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# Action research and the study of human being

Enoch A. Lambert

Despite the openness of action research to engage with several philosophical movements from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there does not seem to be as much engagement with existentialist thought. I try to point out and further articulate certain affinities that I see between action research and existentialist philosophy. I suggest that action research can gain from exploring these connections. Based on the existentialist perspective, I compare action research and more standard social science. In particular, I use Heidegger's notions of "das Man" and an "existentialist essence" of human being as a key to bringing out these differences and for suggesting ways in which action research may capitalize on such differences.

**Keywords:** existentialism, Heidegger, authenticity, action research, social science

## 1. Introduction

In this essay I would like to raise and address some philosophical issues implied by the style of social research and inquiry called "action research" (AR). It may seem odd to propose a philosophical investigation into a research tradition explicitly characterized by action, pragmatism, and real world engagement. Philosophy is supposed to be a discipline that deals with abstract and abstruse issues divorced from action and real life. In fact, this has not always been the case. Toulmin (1990), for example, has argued that this is only a certain path that philosophy got sidetracked with around the time of Descartes, and that 20<sup>th</sup> Century figures like Dewey, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Rorty have paved the way for a return to practical philoso-

phizing which many philosophers have begun to take up. In fact, writers on AR such as Greenwood and Levin (1998) as well as several authors in Reason and Bradbury's *Handbook of Action Research*, have engaged these same philosophical figures, as well as others from both the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and antiquity<sup>1</sup> to ground and inform AR philosophically. There is no contradiction, then, in a program of philosophically informed action research.

However, my philosophical interests in this paper lay not in ambitious attempts to grind out a fully worked out epistemology, ontology, or ethics of AR. Such may have its place, but here I will be more concerned with returning the philosophical to, using Toulmin's (1990) phrases, the particular, local, and timely, as well as, to use my own, the uncertain, ambiguous, and imprecise yet meaningful and demanding. I will be attempting a hermeneutical investigation into the possibilities and promises of AR as well as of what it means to practice AR (I assume the two are tightly interconnected). I do this with some trepidation. The way I read one of the philosophers I will be invoking, Martin Heidegger, a hermeneutical investigation of a topic ought only to come out of an authentic understanding of it. For him, an authentic understanding of a realm of activity is impossible without practical engagement with it – engagement that introduces the participant to the interests and stakes people have in engaging in the activity. So far, my only first hand exposure to AR has been a one semester class on it facilitated by Davydd Greenwood. However, Greenwood turned the class into something of an AR project itself by introducing AR and then turning decisions about how to run the course and what topics to cover over to the students. The class itself turned into a community engaging in an AR project to learn about AR. Through exposure to Greenwood's own action research interests and experiences as well as my class's, then, I claim sufficient authentic understanding to begin a partial and piece-meal (not universal and finalized) philosophical hermeneutic of some issues surrounding AR.

My hermeneutical investigations will be neither uncritical nor a call for radical revision. I will do some comparisons of AR to other more traditional approaches to social research. In doing so I will also try to bring out in to

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Eikeland (2001) discusses Aristotle as a forerunner of AR.

greater relief some aspects of AR that are there in the literature and, I think, crucial to AR, but, nevertheless, underemphasized and therefore less well developed. One such aspect, mentioned by Greenwood and Levin, is the commitment to own up to and not deny the existential demands of social research and AR. I will argue that this aspect is just as important to developing AR as a true alternative to traditional social science as the emphasis on pragmatist philosophy is. In doing so I will also consider contrasting conceptions of what the essence of being human rests in. Action research, I will argue, is in a unique position to help develop a better understanding of one of these conceptions that I will argue has been neglected in the study of humans but is nevertheless a closer one to the human condition.

## **2. Key features of action research**

To begin, we need to get a better handle on what exactly AR is so that we have a framework for the proceeding discussions. However, this is itself a delicate issue. Both Greenwood and Levin in their *Introduction to Action Research* and the authors in Reason and Bradbury's collection emphasize the open-ended character of AR. They do not think it should be reduced to a determinate set of strict methods. They contend that AR is and must be context specific and locally sensitive. To counter a classical philosophical impulse, there is no specific set of a priori necessary and sufficient conditions for determining whether something counts as AR. Nevertheless, Greenwood and Levin do suggest three broad elements (themselves open-ended) that are crucial for AR. They are: Action, Research, and Participation (Greenwood and Levin 1998). The action element incorporates the goal of AR to change and make improvements in people's lives, and to reform negative situations. The research element emphasizes AR's commitment to generating knowledge. Finally, the participation element emphasizes that AR aims to make research *democratic*, to make it "*with* rather than *on* people," and to recognize that research must involve, and be accountable to the stakeholders in the research (Heron and Reason 2001). Of course, the participation element also has a broader goal of making society itself more democratic and participatory,

though in this study I will be more focused on the research goal.<sup>2</sup> Together these three elements provide a framework for getting a handle on the aims of AR and for guiding the discussion.

Practical knowledge and a pragmatist epistemology are highlighted as key to AR in several works. Whether it be through modern pragmatism (Greenwood and Levin) or the *phronetic* wisdom of Aristotle (Eikeland), the fundamental role of engaged practice to human knowledge is what proponents of AR claim to be returning to and what, they say, most social science has lost. Indeed, I think AR practitioners are correct to defend their approaches by invoking the critique of the modernist picture of knowledge found in explicit pragmatists (James and Dewey) as well as other proponents of the primacy of practice for knowledge (e.g., Heidegger and Wittgenstein). Pragmatist style philosophies seem to be the most central and oft invoked. But AR researchers have been willing to engage with all kinds of 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophical movements. A quick rundown of the Table of Contents in Reason and Bradbury's reader reveals articles engaging feminism, critical theory, social constructivism, systems theory, humanistic approaches, and postmodernist themes. However, there is one philosophical movement not found that I think deserves attention, namely, existentialism. I think its theme of the necessity of owning up to the uncertainties inherent in human existence in order to live meaningfully is important for a style of social research focused on meaningful and democratic social change.

### **3. An existentialist ethic for social researchers**

For some time in the AR course I was taking, I was beginning to develop some intuitions about the potential AR had to overcome some of the limitations and weaknesses of traditional social research. However, I could not quite put my finger on just what my intuitions were converging on. Finally, a passage I read from Greenwood and Levin (1998) hit the nail right on the head:

We do not rely on particular recipes that always should be followed because we believe that such recipes mainly serve to lessen the insecurities

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for urging me to make this point.

of the professional researchers. We confront the local problems with all the skills and knowledge we have. What we do not know and skills that we lack can be a detriment to the particular project. Of course, we always wish we were smarter and more skilled. We advocate facing our existential and epistemological uncertainties as professional action researchers directly, however, rather than adhering to a particular set of canonical practices that would lower the demands on us. We think that is a necessary part of our integrity as researchers (154).

After reading this passage it hit me that many of the problems of classical social science were not just simply epistemological or ontological ones. Rather, they were existential ones. As opposed to those in the natural sciences, social scientists study beings that are like themselves, beings who share the same mode of existence. Doing so has many existential and ethical implications. But, rather than own up to the fact that humans are complex creatures living in unique, local situations and for whom small differences in the world matter in ways that cannot be captured by precise scientific instruments, social science pushes ahead with what it claims are universal methods, tools, and measurement procedures for telling us what humans are ‘really’ like. Social scientists are led to believe that their basic commitments are to methods rather than to people. Uniform methods make far fewer demands on the social researcher considered as a whole person than involvement in a community of persons does. In order to give a better sense of what I mean by this, I would like to now turn to themes from the existentialist tradition.

A recurring theme running through existentialist authors from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche down through Sartre and Camus is that people generally lose themselves in their daily routines and activities so that they do not have to think about the fact that they are the ones who must live their own lives and so are ultimately only responsible to themselves for how they do so. They ignore the problems or troubling aspects of their lives that they wish could be changed and quickly cover over the encounter of anomalies that intrude into their habitual way of doing things – intrusions that might force them to take stock of their situation and make decisions about it for which they alone are responsible. Social science that aims at pure “objectivity” which is not supposed to interfere with people’s lives, and which is only concerned to study people in the ways in which they normally act is not well

equipped to provide those same subjects of research with meaningful knowledge that might help them decide to improve their own situations in life. Conversely, the goal of AR *is* to intrude into people's lives. Action Research projects usually do require AR researchers to directly contact a group of people, disrupt them from their routines, and ask them to take stock of their situation so as to see if there are any problems or improvements they would like to work on. "Intrusion" and "disruption" might seem like bad words, implying unethical procedures. However, AR researchers do not force any one to work with them. Furthermore, they generally trade intrusion and disruption for democratic control over the research process. AR researchers do not force people to be subjects of studies and research they may be unaware of. Instead, anyone whose lives AR researchers intrude upon are treated as genuine stakeholders in the outcome of the research process who ought to have primary control over what kind of research takes place. Besides achieving the ethical goal of democratic research, this practice of AR may also be used to extend the process of allowing people to go through the experience of facing up to their own responsibilities for their lives.

For example, as the facilitator of an AR project with an industrial cooperative group in the Basque Country of Spain, Davydd Greenwood refused to lecture on organizational culture or define the problems for research. He insisted that it was up to the participating members of the cooperative group to define the issues and problems for research that they were interested in and to consider the ethical dimensions of doing the research for their cooperative. Eventually the group was able to accomplish both change and the generation of knowledge that could be used by others in similar situations (Greenwood and Levin 1998). Thus, AR, through daring to intrude into people's lives and disrupt their routine flow instead of insisting on a purely detached, "objective" stance, can both help people learn to own up to and face their responsibilities for engaging in activities to change their own existential situations as well as create genuine, working knowledge.

However, to be in a position where they can authentically, meaningfully, and effectively allow people to face the existential demands of their situations, AR researchers must themselves be ready to own up to the existential demands of the type of research they are engaged in. They must be prepared

to be sensitive to the local context and situation, unwilling to extend the scope of their knowledge and skills beyond what is appropriate, and be open to a possible space of results that could range from failure to incremental change to unexpected success. It is these types of demands that traditional methods, guiding assumptions, and approaches of much social science insulates its researchers from. To further develop this point, I would like to turn to the work of Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* and apply some of his analysis to the public norms that structure the intelligibility of the practice of social science.

#### 4. Ways of fleeing from existential demands

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that the intelligibility of the world (the primary significations and spaces of possibilities for comportment [meaningful action] that make up the human's world) is primarily articulated by what he calls (in the German) "das Man" (Heidegger 1962). The best translation of this phrase is probably as "the one" (following Dreyfus 1991). People eat dinner the way *one* eats dinner in their culture. They drive the way *one* drives, walk the way *one* walks, pursue their interests the way *one* does, etc. It is probably even the case that people rebel in society the way *one* rebels. This last point helps to show the essential point that "das Man" is not just a set of norms or rules for how one governs oneself in a society. Rather, "das Man" is structured in the form of a *style*, not reducible to rules, that constitutes, structures, and *connects* the various activities, projects, and possibilities open to members of a society.<sup>3</sup> The problem with "das Man", according to Heidegger, is that people let it govern their lives and make decisions for them. It gives them the illusion that they have authentic understanding of things they really know hardly anything about. Through language and because others tell me about them, I can talk about and pronounce opinions on carpentry, starvation in Africa, and what the Sixties were like all without having had any first hand experience or having been placed in a position where I could make meaningful commitments concerning the outcomes of the opin-

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<sup>3</sup> This point is inspired by Dreyfus' (1991) discussion of das Man as well as his and others' discussion of what they call "style" in Spinoza et al. (1997).



ions I pronounce. Das Man does most of the thinking and makes most of the decisions for me and then gives me the illusion that I have more authority over things outside my control than I really do. I can let das Man disguise for me the fact that I must live my own life, face up to and die my own death, and that the world is full of more uncertainties than I acknowledge. If it ever so happens that I am gripped by anxiety in the face of one of these facts, I can always escape by letting myself slip back into das Man mode.

Heidegger's analysis of das Man extends to most forms of human activity, including science. Social scientists (individually) do what a social scientist (in general) does. There is not necessarily anything wrong with this. Research traditions would fall apart if there were not some order involved. If there were not behavioral regularities to define methods and modes of operation, there would be no defined research tradition to instruct new practitioners in. What is important is the character of the das Man-ish aspect of a particular research tradition. Particularly in the realm of research concerning humans, we must ask to what extent the das Man-ish character of the research tradition hides from the researchers the fact that they are studying beings for whom things *matter* and the existential and ethical demands that come along with that.

Another result of becoming conditioned into thinking that traditional social science is the only way to study humans is that one also begins to vastly overestimate the accuracy and relevancy of social science results. This can be seen in the emphasis on measuring research on humans in terms of "statistical significance". Experimental psychology, for instance, is filled with results that are statistically significant. Certain slight differences in things like visual response to different environmental stimuli or small differences in expressed preferences on questionnaires can be statistically significant. There is not necessarily anything wrong with this. Most of the time, statistically significant results probably do in fact indicate real differences of a certain kind in the world. On the other hand, statistical significance does not necessarily imply *practical significance*. I recently took a course in social psychology where we read peer-reviewed papers in which the two got confounded all the time. Most psychology journal articles follow a strict pattern of general introduction, description of the studies performed which include methods, results,

and discussion sections, and then a general conclusion that usually tries to draw conclusions either for further research or for practical, real-life affairs. The pattern and style of writing is so standard and so predictable that I believe it has become a prime example of *das Man-ish* evasion of confrontation with the true nature of the discipline. I have read several articles that would end with a few sentences about major national economic and policy implications based on a projection of small statistically significant differences into general practical affairs. A moment's reflection by someone not steeped in the research tradition of recent social psychology on the nature of the experiments along with the very small, though statistically significant, results would have shown the absurdity of the extremely large generalizations and implications being drawn by the researchers. The practice that engenders the need to say something "practical" at the end of a paper, whatever the results might be, not only gives researchers a sense of false security about the true value of their research, but also threatens to level off any real practical significance of social research at all. In social research of this variety, "unsuccessful results" (meaning not statistically significant) are not things that are reported and whatever *does* get reported is just assumed to have value and to warrant assertions about general practical implications outside the lab.

Interestingly enough, as Greenwood and Levin point out, AR and social psychology find common roots in the work of Kurt Lewin. Lewin was a founder of social psychological research and also may have been the first to use the term "action research" (Greenwood and Levin 1998). However, whereas Lewin sought to apply principles of Gestalt psychology to the social realm, in which people are seen as geared in to a holistic situation, social psychology has since broken into many distinct sub-areas of research with little theoretical connection.<sup>4</sup> Social psychology has many research programs that are very fruitful in themselves: cognitive dissonance theory, heuristics and biases, self-knowledge, attribution theory, etc. However, trying to connect all these pieces of research programs together into holistic theories about

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<sup>4</sup> See Aronson, et al, for an example of a standard textbook of social psychology. The lack of theoretical connection between the content of each chapter is easy to discern. I would also like to thank Allen Lambert for personal communication that helped me formulate the work of Lewin in the way it is presented here.

people and social relationships seems highly difficult. Thus, standard social psychology now seems impotent to give us unified, meaningful knowledge about whole people in the situations that matter to them.

How can the insights of social psychology be incorporated back into a research program that considers whole human beings and their situations in the environment? Kurt Lewin suggested that the best way to understand something is to try and change it (Greenwood and Levin 1998). Perhaps one way that AR could accomplish a reintegration of social psychological inquiry and research aimed at problem-solving and empowerment is by trying to get people to recognize tendencies of cognitive dissonance reduction, the fundamental attribution error, etc. in their own behavior and then changing it. Many of these phenomena uncovered by social psychologists can be cast in existential terms – as tendencies to blindly fall into and reinforce the norms of *das Man*. Using AR to confront and try to change some of the negative tendencies in human behavior uncovered by social psychologists might lead to more integrated theories of what humans are like in their meaningful social settings. Of course, doing this would require the researcher to be highly attentive to his or her own behavior that falls into many of the patterns described by social psychologists. For example, can the researcher identify tendencies to commit the fundamental attribution error, particularly with regard to his or her co-participants in AR projects? Can he or she attempt to change such behavior? How can such attempts lead to further understanding about the place of the fundamental attribution error in the context of a whole life? These are examples of the types of questions and problems which an AR researcher can address through sensitivity to the existential perspective I am trying to outline.

As opposed to much traditional social science research, I have been able to find some good instances of action researchers publishing the results of projects that failed to achieve their goals. For example, Greenwood and Levin report and describe multiple AR projects that were less than fully successful in their book. Part of the reason for this is that AR projects are generally long term engagements with communities of people. Even if intended goals are not always met, such engagement almost always yields valuable learning and experience. Furthermore, because AR is supposed to be context sensitive and careful about how far to project its results onto others, it has not leveled off

the many different, yet significant ways of reporting different kinds of findings with different levels of results. For example, Reason's and Bradbury's *Handbook* includes simple reporting of real world action and accomplishment by participants in AR (see Parts III and IV for good examples); the construction of narratives in which to place the meaningful results of AR (again, see Parts III and IV); and even photographs from a project to empower rural women of Guatemala through photography and creative arts (see chapter 36). The ability of a research tradition to publish failed research attempts as well as more successful ones is a sign of a research style that allows and even encourages researchers to own up to the existential uncertainties of engaging in meaningful social research. But this is not the only way in which AR can distinctively add to the production of knowledge in social research.

### **5. Further notes on AR and the generation of knowledge<sup>5</sup>**

What kind of knowledge can a social research tradition informed by existentialist philosophies generate? What can an action research project aspiring to be sensitive to the existential demands of the project's local context provide in terms of useful knowledge? I think some answers can be gleaned from Heidegger here as well in terms of his notion of the phenomenon of world-disclosure. Recall that, for Heidegger, *das Man* articulates the everyday norms of intelligibility in a culture. It embodies the public norms accessible to everyone and structures their world. These general, everyday norms, significations, possibilities, and articulations are what are studied by much social science, precisely because of its accessibility to everyone and its general/universal character. *Das Man* is essential to the general, public character of a culture's intelligibility that permits communication, understanding, meaningful action, order, etc. But Heidegger also thinks that a higher mode of intelligibility can be disclosed – the possibility of which is most often concealed from people due to their dispersion in *das Man* (see Dreyfus 2000).

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<sup>5</sup> My ideas in this section are inspired by those in Spinoza et al. (1997) and Dreyfus (2000). My biggest innovation, here, is to extend the possibility of existentialist and world-disclosive activity to a social research program, whereas the authors of these ideas only consider individuals, civic groups, entrepreneurship, etc.

However, this higher intelligibility, what Heidegger calls authenticity, is not access to something like Plato's abstract Forms which the wise simply contemplate. Rather, authentic disclosure of the world attunes people to the world in such a way that allows them to seize possibilities for action in a manner that is their own (not *das Man*'s) and to respond to the demands of their concrete situation in a way no longer leveled off by *das Man*. Heidegger illustrates this point by saying that *das Man* only ever allows disclosure of the general situation (*Lage* in German) that is always open to anyone at anytime, while authentic understanding discloses the concrete Situation (*Situation* in German) in which the world "lights up" in such a way that it solicits uniquely appropriate and context specific action unavailable to *das Man* (Heidegger 1962; Wrathall 2004).

Now, Heidegger did not say much about what the concrete Situation opens up since it was precisely his point that such situations are local and unique. Only the Situation itself can show what *it* solicits and opens up. However, and this is important for action research, this does not mean that concrete Situations can not be described and communicated afterwards by those experiencing and learning from them. It may not be the case that linguistic communication after the fact can fully disclose all that is learned from practical experience. Furthermore, the demands of a specific research project's situation may not be universally applicable. On the other hand, much *can* be communicated and the style in which it is done so is very important to the level at which what is so communicated reflects and further promotes world- and Situation-disclosing work. To this end, writing that attempts to reveal rather than conceal the fact that both the AR-facilitator and those involved in an AR project are real people with real problems and real interests in the outcome of the research is necessary.

Another way to see the knowledge gained through AR by looking at things through the lens of world-disclosure is by looking at the distinction, explicitly formulated by Ryle (1949), but certainly implicit in Heidegger (1962) and Wittgenstein (1953), of the contrast between knowing-that and knowing-how. Knowledge-that is propositional knowledge of facts and is primary in science/social science. Knowing-how, on the other hand, is practical, skillful knowledge (e.g., driving, riding bicycles, etc.) and is not reduci-

ble to a system of knowledge-that. Both types of knowledge are necessary for world-disclosure. But, by being oriented toward action and change, AR can both generate and help disseminate know-how (e.g., social, communicative, and organizational skills) in ways unavailable to much social science. Addressing knowledge-how in the context of an AR project (rather than just knowledge-that) facilitates the kinds of genuine and concrete disclosure of the research situation discussed above. While knowing-how faces the same problem as situation-specific disclosure, i.e., it cannot be completely communicated linguistically (in knowing-that propositions), it can be sufficiently described for others to test out in their own experience.

Heidegger's doctrines in *Being and Time* concerning authenticity have caused a lot of controversy. However, I think most of the controversial issues can be safely ignored (including even vocabulary like "authenticity", etc.) while still holding on to his idea of how a higher mode of intelligibility may be disclosed to people through sensitivity to concrete situations<sup>6</sup>. But let me briefly address one concern that is of particular relevancy to AR. Many have tried to link Heidegger's anti-democratic leanings (including his involvement in the Nazi party) to his doctrines of authenticity. Since Heidegger clearly intends authenticity to be modally indifferent with respect to types of political action, I think trying to demonstrate an absolute inconsistency between the possibility of an authentic mode of being and undemocratic politics is futile. However, Dreyfus (2000) and Spinoza, et al. (1997) make the case that the possibilities for authentic styles of action and world-disclosure are *more* consistent with democracy than not. In the former work, in fact, Dreyfus tries to show how Heidegger's notion of authenticity can defend the possibility of Western judicial institutions living up to their democratic ideals against contrary arguments by Derrida (who has been a harsh critic of the supposed connection between Heidegger's philosophical ideas and his political involvements). In the latter work, the authors (with minimal use of Heidegger jargon) seek to defend traditional democratic activities such as civic activism

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, Heidegger himself, in his later philosophy, described and allowed for a much wider variety of ways in which the disclosure of higher modes of intelligibility and full presence to situations could occur. He stopped using terminologies that suggested narrow styles for doing so, which was the case in *Being and Time*.

within a framework clearly influenced by Heidegger's critique of *das Man* and articulation of authenticity as a response.

Thus, I think that the important points of Heidegger's use of authenticity to counter the banalizing effects of *das Man* can safely be incorporated into AR. In fact, the most important way for doing this, I think, is already outlined by Levin and Greenwood: facing up to the existential demands of the context by accepting uncertainty and personal limitation, refusing to blindly follow ready made (*das Manish*) methods and procedures, and being alive to the personal stakes of all involved (including one's own), allows disclosure of the situation in such a way that both change and meaningful knowledge can be pursued. To summarize this section, then, AR has a distinctive and important role to fill in the production of social knowledge by being concerned with world-disclosure in ways other social science approaches cannot be. It does this through being attuned to the existential implications of social research in such a way that the local demands of the concrete research situations as well as the necessary role of knowledge-how may be disclosed and addressed in ways appropriate to them.

## **6. Two different ways of conceiving humans**

At this point, having described ways in which some traditional social science covers over the inherent uncertainties and ambiguities in human being and how AR does, or at least has the potential to do, a better job of facing up to those same uncertainties and ambiguities and responding to them in a way that does justice to them, I would like to turn to some wider implications for the study of humans. I want to suggest that much of classical social science labors under a conception of the essence of humanity that is deeply entrenched in the Western tradition and that probably helps lead to many of the evasions from the existential conditions of humanity that I attribute to it. However, there is a different conception of humanity, one might call it a more "existentialized" one, that I think is more conducive to practically meaningful social research and that AR is more open to. I will now briefly discuss these two different conceptions of the essence of man and compare them as well as the possibilities for social research they hold out.

In one of Heidegger's later essays, "Letter on Humanism", he argues that there is a traditional conception of the essence of man in the West, stemming from Aristotle, that guides all thought and research about man. This conception says that man is the rational animal (Heidegger 1972).<sup>7</sup> And, indeed, as a glance through any introductory economics or sociology textbook will discover, the assumption that man is a rational actor is foundational to much of social science. Heidegger has a lot of criticism for this conception, most of which we cannot go into. But the critique most important to our discussion, and rooted in *Being and Time*, says that the proper characterization of man is not captured by positing something like an eternal, unchanging essence that gets attached to man like any other sort of being. Such "essences" are only good if we approach ourselves in the scientific manner in which we approach other sorts of beings. But if we do that, we lose sight of the fact that we stand, "primarily and for the most part" (to use a common phrase of Heidegger's), in a relation to ourselves that is wholly different from the relationship in which we stand to other beings. We *are* ourselves, and our relationship to ourselves has *meaning* for us. Heidegger thinks that any account of man that does not take this existential condition seriously into account can never speak to what is most essential about man. Instead, a social science that is primarily guided by the conception that man is essentially the rational animal will focus its study of man based on a supposed ideal of what it is to be rational and how particular humans and societies approximate to it.

Another way of putting Heidegger's argument is by saying that the concept of man as the rational animal only answers the *what* question, i.e., what is man? This is what we do when we study plants, animals, planets, mountains, tools, etc. We ask, what is x? However, in the case of humans, we may also ask *who* they are. *Who* is man? Heidegger thinks that if we ask this ques-

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<sup>7</sup> Actually, Heidegger thinks that the translation of Greek into Latin was a huge and fateful step in the ontological history of the West. Thus, he thinks that "rational animal" does not adequately translate what Aristotle had in mind. So, he thinks the "rational animal" was a Roman invention, not Aristotle's. What Heidegger thinks Aristotle meant instead is a long and difficult question. In *Early Greek Thinking*, Heidegger seeks to uncover the original Greek meaning of *Logos*, the part of Aristotle's definition corresponding to "rational" in the English "rational animal". I refer the interested reader to this text for further study on the topic.



tion and approach it in the appropriate way, we come up with a very different answer and story than the rational animal one (Heidegger 1962). Now, Heidegger was very wary of attributing a single nature or essence to human beings. He thought that once you started asking the who question, there was no final answer or story. However, Heidegger did not think you could not say anything meaningful at all in answer to the who question. Both in *Being and Time* and through out his philosophical career, Heidegger attempted multiple descriptive approximations to the who question about man. However, the one he puts at the beginning of *Being and Time* is the one that will concern us here. There he calls man “that entity which in its Being has this very Being as an issue” (Heidegger 1962). Let me translate a little bit. For Heidegger, man is the being whose *way* of being and whose stand on that way of being is at issue for it. Man is the being for whom things *matter*. But not just any thing. What is most at stake for each individual human is his or her relation to his or her particular way of being human.

For much of traditional social science, then, the distinctive trait of man – that in the light of which he is studied – is rationality. A reformed tradition of social research need not reject rationality. But it can go deeper than that and, I argue, remain truer to the existential condition of man if it starts from a different base, namely, that of man as the being for whom things matter, above all, his own way of being. I think that strong currents in AR already have practices that preserve this way of thinking about and relating to humans when it studies them. The principle many AR researchers hold of not treating other humans as objects to do research on, but as stakeholders in the outcome of research, helps to preserve this idea.

A great example of a social research project that operated under a conception of people similar to Heidegger’s (though certainly not in his words), is the Listening Partners Project (LPP) described in Belenky, et al. (1997). The goal of the project was to learn about how poor rural women’s lives could be changed for the better. Through recruiting women to participate in weekly discussion groups in which the project leaders tried to get the women to think and talk about their situations in life, they hoped to be able to empower the women into gaining a “voice” and to develop better mother-child relationships to carry on that “voice”. There were several key elements to this study

that characterizes the researchers' commitments to owning up to the risks, uncertainties, and implications of doing social research that tries to help people's lives. They were aware of the intrusions they were making into people's lives and appropriately called their work and the weekly discussion sessions "interventions". There was risk involved. They knew that some women's husbands might not be happy with what was going on and that it might cause conflict. They asked the women hard questions to get them to think about difficult issues. They were aware and respectful of all the stakes that were involved (see Belenky, et al. 1997). There may have been mistakes made – mistakes that might have affected the lives of people involved. But that is an unavoidable possibility that must be faced. On the other hand, it should not be thought that honest, authentic confrontation and acknowledgment of risks and limitations implies a lax approach to problems or a defeatist attitude. People and researchers can continually strive for improvement without exacerbating problems or compromising their integrity by covering over the inherent limitations of human capabilities and possibilities.

The LLP study provides insight into articulating a different model for the action researcher as a generator of knowledge. Thus, rather than the social scientific model of a detached observer capturing objective facts in its gaze, the action researcher acts as something of a democratic activist (see Spinosa, et al. 1997), who then reports what has been learned from such activity. That is, the action researcher helps *focus* and *articulate* the latent existential concerns and meanings of the people and groups she engages to help make changes. To do this, the action researcher must be on guard for reading her own concerns and preconceived answers into the concrete situations with which she engages. Of course, the action researcher must have prior sensibilities and values for perceiving and choosing what projects to engage in. But she must not then take on the stance of a totally impartial and detached scientific observer. Rather, she must cultivate and maintain a *receptivity* to the particular concerns and styles of the practices that make up the communities she is involved with. Profound engagement and commitment to helping a community articulate and address its problems in a way most appropriate to *it* is the way to cultivate such a receptivity. The maintenance of such a receptivity requires recognition of the existential risks involved, namely, possible failure,

the possibility of causing more harm than good, etc. These are elements of what might be called an existentialist methodology, rather than a detached/objectivist methodology. However, it should not be thought that such a methodology is *purely* individual and localized. The next step for our action researcher to take would be to share her successes and failures with other action researchers. They ought to engage in dialogue over what worked best in each of their situations, as well as what did not. As opposed to standard scientific practice which uses such dialogue to contribute to the establishment of a universal methodology, however, the action researcher would use such dialogue to continue to foster the kind of openness and receptivity described above, and to extend it into an expanding repertoire of skills for engaging in further AR projects. Such an existentialist methodology would be more truly *embodied*, that is, dependent on the continued exercise, extension, and sharing of the distinctive skills learned through actually doing action research.

Thus, we have seen that through recognizing the relevancy of research to the lives of the people it is carried out with, AR can overcome the subject/object division and the foundational focus on rationality that characterizes most of social science research. Instead, it may engage humans in the unique relationship they have with themselves and thereby produce knowledge potentially more in line with a much neglected aspect of what it is to be human. Because there are as many such ways of engaging humans as there are possible ways of *being* human, there can be no one method of AR, no pure essence of what AR *is*. Other methods of social science research may have their place and may indeed produce knowledge about humans. But the best way, I think, for AR to maintain itself in a position where it can lay claim to being a real and meaningful alternative that brings forth useful and meaningful knowledge is primarily by maintaining an openness to the aspect of what it means to be human that is precisely closed off to much other social science. That aspect is the way in which the essence of being human lies in how its understanding of its mode of being is always at issue for it. By cultivating practices and engaging in research projects that work to keep them open to this alternative characterization of being human, I think that AR researchers can work to establish a research tradition that both advances human

understanding concerning itself and simultaneously works to improve the lives of people in a meaningful way.

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude, I have been offering an interpretation of AR that locates one of its essential properties in its way of relating to existential issues encountered in the human condition generally, as well as in the study of human beings. While pragmatist philosophies have rightly been emphasized in the philosophical defense of AR, I have argued that certain elements of the existentialist tradition are also key in defending and developing AR. Action researchers are right not to avoid the insecurities and demands that come with attempting to study other humans. Engaging and responding to people in their local situations requires remaining open to the “existential essence” of humans, to the risk, uncertainties, and challenges that come with it, and to the often high demands that these things make on the researcher as a whole person (as opposed to just a person *qua* detached intellect with strict methods). This is a very difficult and demanding task. That, I have argued, is part of the reason why more traditional social science has developed methods of research that are supposedly universal in their applicability, and styles of reporting research that social scientists can easily follow without being stimulated to reflection and learning. It facilitates ignoring and escaping from the need to face up to and meet such demands. Facing up to such demands can never be done as a routinized activity. Thus, the task of doing so must always be renewed. This is why action research, in order to maintain itself as a viable alternative to traditional social science, must always work to preserve its openness – an openness that rigorously faces up to the local and particular demands of each new project.

In this paper I have focused mostly on the existentialist themes found in Heidegger’s early work and in more recent interpretations of it. I have used Heidegger’s analyses of *das Man* and the conception of humans as rational animals as a basis for articulating the differences between AR and standard social science in terms of an existentialist analysis. To these I have contrasted AR’s unique opportunity to develop a more authentic mode of social research

– one that approaches humanity in its “existential essence” instead. While my focus has been on Heidegger, one of my main goals in this paper has been to open up a space for more dialogue on the role of existentialism in AR generally. There is no reason why many of the other great thinkers in the existentialist tradition (e.g., Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Sartre, etc.) may not have important insights for the action researcher. Thus, I hope the ideas in this paper may contribute to further dialogue on the role existentialist thought might play in the continuing development of action research as an alternative research paradigm.<sup>8</sup>

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