' that aspires to a better history than the history we face if things go on as they are. It is the eternal other of human suffering – hope.

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#### A NEW DEFINITION OF CRITICAL PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

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The arguments and perspectives presented in the preceding sections lead me to propose the following as a new (though long) definition of critical participatory action research – or a thesis about its nature. The numbers in this definition refer to the chapter's preceding sections.

Critical participatory action research

1. is research undertaken collectively by participants in a social practice to achieve historical self-consciousness (or 'effective-historical consciousness' aimed both at historical consciousness of an historical object and of the historicity of the person interpreting it) in and of their practice as praxis – that is, as morally-informed, committed action, oriented by tradition, that responds wisely to the needs, circumstances and particulars of a practical situation – not only by each as an individual but especially through collective deliberation aimed at collective self-understanding
2. as a process in which they reflect critically and self-critically on
  - their praxis as individual and collective participants in the practice (action that may perhaps turn out to be untoward in terms of its effects or longer-term consequences),

- their historically-formed and intersubjectively-shared understandings of the practice (that may perhaps turn out to be ideologically or otherwise distorted), and
  - the historically-formed cultural-discursive, social and material-economic fields that constitute the conditions of their practice and the situations and settings in which their practice is conducted (conditions, situations and settings that may perhaps turn out to be destructive)
3. by opening communicative space – that is, space for collective reflection and self-reflection through communicative action aimed at intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and unforced consensus about what to do – in which participants can strive together, subjectively and intersubjectively, to reach shared insights into and decisions about what to do in relation to the nature and historical formation of their practice in terms of
    - how their practice has evolved over time in its intertwined (and sometimes contradictory or contested) cultural-discursive, social, material-economic and personal dimensions and
    - themes and issues that arise as common concerns as a consequence of the tensions and interconnections within and between their shared lifeworlds (that provide content and resources constituted in the shared logos of language and shared background assumptions in the cultural dimension, solidarities in the social dimension, and competences and capacities in the personal dimension), on the one hand, and, on the other, the administrative and economic systems that structure and constrain possibilities for their action in the situation, and
  4. by intervening in their unfolding collective history through exploratory action to investigate their shared reality in order to transform it and to transform their reality in order to investigate it, that is, by making changes in what they do and gathering evidence of the observable conduct and historical consequences of their actions for different people and groups involved and affected in terms of the cultural-discursive, social, material-economic and personal character, conduct and consequences of the practice,
  5. with the practical aim of acting rightly (in terms of moral appropriateness) and with wisdom (based on critically-interpreted tradition and experience) and prudence in response to a current issue or concern that confronts them in their particular situation, and, in addition to this,
  6. with the emancipatory aims of eliminating, as far as possible, character, conduct or consequences that are untoward, distorted, destructive or unsustainable because they are
    - irrational (discursively unsustainable),
    - unjust (causing or supporting domination or oppression), alienating or excluding (morally- and socially-unsustainable),
    - unproductive (materially-economically unsustainable), or
    - the unjustifiable causes of suffering or dissatisfaction for particular persons or groups
 and of enhancing participants' capacity for collective historical action, often in the context of social movements.

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