

System Boundary Issues for Informed Consent in Action Research: A Birdseye View

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Abstract

As the ways in which action research can be performed have proliferated, so the ethical dilemmas faced by action researchers have multiplied. Informed consent is a vexing issue for many qualitative researchers (Avgerou, 2001; Braud & Anderson, 1998; Christians, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Fontana & Frey, 200; Lee, 1999). In this paper the principle of informed consent will be explored across action research.

A conceptual framework underpinned by [(Habermas, 1996)]'s structural analysis of the public sphere, complexity theory (Stacey, 1996; McKenna, 1999), and human activity systems (Checkland & Scholes, 1990) has been developed to clarify ethical dilemmas posed in action research as researchers engage with the world in the research process. From the social sciences emerges the concept of the qualitative researcher as guest in the private spaces in the world (Janesick, 2000) from soft systems multiple meanings of informed consent in qualitative research (Checkland, 1984) and from complexity theory (Stacey, 1996) the 'points of tension' for informed consent in qualitative research. Within this conceptual framework appropriate informed consent according to research method, culture, context and protocols within the private space being investigated are situated.

Introduction

As the variations on action research and the disciplines in which action research is practiced has proliferated, so the ethical dilemmas faced by action researchers have multiplied. Informed consent is a vexing issue for many qualitative researchers (Avgerou, 2001; Braud & Anderson 1998; Christians 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Fontana & Frey, 2000 & Lee 1999). In this paper the principle of informed consent will be explored across for action research.

A conceptual framework underpinned by (Habermas, 1996)'s structural analysis of the public sphere, complexity theory (Stacey, 1996; McKenna, 1999), and human activity systems (Checkland & Scholes, 1990) has been developed to clarify ethical dilemmas posed in action research as researchers engage with the world in the research process. From the social sciences emerges the concept of the qualitative researcher as guest in the private spaces in the world (Janesick, 2000) from soft systems multiple meanings of informed consent in qualitative research (Checkland, 1984) and from complexity theory (Stacey, 1996) the 'points of tension' for informed consent in qualitative research. Within this conceptual framework appropriate informed consent according to research

method, culture, context and protocols within the private space being investigated are situated. Such a framework provides a navigation aid for dealing with the complex issues associated with informed consent in action research whose main characteristic is emergence both for research process and final results. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach contributes to the development of a philosophy of information technology; a discipline that serves the organizational world in a multiplicity of ways.

The structure of the paper is as follows: the principle of informed consent is defined; the terms 'public' and 'private' are defined and situated within the theoretical framework provided by (Habermas, 1996) qualitative research phases defined (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) for emergent research methods; a set of 'points of tension' outlined with respect to both public and private space and stages of the research process; and implications arising from these 'points of tension' for future skill development for researchers who engage with emergent research methods.

The Principle of Informed Consent

A prime governing principle observed internationally for ethical research is informed and voluntary consent. No participant in ethically sound research is required to take part in a research project unless informed consent is in place. Informed consent incorporates the principles of: respect for participant's rights, confidentiality and preservation of anonymity; harm minimization, cultural and social sensitivity, and respect for intellectual and cultural property ownership.

Institution review boards typically require information on access; secure physical storage, retention and destruction of informed consent forms.

Defining Public and Private Space

Habermas (1996) traces the history of public and private domains. For the purposes of Figure 1 the private realm is the internal world of organisations. This internal world has both a public and a private view. For instance, the private view could be represented by an organisational intranet and the public view by the website advertising the organisation to the outer world. The public sphere is the world of publicly funded activities of which Universities are but one such publicly funded domain. As an academic the action researcher is situated in the public sphere by her/his institutional affiliation. As a researcher it can be seen that organisational research – the domain of the action researcher - straddles the boundaries of all three: private realm, public sphere and public authority. The action researcher is centred above and within the public sphere usually, but not necessarily associated with an academic research institution. The action researcher also has public and private arenas, as do organizations, participants, research institutions and funding bodies.

In the public sphere research and research institutions are situated within the 'world of letters'. This 'world of letters' is the domain of reported research whether it be spoken, written or presented in any other way. This 'world of letters' incorporates both virtual public and private space. Action research in organizations overlaps public authority, where informed consent requirements are legislated, and research institutions,

predominantly reliant on public funding. For the individual action researcher their world is centred above and within the public sphere in the ‘world of letters’. We could consider that the individual researcher also overlaps the market place in the dissemination of research results in journals, conferences and electronic forums.

Private spaces within organizations

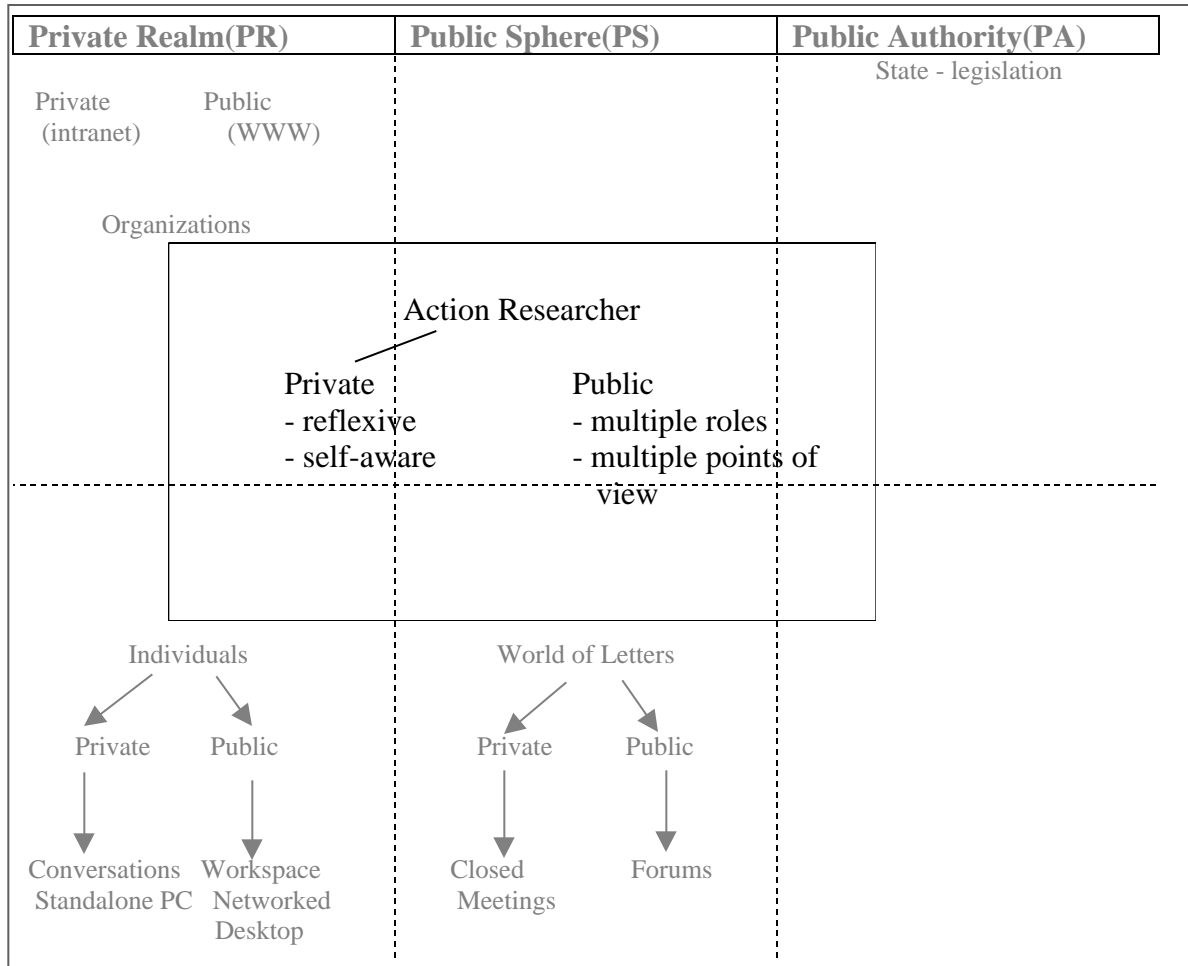


Figure 1 adapted from (Habermas, 1996)

Gubrium & Holstein (1997) p204 state ‘contemporary social life . . . is conducted in a virtual plethora of public sites and locations interpreted from diverse perspectives, more and more of the formal organised . . .’ which has as its underlying assumption the blurring of boundaries between public and private spaces in the world. Points of tension arise for the action researcher entering contemporary social life in the workplace as boundaries become fuzzy. Individual private spaces within organisations are represented by the lower sector in the private realm and organisational private space in the upper sector. Similarly within the public sphere for academic institutions and within public authority, the individual domain is in the lower sectors, the institutional domain in the upper sectors.

Action Research – an Emergent and Practical Research Method

Action research is an emergent, flexible, cyclic, methodology that can involve a collection of methodologies. Participation by both the action researcher and the participating organisation is defined by the actual process, may vary from project to project and is a design choice by the action researcher. There may be multiple data sources and it is usual that the effect of an action researcher embedding her/himself in the research process and the organisational setting allows for rich research themes to emerge.

Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework. (Carr & Kemmis, 1991) p185 suggest that action research has both construction (planning and acting) and reconstruction phases (observing and reflection). These four phases are cyclic and shift between social practice and discourse. Action research is collaborative, both practical and reflexive and aims to add to the total body of social knowledge.

Research Phases and Informed Consent

Denzin & Lincoln (2000) suggest that there are five phases in the qualitative research process (Table 1).

Phase 1: The Researcher as a Multicultural Subject	History and research traditions; conceptions of self and others; ethics and politics of research
Phase 2: Theoretical Paradigms and Perspectives	Positivism, postpositivism; interpretivism, constructivism, hermeneutics; feminism(s); radicalised discourses; critical theory and Marxist models; cultural studies models; queer theory;
Phase 3: Research Strategies	Study design; case study; ethnography, participant observation, performance ethnography; phenomenology, ethnomethodology; grounded theory; life history; historical method; action and applied research; clinical research
Phase 4: Methods of Collection and Analysis	Interviewing; observing; artefacts, documents and records; visual methods; autoethnography; data management methods; computer-assisted analysis; textual analysis; focus groups; applied ethnography;
Phase 5: The Art, Practices and Politics of Interpretation and Presentation	Criteria for judging adequacy; practices and politics of interpretation; writing as interpretation; policy analysis; evaluation traditions; applied research

Table 1 The Research Process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), p20

Action research can be described as an emergent methodology. Manen (1990) suggests that ‘A certain openness is required in human science research that allows for choosing directions and exploring techniques, procedures and sources that are not always foreseeable at the outset of a research project.’ P162. Whilst emergent research methods are grounded in their own respective theoretical domain, they are essentially practical in nature. It is the ‘lived experience’ that is researched. In positivist approaches informed consent is approved in phase 3 of the research process (Table 1). Approaches are made

to organizations at the planning stage and research institutions and funding body approval given. The main source for points of tension at phase 3 is that because these research methods are emergent what is agreed by research institute review boards may not necessarily be what actually evolves in the next phase of the research process.

The reasons for these initial condition points of tension can be seen clearly when we consider that research institutes and proposal approval occur on the border between the 'world of letters' in the public sphere and public authority (Figure 1). It is on this border that research institution review boards that informed consent approval is granted. This approval takes place within phase 3 of the research process (Table 1).

At phase 4, the action researcher moves into the private realm of organizations to gather research data. The action researcher moves out of the public sphere and the 'world of letters' and into the private realm of organizations. The point of tension arises because approval is situated on the 'public authority'/'public sphere' border and the qualitative researcher is transitioning from 'public sphere' to 'private arena'. This major point of tension arises because approval is granted at the wrong place in the public/private space arena. It is no wonder that many an action researcher has been frustrated at project approval stage. Academic Institutional Ethics Committees (AIEC) dominated by positivists requires fixed research process at proposal stage. Action Research is an emergent research methodology. The approval process in the Public Authority space hampers the informed consent process for action research proposal approval.

Not only is informed consent approval in the wrong place on the public/private divide, the 'language' and 'form of informed consent is aligned with 'the world of letters' in which academic review boards are situated. Informed consent is not expressed in the 'lived' language of organizations situated in the private realm.

Yet another point of tension associated with informed consent exists between research phases 3 and 4 because of organisational structure. It is not necessarily so that the actual participants make the decision-making about research activity. Decisions are often made at other places in organisational structures.

Permission and form of informed consent is required from research institutions and funding bodies before research takes place. Discussions with organizations take place before research institutional permission given. Here there is a point of tension because of the timelines involved in the approval process. Further points of tension are inherent in the way in which action research is structured through 5 phases that are linear with respect to time.

At research phase 4 there are many ways in which points of tension may arise in action research. Whilst research institution review boards concentrate on data collection, storage, destruction and dissemination, they only concern themselves with the mechanics of the research process in gathering data – surveys, questionnaires, focus groups . . . It is in the research process that the following points of tension may arise:

1. Manen (1990) suggests that participants may feel ‘discomfort, anxiety, false hope, superficiality, guilt, self-doubt, irresponsibility’ as well as ‘hope, increased awareness, moral stimulation, insight, a self of liberation, a certain thoughtfulness’; p162 and
2. Manen also suggests that organizations may feel challenged when research being conducted points to changed organisational practices.

Entry into Research Phase 4

There are many ways in which the action researcher may enter into the private realms of organizations. Whilst research institute review boards may have approved these entry modes, the nature of emergent research methods may mean that the entry mode may change.

Entry into the private arena of organizations by the action researcher may be:

1. Formally approved by research institute, funding body and organization; Points of tension arise if the decision maker is not the research participant; and
2. Formal approval may have been given but the emergent nature of the research method means that informed consent requirements change. This may arise in action research because of the cyclic nature of the research process, the level to which the researcher is immersed in the research process and failing to align data collection and emerging practice.

Points of Tension During Phase 4: Multiple Roles for Action Researcher and Participant

Points of tension may also arise because the researcher and/or the participant adopt multiple roles. When research takes place within the researcher’s own organization, for instance, the researcher adopts the dual roles of employee or employer and action researcher. Participants may be fellow employees, may adopt multiple roles within the organization particularly in relationship to the researcher. A recent instance involved the researcher interviewing a participant who was a work colleague as well as a member of the institution’s AIEC. The researcher was both employee and researcher, and the participant was employee, AIEC member and interviewee. Questions arose about the validity of the interview technique that arose from the IRB role which in turn raised yet another point of tension

Points of Tension Arising within Phase 5: the Art, Practices and Politics of Interpretation and Presentation

Klein & Hirscheim (1996) nominate ‘a principle of multiple interpretations’ in their guidelines for evaluating interpretive research. Multiple interpretations imply multiple world-views and theories.

It is in phase 5 that the action researcher crosses boundaries from within the ‘world of letters’ and moves into public forum with research outputs reported in academic press and conferences. Boundaries are also crossed as results are reported back to organizations and research participants.

Points of tension are likely to arise just because boundaries are crossed within the public sphere (internal 'world of letters' to the public forum for academia) and from the public sphere back into the private arena of organizations and individuals.

What is reported is the action researcher's point of view, interpretations situated within the appropriate literature; the chosen research methodology, analysis techniques and evaluation frameworks. Points of tension arise when the action researcher has worked in isolation rather than consulting with the researched organization in reporting findings. Points of tension may also arise when the 'greater good' is reported that may not necessarily be in the interests of the researched organization.

Points of Tensions in Obtaining Informed Consent in Qualitative Research in Information Systems

Grounding the points of tension that arise in action research (Habermas, 1996) structural analysis of the public sphere provides a useful tool with which to identify where points of tension arise in public/private space. When this is overlaid with Denzin & Lincoln's (2000) 5-phase research process a much clearer picture of the problems that arise with the informed consent appears. Points of tension do not necessarily indicate an insurmountable problem, nor do they necessarily indicate a problem. The advocates of complexity theory in organizations (Stacey, 1996, Lissack, 1999) suggest that it is at the points of tension, - which may be 'at the edge of chaos' where most productive activity occurs in organizations. Awareness of points of tension, the public/private space dimension, the stakeholders in the research process at the point of tension and the research process phase provides additional resources to the action researcher. Points of tension may arise in the following situations:

1. Points of tension arise when the research activity requires the boundaries of private realms to be crossed from public sphere or public authority;
2. In research activities boundaries may be crossed in many ways and at any stage during the research process. For instance, at phase 5 boundary crossing may be have global implications as research outputs are released internationally;
3. Points of tension concerning informed consent arise when boundaries are crossed from public authority to public sphere or private realm;
4. Points of tension arise when action researchers are required to adopt multiple roles – researcher, student, representative, consultant, employer or employee;
5. Points of tensions arise when there is an imbalance of power and control anywhere in the research process with respect to informed consent;
6. Points of tensions arise when emergent research methods are employed. All contingencies for informed consent may not have been foreseen at phase 3 of the research process, planning;
7. Points of tension arise through the use of domain-dependent language. (Academic language used in organizations as opposed to 'lived language' in organizations);
8. Points of tension arise when research institution guidelines are set within an underlying positivist paradigm and then applied to action research;

9. Points of tension arise when research institution guidelines allow no room for negotiated space for informed consent; and
10. Points of tension arise when participants within organizations are not informed of research activity.

Implications arising from these Points of Tension

Whilst legislation (situated in public authority space, Figure 1) may allow for changing circumstances of emergent qualitative research methodologies, informed consent is still required before any research takes place. Points of tension may indeed arise between public authority and public sphere when legislation requires all questions asked to be known in advance or for participants to be informed if all questions are not known in advance. Individual institutional review boards may require that all data collection methods to be stated explicitly at proposal time, even with emergent research methodologies.

Training for action researchers should include knowledge of public/private space and the many situations in which points of tension may arise. Also, points of tension need not be viewed as barriers; they may indeed be the catalyst required to gain valuable research data and an insight into research process. Training should also include an awareness of the complexity involved in conducting qualitative research in her/his own organization (Holian, 1999).

Action researchers usually adopt a more cooperative and reciprocal approach with participants than positivist researchers. The fine nuances of informed consent require a heightened awareness and reflexivity in action research.

All stakeholders within the 'world of letters' need to be aware of the importance of organisational domain-specific language.

Negotiated space for informed consent requires a change of policy for action research by most institutional review boards. The underlying and often assumed dominant paradigm makes this issue an obstacle rather than a creative point of tension. Informed consent in action research is a far more complex issue than in other forms of research.

A fruitful direction for future explorations of the points of tension that arise in action research is to create a landscape of tension points that includes multiple points of view, obstacles, creative tension, and legislative and policy changes.

Conclusion

In this paper the principle of informed consent has been explored in the emergent research methodology: action research. A conceptual framework has been developed to provide an additional conceptual tool for action researchers as they engage with the world in the research process. Within this conceptual framework appropriate informed consent according to research method, culture, context and protocols within the private space being investigated has been situated. Points of tension that arise are situated both within

Habermas's public/private space structure and Denzin and Lincoln's 5-phase research process. Such a framework provides a navigation aid for dealing with the complex issues associated with informed consent in action research whose main characteristic is emergence both for research process and final results. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach contributes to the development of a philosophy for systemic thinking; a discipline that serves the organizational world in a multiplicity of ways.

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