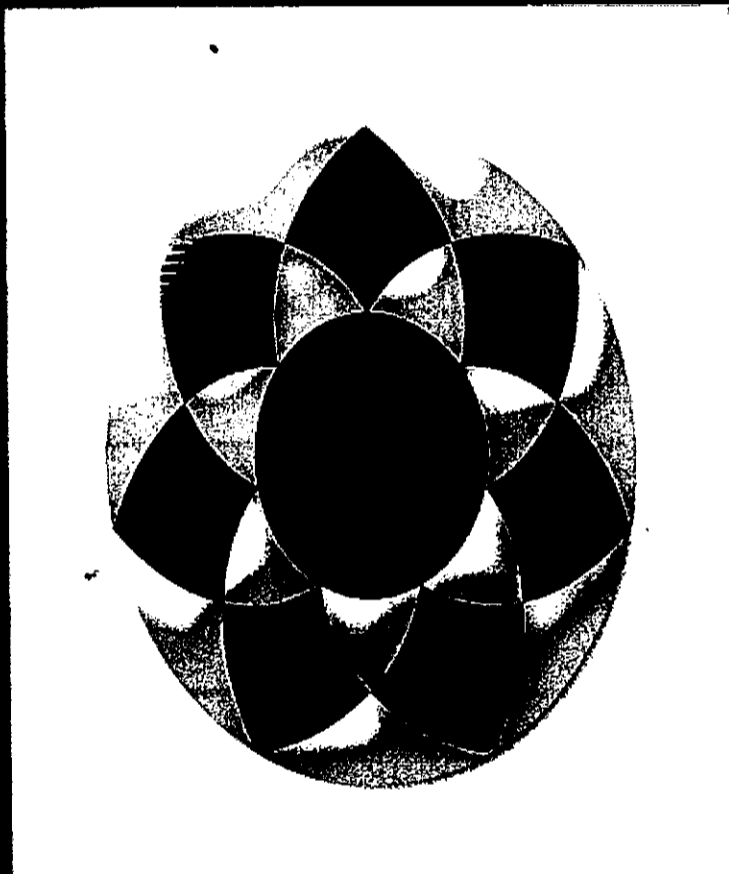


**Challenges And Responsibilities  
of Social Research in Africa :  
ETHICAL ISSUES**



**Edited by  
Apollo Rwomire and Francis B. Nyamnjoh**



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## 6. ISSUES OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN SURVEY, ETHNOGRAPHIC AND ACTION RESEARCH

N. Romm

### 1. Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on exploring various research strategies (namely, survey, ethnographic and action research) in terms of issues of accountability in social research. In the course of the chapter I spell out what I call (in Romm 2001) a trusting constructivist conception of accountability in social research. I define this position in relation to certain alternatives. The alternatives are discussed under the following categories: positivism, critical rationalism, scientific realism, interpretivism, critical theory and anti-foundationalist feminism. Of course, when discussing styles of social research as well as positions from which one can view the accountabilities of social researchers, I have had to be selective. I have not tried to cover all possible ways of doing social research or all perspectives from which one might define the accountabilities of those engaged in such research.

In the first four of the positions discussed (positivism, critical rationalism, scientific realism and interpretivism), I suggest that assessments of researchers' accountabilities are primarily based on judging the contribution of research processes in leading to (more or less) certain knowledge of the social realities studied. This implies that (self-named) researchers try to earn trust by positing a way of accessing realities outside of their discourses and by presenting findings as relating (as much as possible) to these realities. This way of earning trust is rooted in a specific conception of knowledge –

one that has been challenged from various quarters. For instance, critical theory and anti-foundationalist feminism focus on the importance of developing communicative/dialogical inquiry. A trusting constructivist view sides with both critical theory and anti-foundationalist feminism in their claims that any 'findings' of the research process should be considered as discursive enablers, enabling communicative/dialogical encounters around the 'information' produced. The trusting constructivist position calls forth the value of developing an orientation towards "discursive accountability" (cf. Romm 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 1998). Accountability as practised by researchers does not involve trying to indicate that they have followed a path that can (best) lead to advancements in knowledge of posited social realities; it is a matter of defending the inquiry processes adopted and, in the light thereof, opening a discussion of the way results may be conceptualised.

For researchers to be able to defend themselves as being discursively oriented (in the sense defined within a trusting constructivist position), their work cannot fairly be judged in terms of whether the inquiry process is likely to lead to knowledge of (extradiscursive) realities. A trusting constructivist view keeps alive, and enters discussion around, the question of what 'knowing' as an enterprise in society might involve. I believe that any answer to this question endorses some mode of human interaction in society at the time. In the case of trusting constructivism, the plea is to appreciate that one

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might trust others' judgements insofar as they engage (and express a serious engagement with) other people's visions and concerns as the basis for knowing.

I explain my argument more fully in the context of discussing issues of accountability in the practice of different research strategies. But first I need to offer an outline of positivism, critical rationalism, scientific realism, interpretivism, critical theory, anti-foundationalist feminism and trusting constructivism. My discussion is brief and concentrates on extrapolating visions of accountability within these various positions. I then utilise the arguments to explore ways of judging the accountability of those involved in what is defined as survey, ethnographic and action research respectively. Finally, I relate the discussion to examples of these styles of research.

## 2. Various Views of Accountability

Current debates on the achievements of social science can be clarified by considering how the arguments relate to what is sometimes called the 'positivist' philosophy of science. Crotty (1998) notes that it was Comte who popularised this term in the early 19th century in his *Cours de philosophie positive*. Comte pleaded for the extension of natural scientific procedures to the social sciences and for the need to develop a 'positive' (scientific) approach to the study of society. Delanty suggests that an exploration of positivist thinking provides a way of opening a discussion on the practice of social science, because "philosophical debates on the methodology and self-understanding of social science have been, for the greater part, shaped by the positivist dispute" (1997, 11).

In terms of positivist argumentation, the proper practice of science requires developing observation techniques to get to grips with factual phenomena. By relating observation of phenomena (through inductive and deductive logic) to more general statements about reality, knowledge can be advanced.

This is knowledge of causal connections between what are termed variables (phenomena that can change or vary). The accountability of scientists is linked to their commitment to develop general statements grounded in the observation of facts. The scientific community is accountable to society for ensuring that proper science is indeed practised within the community, and society expects that the scientific community can indeed develop some knowledge of reality based on the use of scientific processes.

This manner of understanding the institution of science in society has been the starting point for the development of many other arguments. For example, the critical rationalist position (so-named by Popper) emphasises that science can never be used to verify proposed hypotheses concerning connections between variables. According to Popper, deductive logic – which he sees as the logic of science – can be used to subject hypotheses to testing. If they withstand repeated attempts to falsify them, the hypotheses can be regarded as tentatively corroborated (Popper 1959, 1969, 1994). The accountability of scientists is here linked, as Hammersley and Gomm put it, to their efforts to "maximise the chances of discovering the truth about the matter concerned" (1997, para. 4.14). The accountability of scientists depends on their being prepared to judge critically their own and others' inquiry efforts. This self- and mutual criticism is an important route to advancing knowledge of reality (although we can never be sure in any specific case of the truth-content of any set of statements about reality).

In response to both positivism and critical rationalism, the scientific realist argument (as elucidated, for example, by Keat and Urry 1982) is that too much attention to observation as the basis of developing knowledge of reality may direct efforts away from appreciating the structures and mechanisms that are hidden from observation. It is regarded as crucial to try to build theories about these realities. Such theories, however, can neither be

verified nor falsified. This lends more uncertainty to the scientific endeavour. Conceptions of accountability in this position revolve around the requirement for scientists to try to advance knowledge in the midst of the increased uncertainty characterising the practice of science.

The interpretivist argument (so-named by Weber) parts company with the previous three in arguing for a distinct approach to the study of social life (distinct from that used for the study of nature). The accountability of scientists is here seen as linked to their attempts to develop plausible accounts of the motivating meanings that constitute the stuff of social life. However, as with positivism, critical rationalism and scientific realism, (Weberian) interpretivism suggests that social researchers should try to adopt an attitude of ethical neutrality in the process of developing their appreciation of the social realities studied. In this case their accountability is a function of their efforts to understand the lifeworlds of those studied and to indicate possible consequences that may ensue from upholding particular worldviews.

In contrast to these arguments, the school of critical theory (including, for example, Habermas) has suggested that the distinction between 'facts' and 'values' introduced by positivism and upheld within the positions of critical rationalism, scientific realism and interpretivism should itself be relinquished. Habermas' argument (1974, 1982, 1996) is that unless people (in both the scientific community and ordinary public life) are able to bring into consciousness the interests or values guiding their inquiries, they will be unable to subject them to critical discussion. The accountability of those involved in critical theoretical inquiry is thus linked to their commitment to generate a discussion around values being brought to bear in the inquiry process.

Meanwhile, anti-foundationalist feminism extends critical theoretical argumentation by suggesting that it is impossible to separate out an 'object' of social inquiry that can be looked at in a neutral

fashion (cf. Stanley and Wise 1993; Oakley 1998). The use of the scientific process to try to gain access to some object of inquiry is regarded as linked to a hierarchical relationship between 'knowers' (researchers) and respondents. As Oakley notes, "the knower is the expert, and the known are the objects of someone else's knowledge" (1998, 710). Scientific practices aimed at getting closer to 'truth' (as representation of reality) are thus regarded as unduly privileging researchers' so-called expert opinions. Alternative relationships between researchers and researched therefore need to be sought.

Finally (for the purposes of this discussion), constructivist-oriented authors adopt the position that any pretended recourse to some abstract human reason which can supposedly use 'evidence' to settle disputes between contending experiences of the world should be challenged. Irresolvable disputes should not be regarded as a nuisance in the practice of science or any other human discourse (Shotter 1993; Edwards 1997; Temple 1997; Midgley 2000; Gill 2001). Constructivism (including what I call trusting constructivism) focuses on the value of discursive exchange between differing (contending) ways of constructing and working with information (as humanly mediated). In this view, the accountabilities of social inquiries can be assessed only through discourse as social activity. It is through this mechanism that researchers can attempt to earn trust in their way of proceeding and in their way of organising a discussion around the 'results' of their inquiries.

I now proceed to explain how the various positions on accountability might become instantiated when judging various forms of social research.

### 3. Accounting for Survey Research

As De Vaus defines it, survey research amounts to "collecting information about the same variables or characteristics from at least two (normally far more) cases and ending up with a data matrix"

(1996, 3). A survey approach seeks "naturally occurring variation" in the data that is examined in order to gain some appreciation of the way variables may be connected (De Vaus 1996, 6). De Vaus notes that in survey research, as in other forms of research, a range of data-collection techniques may be employed. Research is normally carried out using questionnaires (which consist largely of closed questions but sometimes also include some open-ended ones). Other techniques, such as structured interviewing (with pre-set questions), in-depth interviewing (semi-structured or unstructured), direct observation and content analysis, can also be used to gather data (De Vaus 1996, 6). As De Vaus explains, "the technique by which we generate the data need not be highly structured so long as we obtain each case's attribute on each variable. Because questionnaires are the easiest way of ensuring the structured data matrix they are the most common technique used in survey research. But there is no *necessary* connection" (1996, 5).

Following De Vaus, Seale and Filmer also comment that social surveys do not "always involve rigidly fixed questioning devices" (1998, 128). They note that "qualitative data" as gathered through, for example, interviewing processes, can later be quantified by putting them into a measurable form (1998, 128). In De Vaus' view, the data would need at some stage to be expressed in terms of variables, so that each case's attributes on the different variables can be compared with others. This is in order for the research to meet the requirements for it to be classified as a survey.

From a positivist point of view, social researchers' accountability when organising survey research can be judged in terms of their effectiveness in collecting data in regard to the variables under investigation. Survey research should hold the possibility of aiding us to establish the probability that relationships (of correlation and ideally of causation) hold between the variables chosen for study. The task of researchers is to engage in analytic work to try to discern whether relationships can indeed be

argued to hold (and with what likelihood they can be deemed as holding). From a positivist point of view, as long as such analytic work is grounded in the data that is collected, and as long as the collection of data itself is not tainted by undue prejudice, researchers can be said to be acting accountably.

A critical rationalist position suggests that it is crucial to try to seek evidence that might help in disconfirming hypotheses (conjectures) regarding patterns of correlation or causation holding in reality. Colleagues in the scientific community are an important source of criticism that can be levelled at ways of conducting observations by, for example, carefully considering the way questions are constructed, interviews administered, etc., or by considering the way conclusions are drawn from data obtained. The chances of avoiding mistakes in regard to conclusions about the variables under study become stronger due to the mechanism of such criticism within the community. Colleagues can criticise one another's way of collecting data or their way of drawing conclusions and expressing results. Scientists should regard themselves as accountable to colleagues for the way in which they proceed and should apply both criticism and self-criticism to work undertaken.

Scientific realist forms of argumentation are more wary than both positivism and critical rationalism of the way surveys are used to try to discern relationships of correlation or causation. Developing knowledge of (social) realities implies adopting a different conception of causality from that held by positivism and critical rationalism. The scientific community itself should not be unduly biased in favour of simply determining whether certain variables are regularly associated with, or followed by, others. More important is to consider possible underlying hidden mechanisms that can explain the generation of the phenomena that become discerned in social life. Survey research can thus be properly accounted for only if it can be argued to aid the process of theorising around such mechanisms.

Interpretivist-oriented authors are also somewhat wary of the usefulness of surveys in attaining the required knowledge of social reality – which according to this position amounts to trying to attain better access to the meaningful character of social reality. It is crucial for researchers to bear in mind, and to express to others involved (whether respondents questioned or other audiences of the surveys), that ‘variables’ should be seen as constructs relating to people’s meaningful experiences of social reality. Researchers are accountable to colleagues, to respondents and to audiences in the sense of trying to achieve a closeness to the everyday experience of meaning-making in the way they portray results of any survey research that might be undertaken.

From a critical theoretical point of view, there is no need to conceptualise survey research (or other strategies) in terms of their contribution to attaining knowledge of social realities – whether of proposed causal relationships or patterns of meanings in reality. More important is to use the process of social research to open up intersubjective discussion around the way in which people choose to create meanings and the way in which specific patterns of conduct emerge from the human creation of meaning. This means that survey research, if properly employed, might be able to help people to consider the way in which they are constructing their lifeworlds. Ways in which this reconsideration can be instituted need to be explored.

The concern of anti-foundationalist feminism, in turn, is that forms of research such as surveys, with questions designed by researchers, give too much control to researchers in the interaction between them and respondents. This means that reality normally becomes constructed from the perspective of the interests of researchers. Heterogeneous experiences of reality can become suffocated through the very way in which surveys are set up and results created. To act accountably as social researchers, researchers need to develop a way of interacting with participants and of writing up re-

sults (for audiences) that is less controlling than that associated with traditional survey research.

From a trusting constructivist position, the important requirement for social researchers earning others’ (colleagues’, participants’ or other audiences’) trust is that they can defend the choice of research strategy adopted while simultaneously pointing towards a recognition of alternative ways of creating/evoking research material. Surveys can possibly be defended in certain contexts, but this is a matter of engaging seriously with the criticism that may be levelled against this kind of research in general and in the context under consideration, and in the light thereof explaining the continued relevance of the survey. Also, any results proffered should be set in the context of a consideration of debates around the practice of this kind of research. This should allow people (other researchers and others in society) to continue to work around and past any proffered “results”.

#### 4. Accounting for Ethnographic Research

Fielding defines ethnographic research as “a form of qualitative research which combines several methods, including interviewing and observation” (1993, 154). The qualitative character of ethnographic research derives from the “emphasis put on ‘depth’, ‘intensity’, ‘richness’, and so on” (155), and some effort needs to be made “to ‘think’ oneself into the perspective” of those being studied (157). The gathering of detailed material can be very demanding in ethnographic research. Thus, sample sizes are normally much smaller than those in some other kinds of research – such as, for example, surveys (Fielding 1993, 155). Nevertheless, the definition of ethnographic research does not rest on the size of the samples utilised but on the way in which the material is approached – that is, with a view to exploring the way in which life is experienced in the ‘natural’ setting (Bryman 1992, 59;

Fielding 1993, 157).

It is sometimes suggested that the organisation of ethnographic research in specific social settings need not detract from researchers' attempting to develop insights that can be recognised as being of analytic value towards general theory building. Yin (1994) suggests that the analytic power (theoretical value) of the concepts generated through case study research (under which ethnographic research may be labelled) is based on comparing the situations studied with other ones in which we are interested. However, Yin suggests that if ethnography is to be seen as a vehicle for developing theory, then this intent should be built into the design from the start, so that comparisons can be set up with other settings (for example, through organising other case studies or through referring to those done by others). Yin calls this process "analytic generalisation" (1994, 36; 2000, 241).

The comparative and theoretical utility of ethnographic research has been cited by a variety of authors, including those who may be labelled as having leanings towards positivism, critical rationalism, scientific realism, and interpretivism. From the perspectives of critical theory, anti-foundationalist feminism and trusting constructivism, an interesting advantage of ethnographic research is that it opens up opportunities to develop dialogical relationships both with participants (in the research process) and with the audiences for the research results. Specifically, it can widen the scope for researchers to engage with others in society in an ongoing discourse about ways of defining life experiences.

As in my discussion of survey research I proceed to indicate how the accountability of those organising ethnographic research might be conceptualised from various theoretical positions.

From a positivist point of view, social researchers' accountability in ethnographic research can be judged in terms of their effectiveness in getting close enough to the data to be able to develop ideas about possible correlations or relationships of cau-

sality that may exist between variables in social life. Ethnographic research potentially provides one source of hypotheses that later can be investigated via forms of research geared to properly measuring variables and examining their possible connections. The task of ethnographic researchers is to engage in the exploratory work that later can be used by researchers to convert the ambiguous terminology of everyday life into variables to try to discern whether relationships can indeed be argued to hold (and with what likelihood they can be deemed as holding). From a positivist point of view, as long as such work is presented as exploratory investigation, researchers can be said to be acting accountably.

A critical rationalist position suggests that it is crucial to use the research process to attempt to disconfirm hypotheses that may be put forward in regard to patterns of correlation or causation that might hold between variables. In line with positivism, critical rationalists would suggest that ethnography can provide a good source of hypotheses for rigorous testing. However, to operate as scientists, ethnographers must distance themselves from the idea that commonsense ways of seeing social realities are valid in their own terms. Indeed, commonsense views are precisely what need to be put to the test. Thus, ethnographic research should highlight the need to subject everyday opinion (about the patterning of reality) to critical testing.

Scientific realism concentrates on the importance of researchers developing their skills of abstraction so that they can abstract from what is immediately discernible in order to theorise about hidden structures and mechanisms in social reality. If ethnographers operate too much at the level of description, as they are often prone to do, then the work is not scientifically defensible or accountable. As scientists, they have a responsibility to locate underlying structures of causality that can help to explain the patterning of, and meaning-making in, social life. The scientific community itself needs to take on board the requirement to use



analytic reason to locate deeper structures of reality. Scientists should consider themselves duty bound to criticise a science that is too descriptively based and that is therefore unable to afford the necessary analytic devices to come to grips with the structures of social reality.

Interpretivist-oriented authors welcome the opportunities that ethnographic research offers to build an understanding of social reality based on people's meaningful experiences. From this perspective, the task of social researchers is to engage with participants in such a way that the richness of different people's experience of social reality can be documented. Insofar as participants disagree with the way in which researchers are interpreting the meaning of their actions, attention should be drawn to this, so that at least audiences can see how researchers are developing their insights based on what participants have said and on how they assign meaning to their actions. Researchers cannot create their analytic understanding without reference to the way in which participants might regard the 'insights'. In this way, an exploration of social reality that bears a better relationship to people's meaning-making than externally generated abstract 'variables' or 'causal mechanisms' can be undertaken. Researchers are accountable to colleagues, to respondents and to audiences in the sense of trying to develop some closeness of fit between their insights and the commonsense perceptions of participants.

From a critical theoretical point of view, it is possible to develop a style of *critical ethnographic* research whose aim is to contribute to developing more dialogical relationships among those involved. Between researchers and participants, it is possible to set up dialogues about meaningful ways of living; and also between participants themselves it is possible to set up conditions for (more) genuine dialogues. Ethnographic research, if accountably practised, can be used to set up forums for discussion around the way in which people choose to create their lifeworlds. Such discussion should

not be seen as outside the remit of proper social research.

The interest for anti-foundationalist feminism is to encourage the use of research as a possible forum to allow for cultivation of dialogue around people's differing experiences of their worlds. What may be called ethnographic research, if well practised by a sensitive researcher aware of his or her possible impact on others' ways of seeing, can draw out the differing experiences without imposing researchers' definitions. This can occur both during the research process and also later in the write-up of results. The write-up should be done in such a way that audiences are specifically invited to appreciate that there is no need to posit some true picture of reality towards which people should direct their dialogue.

From the point of view of a trusting constructivism, ethnographic research, like other forms of research, can be defended by researchers recognising that they need to earn the trust of others – colleagues, participants and other audiences. Researchers should attempt to use the research process, as well as the write-up period, to create a climate where trust can be earned without necessarily resorting to traditional definitions of the purpose of science (or any knowing endeavour) to strive to develop knowledge as representation of reality. This implies showing up the way in which humans create their constructions in engagement with others, and indicating in detail what it may mean for people to take seriously another's way of seeing.

## 5. Accounting for Action Research

Rapoport suggests that action research can be characterised in terms of its aim "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" (1970, 499). He indicates that action research is defined by the manner

in which the inquiry is organised to consider ways of addressing the "problematic situations" in which people as practitioners are immersed. Whyte, Greenwood and Lazes, for their part, explain what is meant (for them) by collaborating with practitioners in the inquiry process. They distinguish what they call participatory action research from "the conventional model" of research on the grounds that some of the people in the organisation or community under study participate actively with the professional researcher throughout the research process from the initial design to the final presentation of results and discussion of their action implications (1991, 20). In this form of research, the roles of those involved in the inquiry are shared out – with the contribution of "professional researchers" and other researchers/participants being negotiated in the process (see also Eden and Huxham 1996, 81; Flood and Romm 1996, 135; McKay 1997, 12; Smaling 1998, 2).

The intention of action research as a mode of inquiry is, as McTaggart puts it, to "involve people in deliberately changing their own action in the light of collective reflection on the perceived shortcomings of current work [or other social] practices" (1997, 183). Interestingly, this often implies that action research is presented (by proponents) as a way of challenging efforts at representing reality as such. In other words, action research tries to generate new possibilities for experiencing our relationship with the world. As Weil argues, action research, or at least the brand of action research she advocates, 'critically reflexive action research', "does not aim to create one representation of reality, but, rather, the unravelling (and documentation) of multiple realities and rhetorics that are in mutual and simultaneous interaction" (1998, 58). This is not to say that all those engaging in action research see it in this fashion. As noted below, there are various debates on what action research properly is and how it can best be accounted for.

From a positivist point of view, action researchers' accountability as scientists is judged by focus-

ing on the way in which the research may be helpful in locating patterns of causality in social reality. The setting of everyday action is indeed a possible source from which to develop and test hypotheses concerning relationships of causality, that is, concerning the way in which a change of conditions can lead to specific outcomes. By taking some part in changing social circumstances and examining the effects on everyday life, knowledge can be advanced by researchers. They can reasonably make comparisons across different situations (by comparing different studies) so that some general statements about the effects of instituting changes of a certain kind can be made.

From a critical rationalist perspective, although action research can conceivably be used as a way of advancing knowledge of patterns in social reality, we need to be wary of allowing practical agendas to influence the way in which the research results are read. From this perspective, action researchers must test hypotheses with detailed reference to the evidence they are collecting in regard to change processes in social life. Also, as with ethnographic research, one needs to be wary of the loose way in which terms may be used in everyday life, so that definite hypotheses (rather than vague formulations) can become the subject of rigorous inquiry.

Scientific realists would judge action researchers' accountability in terms of the usefulness of the project in uncovering layers of reality that might otherwise have been hidden. For scientific realists, it is important for researchers to operate at the necessary analytic level so as to strive to advance knowledge of what may be needed to alter the basic structures of social settings. Colleagues in the scientific community should be critical of others who fail to operate at an analytic level that might offer some insight into the structures of society that explain the observable features of everyday life. Moreover, researchers should not ignore criticism from such (radical) quarters. Otherwise their accountability to colleagues in the scientific commu-

nity is in danger. And this in turn means that they cannot seek the kind of knowledge that people in society may need if they wish to alter the structures of society that give rise to the ways in which social life is experienced.

From an interpretivist point of view, action research, like ethnographic research, is a valuable opportunity for researchers to make visible the way in which patterns of events in social life depend on the way in which people define options for action. It can draw out the fact that people may not see so-called same situations as indeed the same. Moreover, action research can highlight that people may easily define the 'same' situation as inviting very different options for action. Therefore, it is not possible to assert that certain conditions are likely to lead to certain effects in social life. It all depends on how people decide to respond. Action research is a style of research that is well equipped to display this feature of social existence – that is, its character as produced through meaning-making. If action researchers can use this style of research to emphasise people's involvement in meaning-making, they can be regarded as operating accountably as researchers.

From a critical point of view, action researchers should not miss the opportunity to try to shift people from what may be regarded as undialogically oriented action towards more communicatively directed action. In this view, the researcher's task is not merely to describe, explain or understand social life, but to help people to experience it afresh as admitting of more communicative styles of mutual interaction. Action researchers should therefore try to create spaces for communication and (genuine) democratic forms of social life in the arenas in which they become involved. Unless they try to respond to the challenges involved in this (transformative) remit, it is difficult to consider them as acting accountably.

From an anti-foundationalist point of view, the action research process should ideally be a forum to enable people to appreciate the multiple ways in

which humans can define options for both seeing and acting in the social world. People should be able to appreciate that there is no one way of defining what social reality 'really' is, and they should recognise the need to find pathways through different experiences of reality. Through action research, people can come to an appreciation of the heterogeneous ways in which different people come to terms with their worlds. Action researchers can account for their involvement in social life only if they choose not to control the process of research in terms of their own hypotheses and not to try to find 'the answer' to these hypotheses.

Drawing on and extending critical theory and anti-foundationalist feminism, trusting constructivism sees action research as an opportunity to set up encounters where people can award trust to one another's judgements about how to see and act, without expecting that they can ground their visions in relation to some posited external world. Thus, new forms of trusting relationships can be experienced by people through processes of action research. Trusting constructivists would admit that the constructs they themselves may advance as they engage with others through action research do add input into the social world. However, the kind of input they would like to add is one where experiences of social life are opened for discussion as people engage seriously with alternative points of view as presented by others. The aim is for people to make more considered (accountable) judgements (about ways of seeing and acting) that can be regarded as trustworthy because they express such engagement. \*

The rest of this chapter offers examples of survey, ethnographic and action research studies discussed in terms of the debates on accountability thus far presented. The examples are from South Africa, Swaziland and the United Kingdom.

## 6. A Survey Evaluation of ABET at Unisa, South Africa

This survey, undertaken from 1996-1998, was aimed at evaluating an adult education certificate course organised by the Adult Basic Education and Training Institute (ABET) at the University of South Africa (UNISA). ABET at UNISA was set up towards the end of 1994 in line with the Minister of Education's comment on "the need to launch, as rapidly as possible, a national initiative in Adult Basic Education and Training aimed at transforming both the learning opportunities and earning potential of the millions who have been educationally disenfranchised in the past" (speech to the National Assembly, 1994). The director (and founder) of ABET at UNISA (Veronica McKay) saw the potential for UNISA, as a correspondence university, to contribute by catering for large numbers of students at a relatively cheap cost. Student intakes for a certificate course began in 1995 (and intakes for a diploma course began in 1998). The evaluation, conducted by myself, Peter Adman and Robert Flood (hereafter called Romm et al.) and funded by the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID), aimed to assess the delivery, relevance for students and impact on students' lives of the work done by the ABET Institute in relation to the certificate course.

### 6.1 Organisation of the Research Process

Much attention was given in the research process to the development and administration of different questionnaires that were sent out to about 6,000 past students (from 1996), 120 tutors (who organise monthly tutorial sessions) and 12 regional coordinators. Attention was also given to the formulation of an interview guide that was to be administered to past students. All questionnaires were first piloted with the various types of respondent and

then mailed out in April 1997. In the piloting stage, students, tutors and regional coordinators offered some suggestions not only for clarification of certain questions, but also for modification of the questionnaires in terms of areas of interest they felt should be included. Tutors were invited to participate in the development of the interview guide to be used in interviews with past students. A draft guide was first created and piloted with some students. Time was then set aside in a tutor workshop held in April 1997 to discuss it. This was one of the twice-yearly workshops attended by ABET academic staff and by tutors and regional coordinators, where any matters people wish to raise for attention are discussed. In this case, as part of the workshop, tutors were involved in discussing the pilot guide. They were further involved by soliciting their possible interest in administering the guide to past students (through face-to-face interviewing). This was later organised on a voluntary basis. All postal questionnaires received high response rates: about 33 percent from students, about 65 percent from tutors and nearly 100 percent from regional coordinators responding. (Repeat questionnaires were sent out to the latter two groups.)

As part of the research process, we also organised a group discussion with tutors and regional coordinators along the way, by bringing some themes to one of their workshops. These were themes arising out of our analysis of their responses to the first set of questionnaires sent out to them in April 1997. The issues were discussed in time set aside in a workshop held in September 1997. Later in the project (September 1998) – just before the write-up of the report – a "Points for Consideration Form" was issued to tutors to allow them to comment on what appeared to be some discrepancies on certain questions between tutor and student responses. The individualised comments of tutors were returned through the post to us.

In addition to these ways of focusing our inquiry, we involved ourselves in the following activities:

- Project visits to sites where past students were administering projects. The students were interviewed about the relevance of the course for their work in the project. From these interviews, and observations of activities being undertaken by those on site, we tried to develop a sense of the 'feel' of ABET UNISA in the community.
- A number of interviews with the vice-principal of UNISA as a way of exploring the managerial context outside ABET and to gain some appreciation of the vice-principal's views on the operations of ABET at UNISA.
- Informal discussions with the academic wing of ABET throughout the evaluation. These helped us consider what kinds of questions to include in the various questionnaires as well as the interview guide before these were piloted and later to share and discuss our findings as they emerged.
- Discussions with the head of the ABET Administrative Registry, followed up by discussions with other staff. Options for addressing issues being experienced as problematic were explored.

## 6.2 Some Findings Mentioned in the Report

After elucidating the processes undertaken in the project, the final report presented what were called findings attained through the process. But before the discussion of findings, a section was devoted to explaining that the data we obtained should be treated as a product of the way those involved were possibly responding to the contexts of interaction that were being set up. It was explained that, from our point of view, no research should be considered as unsituated. We therefore indicated that we preferred to make visible the contextual character of the data that was evoked. That said, the following gives an indication of some of the material contained in the report.

Our evaluation of the tutorial support system

suggested that it is by and large fulfilling the purpose of guiding students in their learning throughout the course. The vast majority of the students responded in very positive terms regarding the value of the classes and also regarding the willingness of tutors to help. However, 20 percent of students were finding it very difficult to reach the venues for the tutorial classes, and 25 percent were finding it very difficult to contact their tutors. In cross-tabulating these responses with the type of residence of students (small town, big town, rural areas), it was shown that there did not seem to be an association between these factors. Later, based on a number of considerations, the ABET Institute set up a special hotline as a way of fielding additional calls from any students needing to discuss issues relating to the course. It was also noted, when cross-tabulations were organised between type of employment and ease of reading the study guides, that there was no statistically significant association. In other words, it seems that whether people were practising as ABET practitioners, nurses, development workers, etc., or were self-employed or unemployed, this did not have an influence on their ease of reading the study material. (This information was combined with interpretations expressed by tutors in the Points for Consideration Form for purposes of the report.)

Findings in regard to the perceived impact of the ABET course on students' lives – as developed from an analysis of responses to the interview guide suggested that it had made a substantial difference in the lives of nearly all students and to some of those around them, in the workplace/community and in their families. Many of the students indicated that, through the course, they had initiated projects in their community or had learned how to better manage existing projects in which they were involved. They also reported improvements in their ways of approaching people (relating with them, communicating with them, regarding them with respect, etc.) in the community/workplace/family. Students indicated generally that they believed they

had become better able to address issues they faced in their lives and had become more motivated to deal with life's challenges. This was often related to their reported improvement in self-worth. Most students also reported differences in their family relationships (especially in their relationship with their children). The course had also apparently helped many of them to help their children learn new study skills as well as to encourage a positive attitude in their children towards 'meaningful' (rather than rote) learning. It was suggested in the final report that some of the ways in which past students had reflected on their ways of relating to their partners and to their children could be used by tutors in future to enable other students to consider these as possibilities.

Some students did express disappointments with the course. These were related to their expectations (and/or those of their family) that after doing the course they would find paid employment. When this did not materialise, they were not sure whether all their efforts had been worthwhile. Some of these students felt that their failure to find employment was due to the course not being sufficiently accredited by government bodies and felt that steps needed to be taken to give the course more credibility. Steps were later taken by the institute in this regard, by gaining accreditation from bodies in South Africa that were at that point being set up for the task. The institute tried to raise awareness in various other government departments besides the Department of Education of the need for ABET practitioners within a multitude of sectors.

### 6.3 Accounting for the Research

In this section, I discuss the accountability of the ABET research from the theoretical angles of positivism, critical rationalism, scientific realism, interpretivism, critical theory, anti-foundationalist feminism and trusting constructivism.

From a positivist point of view, Romm et al.'s accountability as scientists would be judged by fo-

cusing on the way in which they used the survey to collect information in regard to the variables under investigation. Although the survey was largely descriptive, it could in principle (in another study, for instance) be extended so as to test some hypotheses about possible relationships holding between variables. So, for example, one could test a hypothesis suggesting that tutorial contact has some effect on student learning. However, the variables would first need to be more clearly defined and measured. More work is necessary before this survey can be seen as useful in establishing the existence (or not) of correlations or causal relationships between variables isolated for attention.

From a critical rationalist point of view, similar remarks may be made regarding the way that Romm et al. have accounted for their survey. Again, it would be advised that thus far it is difficult to consider whether the data offers us any advancement of knowledge into patterns of correlation or causation that might hold between the variables studied. Nevertheless, the survey does offer a starting point to develop hypotheses in this regard that can then be put to the test in future studies. But Romm et al. would have benefited from conducting more of a debate with colleagues in the scientific community regarding the terms used in their questionnaires and interviews. And they would have benefited from colleagues offering ideas on how to treat the discussion with tutors and others in deciding how to interpret the results of these observations. To act accountably as scientists from the critical rationalist point of view, they would need to orient themselves to taking on board possible and actual collegial criticism.

From a scientific realist point of view, the need to engage with collegial and self-criticism would again be focused upon. However, in line with the scientific realist insistence on the need to be aware of hidden causal forces that may be operative in social reality, colleagues who operate with a narrow view of causality (as implying solely that certain events are regularly followed by others) would

have to be criticised as part of the process of dialogue. Romm et al.'s work would be criticised from a scientific realist position with a view to inviting them (or others reading their work) to widen the scope of their considerations to include a recognition of the way that underlying causal mechanisms may be operative in this case too. Adding these considerations would increase the possible utility of the information for funders of the report and other audiences (including those involved in or affected by ABET UNISA). These audiences could become better informed of the depth of the changes that may be needed in order to achieve the desired results of adult education in South Africa.

From an interpretivist point of view, the survey was an interesting attempt to account for the character of variables as constructs expressing people's meaningful experience of social reality. Romm et al. tried to explore selected 'variables' by considering the meaning that might be attributed to the ticking of closed-ended response categories in questionnaires, to the comments made by respondents via open-ended ones and to their answers given through interactions in face-to-face interviews. Although Romm et al. did not explore meanings with participants directly when collecting data from students, they did this indirectly by involving tutors who worked closely with the students. In this way, Romm et al. made efforts to improve the quality of the data that was gleaned from the fleeting encounters organised through the questionnaires and interview guide administration. The utility of the results achieved is greater than had they not tried to compensate in the way that they did for the fleeting character of most of the interactions with respondents.

From a critical theoretical point of view, Romm et al.'s way of organising the study might be defended as an effort to open up argumentation around the 'facts' generated through the process of the research. The research process was used as an opportunity to open up intersubjective encounters around the discerned data. The validity of what

Romm et al. 'discerned' through the questionnaires and interview guide lies not in whether they can argue that it reflects realities that they were trying to uncover. It lies in whether they can argue that, during both the research process and thereafter in the presentation of findings, they have provided space for communicative encounters.

From an anti-foundationalist feminist point of view, Romm et al. might account for the validity of their survey by defending it as an effort to contribute to the value of organising dialogue across heterogeneous experiences of reality. Efforts were made to set up arenas for discussion within the process of the research, and the report was written in a genre that presumably would discourage univocal readings of 'the findings'.

From a trusting constructivist point of view, Romm et al.'s survey would be judged in terms of how those involved could relate to the constructions advanced as constructions. At the same time, it should be highlighted that the way questions are asked in the first place might already make a difference to the experience of reality for participants. For example, raising questions about the tutors' possible involvement in aiding learning might itself contribute to the creation of certain effects as people (both tutors and students) become oriented to embracing the kinds of learning evoked through the way they have been questioned about this. Romm et al. displayed sensitivity to the need to take some responsibility for this potential effect of their organising and reporting on the collection of survey data. And their sensitivity was also expressed in their manner of reporting on the survey, emphasising the constructed character of results. But they still needed to earn trust by entering a discourse with others on ways of regarding the status to be given to the results.

## **7. An Ethnographic Study of Inheritance in Swaziland**

This study was intended to explore what the par-

ticipants (the hosts of the project) deemed to be important about the broad topic of inheritance. The research team consisted of seven women who were exploring inheritance issues in Swaziland as part of a larger research programme "Women and the Law in Southern Africa" (with different national teams organising research in different countries). The overall programme was funded through the Women and the Law in Southern Africa Research Trust. Funders included the Ford Foundation, SAREC, DANIDA, NORAD, SIDA, CIDA and UNICEF. Some of the researchers were professional lawyers, some professional sociologists and some non-professionals. My own involvement was as a 'consultant' at a certain stage of the research process.

I was invited by the coordinator of the team to adopt this role, which I shared with Nina Romm (my sister). The consultancy took the form of a workshop held over three days in Swaziland with all of the researchers to discuss the project with a focus on the coordination of the researchers' various efforts.

### 7.1 Organisation of the Project

In their report, Aphane et al. (1993) indicate that the project aimed "not only at bringing change at a personal level (in aiding people to envisage options for action in relation to inheritance issues), but at the formal level as well, e.g., on policy, law and administration (7). The concern of the researchers was to explore, with participants, the relationship between customary practices relating to inheritance, and the so-called general law. Reference to the latter included formal legal proceedings to execute estates and court case proceedings to address cases of dispute in relation to inheritance. One perspective that the researchers brought to the study was that, as they put it, "if the laws which regulate inheritance and other spheres of the legal status of women could sufficiently provide for women, they would have less inheritance problems. However,

women have to be encouraged to utilise such laws (6).

With ideas such as these in mind, the researchers began their investigations, making use of the following investigative techniques (Aphane 1993, 8-13). (The different researchers used different mixes of the techniques as they divided the research task amongst themselves.)

- Documenting court records (of High Court proceedings). All court cases that the researchers could identify (since the introduction of a system of general law in Swaziland in 1968) were perused.
- Documenting master records (of administrative procedures relating to dissolution of estates under general law). The idea here was to explore the effects of the law on Death Duty and of the Law of Succession in terms of estates that had been dissolved.
- Observing next-of-kin meetings (where executors are chosen under general law). Observations of 15 meetings were directed in terms of the researchers' intention to "observe the interaction between the surviving spouse and their relations (e.g., in-laws), the conduct of the surviving spouse at the meeting, and the role and behaviour of the men and women at this meeting" (Aphane 1993, 10).
- Interviewing key informants. This involved making contact with persons regarded as specifically 'knowledgeable' in the field. The aim was to look at "divergent views, as Swazi law and custom (as opposed to the general law also operating in the country) were not codified" (Aphane 1993, 12). The researchers thus expected to come across different interpretations of (informal) customs. Officials from courts and other institutions that administer inheritance issues were also approached as key informants.
- In-depth interviews with widows and widowers. Interviewees were chosen with the help of 'strategic people' in the community. In some cases, the chief suggested that the leader of the



community's women's group aid the selection of interviewees. In other cases, potential interviewees were known to the researchers, or were still wearing mourning garments. The researchers carried an interview guide with them but referred to it only "where the interviewee did not address a certain aspect that the researcher was interested in" (Aphane 1993, 11). Aphane et al. considered their method of in-depth interviewing to be very important to their research as it "has the lived experience of the interviewees" (1993, 12). Thus, interviewees were encouraged to "relate their stories" (11). Thirty-five such interviews were carried out.

- Organising case studies. This amounted to considering various players' roles in a case of a single inheritance. In following up some of the in-depth interviews with widows and widowers, the researchers interviewed others who had been identified (for example, the in-laws or other family members) as relevant to their case. The researchers hoped in this way to "gauge different opinions on the same issue" (Aphane 1993, 12).
- Arranging focus group discussions. This involved bringing together groups of people to focus on specific issues for discussion. Eight such groups were organised. The style of focus group interviewing was organised (facilitated) to allow group members to consider one another's differing views (including those that the researcher sometimes injected into the discussion). This is more or less in accord with Stewart and Shamdasani's definition of what they call "the contemporary focus group" as consisting of individuals who "discuss a particular topic under the direction of a moderator who promotes interaction" (1990, 10).

## 7.2 Interacting with Participants and Organising Community Discussions and Workshops

The interaction of the researchers with participants was based on the idea that both could develop their insights through the medium of the research. In the interviewing process, as in all their involvements, the researchers tried to be sensitive to the points of view of the various interviewees – accepting challenges to their own preconceptions while also opening up new avenues for discussion. An interesting area of 'expansion of consciousness' between researchers and widows revolved around the possible engagement of the general law as a route to addressing inheritance concerns. Aphane et al. note their own concern that the widow "may be disadvantaged [in terms of Swazi custom] because it is another family, rather than her own family, which makes decisions after the death of her husband. This is the family which she joined by *inkhonto* [a customary expression of allegiance to her mother-in-law]. This differs from the situation of a widower, as when his wife dies it is his own family which makes decisions" (1993, 48).

The researchers' views on these disadvantages had to be tempered by considerations of how others were seeing the potential use of the general law (in its juxtaposition to customary practices). They also had to consider how others were seeing the possible working out of the relations between widows (and widowers) and in-laws in the community. Aphane et al. admit the uncertainty felt specifically by widows due, for instance, to their not knowing how precedents will be interpreted in the courts (operating in terms of the general law, which makes use of precedents), as the general law can in principle operate as a force allowing for contestation of customary practices. Also, tensions felt with in-laws during the time at which widows are trying to make use of the general law had to be recognised. As Aphane et al. note, "sometimes widows felt that

they were too dependent on, or obligated to, their in-laws to threaten them via a court case" (1993, 112). The researchers still sometimes indicated, when offering 'advice' to widows, that even those who had been married under customary law have some legal recourse to the general law. But the researchers also had to recognise that widows might not have the same view of the law and its utility. In this way, the researchers tried to prevent a unidirectional focusing of the discussion with participants during in-depth interviews. While exploring the potential opportunities provided by the law, they also tempered this exploration with a sensitivity to the way in which tradition and obligation might add layers of complexity to the women's (and others') conceptions of options for seeing their situation.

In line with their intention to organise community discussions, the researchers considered focus groups to be an apt forum for generating debate around issues of concern. They saw their role in such groups as creating spaces where people could reconsider customs in the light of the moral duty (supposedly written into the customs) to offer protection to women and children. For example, one issue addressed in the focus groups was the way property was customarily bequeathed to the eldest son. Some participants indicated that it was important that people may bequeath their property to "responsible children rather than the customary inkhosana" (that is, the keeper appointed by custom) (Aphane *et al.* 1993, 61). This was seen as one solution to the problem that the property might otherwise be left in the hands of the less considerate or less responsible. Some participants – including some men – suggested that it would be appropriate if "the inkhosana was the most considerate and responsible child who had contributed during the lifetime of the deceased irrespective of sex, rather than simply the eldest son" (Aphane *et al.* 1993, 51). Issues relating to women's right to possess property (including the possibility of widows' having access to inheritances) were also discussed

in this context. The researchers considered it important to allow for the entry of the viewpoints of women more openly into the discussion in the community (than had they not initiated and facilitated the focus groups). The researchers were concerned that, traditionally, women's voices have tended to be somewhat muted in discussions of 'fair' practice.

In order to disseminate and discuss the information arising from the study, Aphane *et al.* organised a number of workshops. They were invited by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to disseminate and discuss their findings in a workshop, and sometimes they organised their own workshops for community members (1993, 13). They also presented a final report to the Women and the Law in Southern Africa Research Trust.

### 7.3 Accounting for the Research

From a positivist point of view, Aphane *et al.*'s accountability as scientists would be judged by focusing on the way in which they used the ethnographic process to develop ideas about possible correlations or relationships of causality between variables that have been shown to be relevant in people's everyday existence. The way that people experience their existence provides one source of conjectures about correlations (and causal relationships) that might obtain in social reality. So, for example, if women believe they are disadvantaged relative to men in access to inheritance, a hypothesis can emerge that can be tested in this or further studies. But Aphane *et al.* did not really offer a clear enough account of why they believe their information, and their (implicit) comparison of this with information from other studies, can be termed scientific.

From a critical rationalist point of view, in ethnographic research as in other forms of research, researchers need to direct their research activity to finding out about the patterning of reality. For instance, Aphane *et al.* could have tried to test the

(seemingly) commonsense perception that gender affects access to resources and that inheritance access is a case in point. We cannot ever decide with certainty to what extent this is the case, but the study could have increased our chances of providing conceptions that are more firmly grounded than a simple allegiance to common sense. However, Aphane et al. have not given us sufficient evidence that they were committed to undertaking the study as a scientific one. Their political allegiances could well have affected their way of speaking to participants as well as their way of interpreting their responses. This should have been opened to possible criticism.

From a scientific realist point of view, discussion of Aphane et al.'s accountability would be directed at considering their use of the skill of abstraction to put forward certain theoretical ideas. Judged in these terms, comments that they made about, say, the way women are made to feel guilty when they try to gain access to their inheritance would be seen as too descriptive. These comments would need to be related, for example, to some suggestions about the structures of power in the society, so that theorising around power can become strengthened. Nonetheless, others reading their report, such as colleagues in the scientific community, may be able to use some of the observations developed in the study to move towards deeper analyses of underlying structures in society. And they themselves, when faced with this possible criticism of their work, might likewise rethink how they can do more analytic work.

From an interpretivist point of view, the study, like all well-organised ethnographic studies, has the advantage of being able to build up an understanding of people's meaningful experience of social reality. But Aphane et al. could have offered more detail on how they developed their understandings through their engagement with various participants. This they could have done by leaving behind a more detailed paper trail of their way of dealing with others during the research process. With regard to their efforts to offer analyses that cast light on issues of

relevance not only to the participants studied but also to others, they also could have been clearer on how they were organising their comparisons across other contexts (social settings). Readers (including the hosts of the project and other audiences, academic and non-academic) would then be in a better position to decide on how relevant the study is for their own understanding of different social settings.

From a critical theoretical point of view, Aphane et al. were admirably trying to use the research process to experiment with a style of critical ethnographic research whose aim was to contribute to social change in the human relationships studied. They set up processes for participants to exchange views with the researchers and with others around different ways of treating inheritance. Their efforts to set up these communicative processes (as they engaged with participants on an individual and group basis) can be considered as part of their accountabilities as researchers. Seen from a critical theoretical point of view, these efforts, though undertaken in good faith, might have been better organised. Aphane et al. could have given more thought to, and allowed participants also to reflect more carefully upon, what is involved in communicative encounters as a basis for coordinating their actions around issues of concern raised in the study.

From an anti-foundationalist feminist point of view, Aphane et al.'s efforts to encourage dialogue around the experience of realities is also what would be focused upon. Indeed, unless researchers have made such efforts, it is difficult to consider them as having acted accountably from an anti-foundationalist feminist point of view. Because such discussions were organised, and multiple ways of seeing and acting were evoked through the discussions, it is easier to justify the researchers' involvement in the lives of participants. And because the report shifts between realist and narrative ways of elucidating insights, it is also easier for audiences not to be awed by the researchers' presentations.

From a trusting constructivist point of view,

following critical theory and anti-foundationalist feminism, the development of rapport with various participants could well involve interactions of the type that emerged in the study. But for the process not to be seen as simply that of researchers' trying to extract information, participants and researchers are required to interrogate their views in relation to challenges from others. To organise interviewing in this way requires efforts to build up a human relationship in the research process. A trusting constructivist position would suggest that Aphane et al.'s manner of conducting themselves with participants can be conceptualised as a possible way of exploring relationships in which people could extend their experience of trust-building through processes of discourse. A trusting constructivist position would also appreciate Aphane et al.'s way of organising the write-up of the study (and their holding various workshops in the community) as a way of inviting a discursive engagement with 'findings'.

### 8. Action Research in Public Services (United Kingdom)

Weil (1998) reports on her study of the management of public sector services in the United Kingdom through action research involving 10 senior managers from different organisations in this sector. She indicates that she brought to the project a conviction that a focus on short-term outputs and adherence to the "financial bottom line" threatens people's ability to "work to multiple bottom lines" (1998, 41). She notes that the kinds of management and organisational practices that are being put forward in some circles as 'efficient' and 'effective' are sometimes based on the claim that private-sector management is 'good' while public sector (not-for-profit) management is 'bad', although she also remarks that, paradoxically, the worldviews that underpin this claim "are beginning to be challenged by many successful private-sector companies" (Weil 1998, 40). She states that her initiation of

critically reflexive action research (CRAR) in the case reported on, and other cases in which she has been involved, is set in a context where public sector managers are "often under considerable pressure to treat the dilemmas they face as if they are problems that can be defined and solved neatly and efficiently. At the same time, a reluctance to acknowledge dilemmas can be seen as a defensive reaction against the high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity that such a stance entails (57). Her action research agenda was therefore aimed at enabling participants (as co-researchers) to reflect upon and re-engage with their starting dilemmas.

#### 8.1 The Research Agenda: Participative Learning as a Counterpoint to Top-Down Control

In her report on the project, Weil indicates that one starting point for her involvement was her concern that introducing top-down controlling strategies as a way of reducing complexity may in fact "escalate social costs: for example, morale and recruitment fall off, and early retirement, disaffection . . . and cynicism rise. Meanwhile, the immediate gaze remains on the short-term financial bottom line (1998, 57). Weil's use of CRAR was organised by making provision for what she calls "on-site" and "off-site" CRAR as "interweaving cycles of managerial and organisational learning" (39). She explains that on-site learning involves a process where those working in an organisational context undertake inquiries "in collaboration with colleagues and others, such as service users, within [their] own organisational system" (46). Learning processes are set up in order to aid the consideration of possibilities for inquiry and action around people's currently felt dilemmas in their organisational settings.

Weil suggests that on-site cycles of reflection and action, can be supported by off-site CRAR. She explains that off-site CRAR "brings people together with others from a range of or-

organisations to engage in cycles of CRAR inquiry" (1998, 45). In this project, off-site meetings were arranged monthly over seven months for a full day at a time to explore issues related to social and organisational learning and change in the context of UK public services (from the perspective of the managers). The off-site CRAR was interwoven with the on-site CRAR. In both cases Weil notes that CRAR group work begins with people's "dilemmas of choice about responsible actions that are likely to have systemic effects" (46).

### 8.2 Working with "Tessa's Dilemma"

To explain how the co-researchers operated off-site to take forward certain starting problems and dilemmas, Weil focuses on a set of off-site encounters around a dilemma faced by a senior manager named Tessa (for the purposes of the report). Tessa was working as a development specialist directly responsible to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in a high-profile public service organisation. The CEO had recently asked her to involve middle-level managers in the strategic planning process, notwithstanding the fact that (in Tessa's interpretation) "he had already finalised the plan with the help of several colleagues in the senior management team" (Weil 1998, 47). Tessa saw her dilemma as "being asked to collude with a pseudo-participative process . . . She knew, from middle managers' reactions in previous years, that wider participation in strategic planning was needed. But since her CEO had not offered to clarify what was open to negotiation and what was not, she felt pressured to act manipulatively" (47).

Tessa's dilemma was chosen by other members of the off-site learning network as the dilemma on which they would like to work at that point. Each member was working on systemic dilemmas around which they wanted to do action research on-site and off-site. Tessa's di-

lemma was chosen for off-site co-inquiry, as it represented concerns with which they could all identify. Weil therefore tried to initiate a process she calls "broaden[ing] and deepen[ing] understanding of this dilemma" (1998, 48).

Tessa was therefore encouraged to "brief several people in the [off-site] group to attend to things that she saw as important here": "She invited one person to listen as the CEO. She invited another to attend to her metaphors and language and to 'blindnesses' and contradictions between her own espoused epistemologies of practice [her views of how she could mobilise her knowledge in practice] and what was being revealed in this situation of action . . . She asked another to attend to issues of power. Another was delegated to record key general issues throughout on the electronic white board" (48-49). From the conversations that ensued and the recordings of key issues that were located, Tessa was able to appreciate "different data sources to take away with her to guide choices about on-site CRAR that she might initiate within her own organisation" (Weil 1998:49).

In continuing the process of exploring Tessa's dilemma, Weil advised that Tessa be invited to stand with certain others in the learning network 'outside' the situation as onlookers to a conversation that was played out in the network – by a number of people taking on (what they thought to be) the roles of the CEO and colleagues. Weil suggests that the fruitfulness of this was that "making Tessa the 'silent onlooker and eavesdropper' at this point helped her to see the impact of her own choices being 'played back to her', and their impact on the CEO and her colleagues. She had assumed that her lone intervention in strategic planning would have some positive effect . . . She now could become more critically reflexive about the limitations of her own constructions" (1998, 50-51). The team now (still in role) was given the task of sharing responsibility with Tessa for devel-

oping a strategic planning process: "They spoke from a perspective of having recognised the risks of [her] marginalising her role" (1998: 51). Through this set of encounters, Tessa indicated that "her entire view of the situation had been turned upside down" (1998, 51).

Weil remarks that, despite Tessa's understanding of the disabling effects that might have been generated by her (earlier preferred) choices, and of possibilities for redefining her choices, "the desire to 'pull back' to the status quo is overwhelmingly tempting" (1998, 52). Thus, as Weil points out, it was important to "empathise and work with Tessa's ambivalence" (1998:52). It was therefore proposed that Tessa be called upon to enact a meeting with her boss and her senior colleagues. Weil suggested that two learning network members support Tessa in this process, with the aim of "stretch[ing] her repertoire of responses". One person was asked to play the role of teasing her towards alternatives and interrupting her 'stuckness'.

Another played the role of 'critical friend'. She would notice how Tessa was using insights and translating them into action and how she was not. This was done through "ongoing commentary and encouragement" (52). Through this process, Tessa also practised discussing what had hitherto been regarded as undiscussable (as she saw it). Weil comments that learning network members then began a process of reflecting on what they had learned through their participation in aiding Tessa to come to terms with her dilemmas.

They decided to put aside time to "share ways in which they intended to use CRAR type processes to interrupt ... 'stuck-nesses' within their own organisations" (1998, 54).

Tessa took insights from this off-site action-based co-inquiry into her on-site longer-term action research. She "persuaded her senior team to approach the strategic planning as a learning exercise, with each leading a slice group to dis-

cuss the strategic plan" (Weil 1998, 55). That is, each senior manager would work with middle managers on strategising as a learning exercise. Springing from this, according to Weil, the senior managers and the CEO became more willing to consider "the unintended organisational effects of their differing levels of comfort with uncertainty and emergent processes" (55). Weil argues from this that "decision making and strategic formulation/implementation [can be] approached not as static but emergent learning processes, as ongoing cycles of reflection in and on action in a complex, ever-changing system. The example indicates how CRAR can better equip managers and others to live more comfortably with discomfort, ambiguity, and uncertainty" (55).

### 8.3 Accounting for the Research

From a positivist point of view, Weil's accountability as a scientist would be judged by focusing on the way in which she used the setting of everyday actions to test hypotheses concerning relationships of causality operative in social reality. Weil's particular way of organising the action research with co-researchers can be classed as an attempt to organise a kind of experimentation *in situ* with participants who had access to various organisations and who could in principle monitor the effects of certain changes. But Weil could have offered much more clarity in her report on why she believes the processes followed in order to test hypotheses regarding participative learning were not unduly influenced by her own and others' prior beliefs about its (supposed) effectiveness.

From a critical rationalist point of view, action research can also be used to test hypotheses about change processes. But crucially, Weil would need to recognise challenges arising from colleagues in the scientific community who may wonder about the rigour of their inquiries. For instance, such colleagues might question the

way in which terms such as 'participative learning' and 'management of multiple bottom lines' are used. They seem to be used in a loose way, making it difficult to recognise what features of reality are being taken by the researchers as indicators of these terms. Because of the loose way in which terms are used and hypotheses set up around these terms, we do not know what kinds of evidence Weil and co-researchers would take as disproving their hypotheses.

From a scientific realist point of view, Weil's assumption that there are multiple realities with which people may have to engage would be seen as a sign that there are different *layers* of reality, all of which are 'real' (in the sense that they exist outside of human knowing processes). The task of researchers is to try to access these realities (including those hidden and unobservable). Insofar as Weil sees action research as a way of exploring the various layers of reality, her work can be accounted for in scientific terms. However, she would have to operate at the necessary analytic level to try to come to grips with what is needed to bring about transformation of the structures of society in which the organisations being investigated are embedded. Weil's hope that participative learning can lead to the management of multiple bottom lines might be overoptimistic and grounded more in her own values and hopes than in an effort to come to grips with the operative realities.

From an interpretive point of view, Weil and her co-researchers rightfully recognised, and made visible to themselves and to other audiences, that patterns of events in social life depend on how people define their options for action. Weil's project became a way of investigating how people can shift their patterns of response in engagement with others. Her study offers the participants themselves insights into ways of organising such shifts, as well as being potentially useful to other audiences. However, Weil may have overstepped her role as re-

searcher by being too committed to the value of participative learning to fully examine others' perceptions of its effectiveness (and workability). Had she indicated in her report how she engaged with others' views on this (and indeed how others in the learning network might have engaged with the views of others in their own organisations), the report would be improved.

From a critical theoretical point of view, Weil tried to shift what might be considered as overly 'strategic' responses to situations towards a more *communicative* orientation. Weil's efforts (with others) to create spaces for 'communication and democracy' in the organisational arenas in which they were involved can be appreciated. But, on Weil's own admission, trying to turn around the dominant forms of administration and control was no easy task. Weil hints at the difficulties involved in working communicatively within systems geared towards 'efficiency,' but she could have spelled out in more detail how she and others addressed these challenges.

From an anti-foundationalist feminist point of view, Weil's use of the research process to organise collaborative learning can be conceptualised as a way of dislodging patterns of (traditional) researcher control. Also important from this perspective is Weil's suggested way of enabling people to appreciate 'multiple realities' and to act on this. Weil's and others' stories about finding pathways through multiple realities can be helpful to wider publics, provided that stories about the research are not told as if reporting about, in this case, participative learning and its general effects. If the report offered by Weil, and the stories told by her and the other co-researchers, are given the status of *narratives*, then they can encapsulate the (feminist) value of respecting the heterogeneous ways in which people may come to terms with their worlds.

From a trusting constructivist point of view,

Weil has tried to credibly defend (account for) the research by suggesting that it offers a way – though of course not the only way – of organising research with others around issues of concern. Those judging the value of the project can decide for themselves what ‘lessons’ might be learned from this, and Weil accepts that this is the case. Her detailed documentation of learning processes and the multiple narratives she provides as part of this documentation enable readers to see how she has developed (with others) some view of the value of participative learning without seeing this view as one that excludes others’ experiences. Her statements about the potential effectiveness of such participative learning are not constructions about the ‘reality’ of its effectiveness (given the evidence to date). They are statements that might become real if people decide to act in certain ways. Because she indicates that we are embedded in the realities that we create, she leaves openings for people to define ways of creating realities in such a way as to still earn others’ trust as they proceed. From a trusting constructivist point of view, Weil’s accountability can be assessed in terms of her way of making visible, in the research process itself and in her production of narratives around it, her own way of working responsibly with a view of ‘reality’ as constructed.

### 9. Conclusion

As indicated in the three research projects discussed in this essay, there are many ways in which the accountabilities of those involved in social research may be conceptualised. I have argued that researchers who regard their accountabilities as being solely to advance knowledge see their relationship to others in society as being that of knowledge-provider. Despite suggestions they might make that whatever knowledge provisions they offer should be treated circumspectly (because these are not certain), their

realist-oriented approach makes claims to represent ‘reality’. Insofar as they define their accountabilities to others in terms of the remit to advance knowledge that tells us something about the realities studied, they largely occlude a recognition of their own involvement (with others) in the construction of their findings. I have tried to show that researchers can attempt to shift (or work past) the expectation that scientific inquiry should advance more or less certain knowledge of reality.

I have argued that it is important for social researchers and others to be at least aware of the value choices they make when they expect science, taken as a whole, to advance knowledge of independently existing realities. I propose that this is not the only way for social researchers to define their role as accountable inquirers. Taking an alternative starting position, it may be argued that there is no necessity for humans to orient themselves (for example, through scientific activity) to seek ‘the truth’. Varying stances regarding ways of defining both human knowledge and human living are choices that themselves have to be accounted for. I have provided a discussion of a variety of such stances in this chapter and indicated my preference for what I call a trusting constructivist position.

I have tried to organise my discussion of the different arguments on accountability by not denuding the rationality of positions which I see as differing from my own. But I recognise that some readers may still feel I have not engaged fairly with certain arguments. As I see it, categories are devices for positioning different arguments in relation to one another rather than devices for ‘representing’ a particular author’s views. Readers can consider whether they believe that arguments (of theirs or of others) regarding researcher accountability can become clarified by placing aspects of them under any of the categories I have discussed, and also whether my discussion of the categories, and my extrapolations of views on accountability linked to these categories, are helpful in extending their appreciation of some possible ways of under-



standing and practising accountability in social research.

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