3

The Continuum of Positionality in Action Research

Researcher positionality is important in all research. Essentially, your positionality as a researcher means asking the question, Who am I in relation to my participants and my setting? It has to do with the myriad forms of border crossing that researchers do as they embark on their studies. Action research shares all of the kinds of border crossing (e.g., class, race, gender, etc.) that other research requires (Villenas, 1996), but a central dilemma unique to action researchers is their relationship to their setting and participants. Because action researchers may be outsiders or insiders to a setting, and may be seeking collaborative relationships with participants, sorting out the implications of this unique relationship to one's study is often confusing. In fact, Thompson and Gunter (2011) point out that even the notions of insider and outsider are multilayered and fluid, and can shift at various times during a research study.

Our intent here is not to naturalize the positions of insider and outsider, but rather to help action researchers interrogate where they are on the continuum as they begin a study, while acknowledging that this positionality can contain elements of both insider and outsider or change during the research process. So while we will address all kinds of positionality, the main focus of the chapter will be on the continuum of positions researchers assume, from being an insider to being an outsider in relationship to the setting and participants in the study.

Much action research is centrally concerned with these issues of the relationship between outsiders and insiders, since clarity about them is necessary for thinking through issues of research validity or trustworthiness, as well as research ethics. From the 1940s through the 1970s, the consultancy approach to action research was dominant in many fields, and in some fields remains so

today. Within this approach, action researchers have been seen as outside change agents who either are contracted by an organization or community or have received grant funding. This research has tended to be undertaken by an outsider, and the central issue has been how to involve insiders in the research to a greater extent than is the case with traditional research or evaluation. Much of this research was—and continues to be—contract or evaluation research, and it was usually funded to solve a particular problem or evaluate a particular program. Master's theses and doctoral dissertations from this action research approach are often done in applied fields that prepare graduates to work collaboratively in areas such as international development, community psychology, social work, health promotion, and other fields.

With the growth of highly educated professionals who have acquired research skills and are enrolled in doctoral programs, action research dissertations are today often done by organizational or community insiders. These practitioner researchers see research as a way to deepen their own reflection on practice toward problem solving and professional development, as well as a way to generate knowledge of practice from the inside out. In such cases, the researcher and the practitioner may be one and the same (see Anderson et al., 2007; Coghlan & Brannick, 2001; Coghlan & Casey, 2001; Robinson & Kuan Lei, 2005). Research by Anderson and Jones (2000) on dissertations in educational leadership suggests that these practitioners—mostly principals and superintendents—were partly motivated by the convenience of studying their own site, where they had a deep level of tacit knowledge. However, more important, they wanted their research to make a contribution to their own setting and clients. In many cases, they wanted to use it to empower themselves professionally and personally, and to bring about organizational change.

In contrasting academic research with insider action research, Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1993) important book *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge* was one of the first to lay out in detail the possibilities and dilemmas of this type of insider research. The issue for many teachers was that knowledge about teaching was being generated exclusively by academic researchers, and that this knowledge was not viewed as useful to the teachers themselves. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) argued that outsider knowledge was often experienced by practitioners as a "rhetoric of conclusions," which "entered the practitioners' professional landscape through informational conduits that funneled propositional and theoretical knowledge to them with little understanding that their landscape was personal, contextual, subjective, temporal, historical, and relational among people" (p. 24). While insiders can do research without outsiders, insiders doing dissertations have a dissertation committee of outsiders they can rely on for methodological guidance. Unfortunately, faculty on dissertation committees have seldom had extensive experience with action research, and therefore may

unwittingly provide well-meaning but problematic advice based on their own outsider epistemologies. Besides a dissertation committee, most practitioner researchers also seek independent *critical friends* who can help them problematize the taken-for-granted aspects of their setting. Insider and outsider positions are at the extremes of the continuum. In the middle are studies done by collaborations among insiders and outsiders. These studies are known as participatory or collaborative research; Bartunek and Louis (1996) use the term *insider/outsider team research.*

We dedicate an entire chapter to the issue of positionality because the degree to which researchers position themselves as insiders or outsiders will determine how they frame epistemological, methodological, and ethical issues in the dissertation. As faculty who advise action research dissertations, we have looked in vain for sources that help students think through how their decisions about positionality influence the many other decisions they will make throughout the study.

There are other ways to think about positionality that are useful to this conversation. Collins (1990) uses the term *outsider within* to refer to the particular perspective on society that being black and female gives her. In Chapter 6, we discuss Lynne Mock's relationship to her African American participants. As an African American, she is racially an insider, but as a university researcher, she is also an outsider. At the end of this chapter, we will take up in more detail these other ways researchers and participants position themselves.

The continuum and implications of positionality presented in Table 3.1 are, in part, the product of a study of numerous action research studies in education that included dissertations, published articles, and conference papers (Anderson & Jones, 2000). The original goal of the study was to explore the potential of action research studies as a new source of professional knowledge in the field of education (more specifically, educational leadership). For this book, we have expanded our database beyond educational leadership and explored implications of each position for the validity of action research studies, as well as the unique ethical dilemmas that arise for each position.

While the researcher's positionality in relation to the setting is important, it is often no simple matter to define one's position. Some researchers who are outsiders to the setting have little knowledge of it, while others may have extensive—and often firsthand—knowledge of the context. For instance, some researchers studying social service agencies may have previously been social workers. Many educational action researchers studying schools may have been teachers. An outside researcher studying a particular Puerto Rican community may be Puerto Rican and may have once lived in the community.

Furthermore, participatory action researchers, who tend to be outsiders to the setting under study, report that their relationship to participants can shift throughout a study and can vary for different parts of the study. For instance,

Table 3.1   Continuum and Implications of Positionality

Insider (1) _____ (2) _____ (3) _____ (4) _____ (5) _____ (6) Outsider			
Positionality of Researcher	**Validity Criteria**	**Contributes to:**	**Traditions**
1. Insider[a] (researcher studies own self/practice)	Anderson & Herr (1999), Bullough & Pinnegar (2001), Connelly & Clandinin (1990) Heikkinen, Huttunen, & Syrjälä (2007)	Knowledge base, Improved/ critiqued practice, Self/professional transformation	Practitioner research, Autobiography, Narrative research, Self-study
2. Insider in collaboration with other insiders	Gordon (2008), Heron (1996), Saavedra (1996)	Knowledge base, Improved/ critiqued practice, Professional/ organizational transformation	Feminist consciousness raising groups, Inquiry/Study groups, Teams
3. Insider(s) in collaboration with outsider(s)	Anderson & Herr (1999), Heron (1996), Saavedra (1996)	Knowledge base, Improved/ critiqued practice, Professional/ organizational transformation	Inquiry/Study groups
4. Reciprocal collaboration (insider-outsider teams)	Anderson & Herr (1999), Bartunek & Louis (1996)	Knowledge base, Improved/ critiqued practice, Professional/ organizational transformation	Collaborative forms of participatory action research that achieve equitable power relations
5. Outsider(s) in collaboration with insider(s)	Anderson & Herr (1999), Bradbury & Reason (2001), Heron (1996)	Knowledge base, Improved/ critiqued practice, Organizational development/ transformation	Mainstream change agency: consultancies, industrial democracy, organizational learning; Radical change: community empowerment (Paulo Freire)

Insider (1) _____ (2) _____ (3) _____ (4) _____ (5) _____ (6) Outsider			
Positionality of Researcher	**Validity Criteria**	**Contributes to:**	**Traditions**
6. Outsider(s) studies insider(s)	Campbell & Stanley (1963), Lincoln & Guba (1985)	Knowledge base	University-based, academic research on action research methods or action research projects

a. A flawed and deceptive version of this is when an insider studies his or her own site but fails to position himself or herself as an insider to the setting in the dissertation (*outsider within*).

participation may be stronger at the problem-posing and data-gathering part of the study than at the write-up and dissemination part. To further complicate matters, insiders to a setting do not have direct access to the "truth" of the setting. Theirs is merely one truth among many.

In the following sections, we have attempted to make some sense of a continuum of positionalities using somewhat oversimplified categories. As we have pointed out, one's positionality doesn't fall out in neat categories and might even shift during the study. Researchers will have to figure out the nuances of how they position themselves with regard to their setting and participants. The reader will find more examples from the field of education on the insider end of the continuum, because insider practitioner research is most common in education, although it is becoming increasingly common in fields such as nursing and social work. (For insider research in hospitals, see Coghlan & Casey, 2001; for social work, Fuller & Petch, 1995; and for counseling, McLeod, 1999; Brooks-McNamara & Torres, 2007.) On the outsider end of the continuum, we provide more examples from organizational and international development, public health, and applied sociology and psychology, particularly community psychology.

Insider: Researcher Studies Own Self/Practice

If we begin on the far left of the continuum, category 1 in Table 3.1, we have dissertations in which insiders, either alone or in collaboration with other insiders, are researching their own practice or practice setting. It is useful to discuss the lone insider researcher separate from an insider group of researchers as we have done in Table 3.1. While one's practice cannot be separated from the setting within which it takes place, a focus on one's own practice versus the actions initiated within the setting is an important conceptual distinction. A focus on

one's own personal and professional self is a form of action research sometimes called *self-study* (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001) or *autoethnography* (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Hayler, 2011; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Jack Whitehead's website (www .actionresearch.net) provides an excellent overview and examples of theses and dissertations done from this vantage point. Such studies add to the literature on reflective practice and professional learning (Schon, 1983, 1987). In these cases, there is a greater emphasis on narrative, self-reflective methods.

On the other hand, practitioner researchers often want to study the outcomes of a program or actions in their own setting, much like an internal evaluation study. These studies often rely on more traditional qualitative and quantitative methods of data gathering. As we will discuss in this chapter, a common mistake in this type of research is to treat one's personal and professional self as an outside observer rather than as an insider committed to the success of the actions under study. We find it is difficult and perhaps deceptive to attempt to separate the study of one's self and practice from the study of the outcomes of actions initiated in a setting. If a researcher is studying a program that is his or her "baby," then the tendency for self-promotion may be too great to overcome. In such cases, an outsider should be brought in to do the evaluation, even if it means finding another dissertation topic. But if the insider's aim is to continue to study herself in relationship to the program she has developed or to fold the action research immediately back into the program in terms of professional or organizational development, we distinguish this from a formal evaluation done for, perhaps, an outside funding source. (For a dissertation that successfully navigated this tension, see Hyman, 2013.) Some of the worst action research studies are done by researchers who are insiders, but fail to fully acknowledge this positionality and think through its implications. We are aware of a dissertation done by a superintendent of schools who wanted to study a professional development program that he developed and implemented for the principals in the district. A major source of data was his interviews with the principals on how useful the professional development had been for them. Had the superintendent acknowledged and then thought through the methodological implications of his position of power, he probably would have offered more anonymous means of gathering data than face-to-face interviews could offer. But without this kind of acknowledgement and grappling with the power dynamics in his research design, it was difficult to ultimately convince readers that the study could be seen as trustworthy.

Our point is not that administrators cannot do action research in their own organizations, but that one's positionality has to be carefully thought through. We have seen cases in which action researchers who are studying their own settings refer to themselves as "the researcher" and use third person instead of first person pronouns. This typically is a sign that the action researcher (or his or her dissertation committee) lacks a fundamental understanding of the epistemology of the insider action researcher.

The following excerpt from Moyra Evans's (1995) dissertation illustrates the impulse to self-reflection that often leads to an action research study. At the time of the study, Evans was a deputy head (what would be called an *assistant* or *vice principal* in the U.S.) of a school in Britain.

"What are you doing?" I asked George, one of the other deputy heads, one Wednesday afternoon at about five o'clock. "Oh, this and that," he replied. He stopped doing this or that, and tried to put his mind to talking to me.

"I don't seem to have anything to do," I said, naively. I had only been there a few days. He looked at me as if he were about to launch into a diatribe about what he had to do, and then thought better of it.

"You will soon" was all he said, soothingly, and turned back to his pieces of paper.

Gradually, I became the proud receiver of pieces of paper. At first they only trickled in. I felt very important, and looked for places to file them. That seemed to be a useful task—to update the previous Deputy's filing cabinet. I thought I would just leave last year's papers there and then add my own. But it wasn't that easy. I couldn't work out why papers relating to twenty years ago were still there. I made an early decision to throw them all out and start again.

I developed a good system, I had a space for everything, and for the first three weeks or so, every letter or document was put away. The papers covered a much wider range of items than those I had received when I was a Senior Teacher elsewhere. I realized that the Head and three Deputies had copies of practically every document that was generated in the school, and that this was a good way of ensuring communications were effective. I certainly couldn't complain that I had been left out; neither could I complain that I didn't know something, because the chances were, that if I had read my paperwork, I would know.

Lessons, marking, administration, meetings, planning—all gathered pace, and eventually I was caught up in the race with everyone else. It was tremendously exciting and I felt very privileged to be at the heart of the management of the institution. I enjoyed talking about how we should go about achieving our aims and planning all of this with various groups of people in the school. I enjoyed doing the work—"getting my hands dirty" is the expression we used.

I remember my life as being on a series of interconnecting treadmills. The momentum had increased so much that I felt I was running along from one rung to the next, jumping from one wheel to another—just keeping going, not pausing to see the scenery. I had always liked running, and reckoned to be good, but eventually, I became a little disenchanted. I wanted to get off. I wanted to stop and see what was happening around me. (p. 97)

We cite the above passage from Evans's dissertation because it captures the spirit of practitioners' need to make meaning of their practice. Schon (1983) used the notion of the *reflective practitioner* to describe those practitioners who "learn to learn" about their practice and therefore become better practitioners. In a sense, these types of dissertations are insider case studies of practitioner

learning that both become a form of professional development for the researcher and provide case study data on how practitioners learn and grow in different professional contexts.

Some academics don't take dissertations very seriously as sources of knowledge because they are seen as being done by amateur researchers who are just learning their craft. However, this type of action research dissertation is more than an amateur researcher demonstrating a certain level of competence in doing research. It is an account of how one practitioner goes about learning his or her craft and what was learned in the process. Such insider accounts generate important knowledge to be shared among practitioners, just as case studies reported by academic researchers do. In fact, they begin to build a knowledge base that can inform the research community about the actions and beliefs of practitioners—a knowledge base that is otherwise unavailable.

This type of self-reflective action research is always written up in the first person. Evans's (1995) narrative has characteristics of a story, with elements of humor and irony and a narrative hook that leads the reader into wanting to read more. Practitioners tend to use narrative and story as a way to communicate professional knowledge, which makes it particularly appropriate for action research. Some action research studies adapt ethnographic and behavioral science methods, while others may use journals and diaries as major sources of data. (For a discussion of quality criteria for narratives, see Heikkinen et al., 2007.)

Insider researchers have unique dilemmas. A simple logistical dilemma is that they can't be in two places at once. Practitioners don't have the luxury of the ethnographer, who can take copious field notes, write them up, and transcribe interviews. Using the ethnographic approach places practitioners in a logistically untenable position because they can't work and record data at the same time. A few accounts, primarily in schools and classrooms, exist of how practitioners have adapted traditional methods to their own contexts (Anderson et al., 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hubbard & Power, 1999). As practitioner research continues to become more prevalent in fields such as nursing and social work, we anticipate that similar accounts will be produced for those unique contexts.

The tacit knowledge that a practitioner acquires over months and years of working in a site raises both logistical and epistemological issues. Logistically, this tacit knowledge is an advantage in that it would have to be reproduced from scratch through ethnographic observation at a new site. However, it raises epistemological problems in the sense that unexamined, tacit knowledge of a site tends to be impressionistic, full of bias, prejudice, and uninterrogated impressions and assumptions that need to be surfaced and examined. Furthermore, insiders, because they are often true believers in their particular practices, are too often tempted to put a positive spin on their data. For this reason, mechanisms for dealing with bias need to be employed. (See Chapter 4 for validity criteria.)

We will discuss these issues in more detail, but one way to deal with bias is to acknowledge one's presence in the study and build in methods of self-reflection. In the following dissertation abstract, Fecho (1995) describes how he went about doing a study in his own classroom in which he wanted to do ethnographic research while acknowledging his own presence as teacher and researcher. He frames his research as a "hybrid between the traditional dissertation study and studies carried out by teachers on their own practice" (p. 2).

> This study was a year-long investigation into the work and attitudes associated with language and language study of the teacher and students in a North Philadelphia classroom. The text describes the complex evolution of a class where language was made problematic and students were encouraged to raise and investigate questions about the roles language played in their lives. It was conducted as a form of teacher research using qualitative methods and, as such, represents a hybrid between the traditional dissertation study and studies carried out by teachers on their own practice. It argues that the study benefits from both paradigms in that it is responsive to the scope, knowledge base, and rigor of academic research while documenting the practice of the teacher from an emic, or insider, perspective—a perspective too rare in the current literature. Research methods included collecting and analyzing student work, audio field notes, class transcripts, and both individual and focus group interviews. In addition, the collected data was analyzed by diverse networks of teacher researchers at both a local and national level, thereby bringing multiple perspectives to the analysis. Focused around the following question—what does it mean for a teacher and students to take a critical stance on language—this study concerns itself with the roles which were played, the topics and issues which were raised, the ways in which knowledge was generated, and the range of student attitudes on critical language issues. (p. 2)

Although this is a study of Fecho's classroom and the interactions that occur around language use, he also owns his own role as insider, turning it to his advantage by arguing that it provides a rare emic perspective on classroom life, while also incorporating rigorous ethnographic methods and data analysis.

INSIDER IN COLLABORATION WITH OTHER INSIDERS

Insider researchers often collaborate with other insiders as a way to do research that not only might have a greater impact on the setting, but also has the potential to be more democratic. However, power relations in a setting operate even when insiders think they are being collaborative. For instance, while principals, teachers, and counselors may collaborate to do inquiry as insiders in a school located in a low-income community, they may or may not view the students or community as part of the collaboration. Unless they do, the results of their action research might benefit them at the expense of those excluded from the process.

These insider collaborations—the second category in Table 3.1—are manifested in many organizations as inquiry groups that go under different names. In business, they are often teams that engage in what is called *data-based decision making* or *quality circles*. In communities, they can be Alinsky-inspired, interfaith community organizing groups such as the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), parent organizations in schools, or consumer groups. In education, they go under names such as *teacher study groups*, *teacher inquiry groups*, *critical friends groups*, or *leadership teams*. These typically are aimed not only at using collaborative approaches to inquiry, but also reculturing organizations into professional learning communities.

These various forms of insider collaborative inquiry vary in their degree of autonomy. Some groups are fairly spontaneous and work at the margins of organizations or communities (see Miller, 1990), whereas others either evolve into or are incorporated into the governance structure (Johnson, 2002). Collaborative inquiry groups often are the result of formal institutional efforts that create site-based management teams to engage in data-driven organizational change efforts. While more autonomous groups provide more freedom and idiosyncrasy, more mainstream groups hold out more possibility of impacting the overall organizational culture. Inquiry groups can be structured to focus specifically on addressing equity issues (Johnson & Avelar LaSalle, 2010). Some argue that autonomous inquiry groups lead to greater balkanization and micropolitics (Holly, 1989); others argue that groups that are brought into the organizational mainstream may be too easily co-opted (Herr, 1999c; Maguire, 1987b; Miller, 1990). While these insider collaborations around inquiry hold great potential for both improving professional development and democratizing organizations, there is much debate about to what extent they should be mandated or voluntary.

Recently, the New York City Department of Education mandated inquiry groups in all schools. They struggled with issues of trust, logistics, and authenticity. Many viewed the inquiry groups as merely a vehicle for implementing the large ARIS database the district purchased and found the data (mostly in the form of spread sheets of student instructional data) "drove" the inquiry rather than the inquiry driving decisions about what data to gather. In other words, these insider inquiry groups were too often data driven rather than data supported. As time went on, this mandated space that had opened up for engaging in collaborative inquiry was taken over by more directive and utilitarian pursuits, such as implementing the common core standards. More research is needed on how to foster more authentic and voluntaristic spaces for collaborative inquiry in schools. (See also the social work example in Chapter 6.)

Regardless of how groups of participants interested in inquiry choose to situate themselves along the continuum of formal institutional to informal autonomous, these group efforts have several potential benefits in common: They can engage in inquiry in ways that help the group move from working as

isolated individuals toward a collaborative community; they can seek to engage their members in learning and change; they can work toward influencing organizational change; and they can offer opportunities for personal, professional, and institutional transformation.[1]

Headman (1992), a fourth-grade teacher, did a collaborative study for her dissertation with the parents of her students.

> Parents and teachers typically establish and maintain hierarchical relationships which ascribe excessive authority to the school, thus limiting the possibilities for dialogue and mutual learning. Their discussions of children's literacy often fail to acknowledge the contributions that parents can make, based on their knowledge and experiences with children at home. Neglecting parents' voices in schools, and in home and school literacy research, means the parents' critical role in supporting children's literacy development is overlooked. By investigating with parents their perspectives on children's literacy experiences in and out of school, this study seeks to understand the relationships between children's home and school literacy and to model processes by which parents and teachers develop a reciprocal dialogue. Eight parents of my fourth grade public school students joined me in a two-month co-investigation. Individually and collectively we raised questions, observed, documented, and reflected on children's uses of reading and writing in and out of school.... Through the parent teacher research process, parents raised issues about current practices in classroom grouping, integrative curriculum, assessment, and teaching and learning relationships, providing further evidence for the importance of including parents' knowledge and experience in the design of effective learning contexts for their children. (p. 7)

While most collaborative insider studies are done among organizational professionals, this is not always the case. Here a teacher collaborated with parents to engage in inquiry about her teaching. This collaboration returns us to the complexity of notions of insider and outsider. One could argue that the parents are typically viewed as outsiders by school professionals who view them as not having a legitimate role in teaching and curriculum. Here the teacher views the parents as insiders to the extent they share a common goal of educating their children, and both bring relevant—though different kinds of—knowledge to the inquiry.

Insider(s) in Collaboration With Outsider(s)

A less common position is insiders initiating collaborations with outsiders. In such cases, organizational or community members contract or invite outsiders to collaborate on research. This collaboration can also range from merely bringing someone in to consult on methodology to collaborations that involve outsiders from the point of problem definition. Collaborative or participatory

action research (PAR) in general raises unique issues with regard to how knowledge claims are justified and how power and control over the research process is distributed.

We make a distinction in this chapter between collaborations initiated by insiders and those initiated by outsiders (most typically the case for dissertations). However, as we have stressed, insiders are not monolithic. For instance, an administrator of an organization might invite an action researcher to work with an organization, but this does not mean that there is consensus among all organizational stakeholders, much less stakeholders outside the organization. In such cases, what may look like collaboration can end up being unintended collusion by professionals against the interests of their clients and communities (Anderson, 1999). These issues of power become increasingly important as funded participatory international development projects are led by researchers who are invited in by organizations in developing nations (Chambers, 1997). By now, it should be clear that achieving an equitable and democratic collaboration across differences in power, status, and resources is extremely complicated. This does not mean that we should give up engaging in collaborative research, but the more we understand its complexity, the more likely the project will create professional and organizational learning and produce new knowledge.

PAR: Reciprocal Collaboration (Insider-Outsider Teams)

If there were an ideal form of PAR, the insider-outsider team would probably fit the bill. However, because all action research is done within a particular context, there may be many situations in which this would not be the best way to design a study—at least not initially. Furthermore, achieving this kind of reciprocal collaboration often requires many years of negotiation among all stakeholders, as illustrated in Lynn Mock's dissertation study described in Chapter 6. In the case described in that chapter, it took many meetings between university faculty and the community organization to build the level of trust and understanding that allowed the research project to move forward with a high probability of success. After years of engaging in action research in organizational contexts, Whyte (1991) concluded that

> the social scientist should not seek to establish such a partnership the moment he or she enters the field. In industry or agriculture, the technical specialists will generally have little understanding of what the social scientist might contribute, and they will react against the newcomer who claims powers they lack. Those social scientists most successful in establishing such interdisciplinary partnerships view themselves initially as participant observers, showing respect for the work of practitioners and technical specialists, and seeking to learn from them. As the social scientist gains an understanding of the organizational culture and

work systems, he or she will find ways of contributing that are appreciated by the technical specialists. This will pave the way for establishing the full partnerships represented by PAR. (p. 240)

While taking time (sometimes months or years) to build trust and expertise may be the ideal for a PAR study, in practical terms, a doctoral student may not have the time for this kind of full partnership to form, unless it forms as part of a pilot study or, as in Mock's case, previous to her entering the study. In the following section, we will further address problems associated with arriving at the right level of participation among researchers and participants.

PAR: OUTSIDER(S) IN COLLABORATION WITH INSIDER(S)

The notion of insider and outsider is often a matter of degree. On the continuum of positionality in Table 3.1, positions 4, 5, and 6 illustrate the gradations from participatory insider-outsider teams all the way to nonparticipatory outsider research. For instance, in the studies described in Chapter 6, the Mock (1999) study was part of a collaboration that would be located near 4, the middle of the continuum. The Cahill (2005), McIntyre (1995), & Nygreen (2006) studies would be located closer to 5 on the continuum. This probably is the most common type of collaborative action research because it has traditionally been more common for outsiders (usually consultants) to initiate research projects than insiders.

Those projects that locate themselves at the center of the continuum of positionality in Table 3.1 are rare indeed. As our case examples in Chapter 6 suggest, insiders are often too busy to be full participants, and seldom do the incentive structures of organizations—other than universities—reward research. While the Mock (1999) collaborative study described in Chapter 6 came perhaps as close as is possible to creating an insider-outsider team (Bartunek & Louis, 1996), even these researchers acknowledged the difficulty of negotiating equal levels of commitment to the project (Kelly et al., 2004).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) point out that there is some justifiable fear that collaborations between university researchers and practitioners or communities can be co-opted by the university researchers, who have greater incentives and interest in publication. Whyte's (1991) insight, mentioned previously, about the defensiveness of organizational insiders goes a long way in explaining why they are often reluctant to invite outsiders into their research projects. For instance, the Teachers-as-Researchers Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association initially discouraged academics from joining so they could have conversations that were not monopolized by university scholars.

The issue of what each stakeholder wants out of the research needs to be negotiated carefully if reciprocity is to be achieved. The attitude of PAR can be illustrated by a model reported by Tolley and Bentley (1996), which is adapted by MYRADA, a nongovernmental organization involved in rural development in India, from the four squares of self-knowledge published in Luft (1963; see Table 3.2). When outsiders enter a collaborative research study with the mindset of the third quadrant of this diagram, they frame themselves as outside experts rather than collaborative researchers. This often reinforces a tendency by insiders to place themselves in quadrant II, undervaluing their own professional or vernacular knowledge (McLaughlin, 1996). The goal of collaborative research is to reduce the tendencies of quadrants II and III and to expand quadrant I.

Table 3.2   The Four Squares of Knowledge

I We know They know	II We don't know They know
III We know They don't know	IV We don't know They don't know

Issues of reciprocity for PAR and collaborative research are very complex. Cornwall (1996) has adapted a continuum of purposes for PAR that is displayed in Table 3.3. She provides a useful list of the varying degrees of participation/collaboration that take place in PAR. Her use of pronouns is helpful in thinking through to what extent outsiders are doing research *on*, *for*, or *with* insiders, or whether the research is done largely *by* insiders.

For excellent discussions of reflexivity and the external researcher in PAR, see Dickson (1997), Dickson and Green (2001), and Maguire (1987b). Bartunek and Louis (1996) provide a more extended discussion of when insider-outsider teams are appropriate and what makes them successful.

Often it is difficult to identify a researcher's position, and thus the issue of whether one is actually doing action research may be called into question. The following dissertation abstract provides an example in which the researcher's position is ambiguous. She is a facilitator or coach of several teacher research groups, works for the school district, but is an outsider to the teachers' professional settings. Her working hypothesis is that teacher research groups, if left on their own, tend to reproduce current practices rather than challenge them. She highlights the importance of the facilitator, but her positionality as a member of the district hierarchy implies a particular agenda.

The purpose of this research study is to examine my four-year role as a facilitator of twelve teacher research groups throughout British Columbia. I examine facilitated teacher research groups as one pathway to engendering educational reform. My thesis is that, without the external voice of the facilitator, contexts for pedagogical dialogue have the possibility of becoming nothing more than a retelling of incidents that occur consistently in the dailiness of teaching. Without the external facilitator, teacher research groups may become rooted in process at the expense of substance. The rigorous conversations and the rethinking of practice may be in jeopardy of being replaced by sessions in which teachers are emotionally and socially supported, yet changes in practice are not viewed as vital. This research study focuses on problematic aspects, tensions, and perplexing questions that emerged in my practice as a facilitator for teacher research groups. These dilemmas included grappling with the colleague/expert dichotomy, "contrived" collegiality, unexamined practitioner constructions of knowledge, and prodding practitioners to move beyond the seductive peril of retelling their own stories to take action towards rethinking and subsequently changing their own practice. Teachers viewed my role as facilitator as important because it contributed an external perspective which focused practitioners on what made a difference to student learning. (Dockendorf, 1995, p. 3)

Table 3.3 Participatory Methods: Means to What End?

Mode of Participation	Involvement of Local People	Relationship of Research and Action to Local People
Co-option	Token; representatives are chosen, but no real input or power	on
Compliance	Tasks are assigned, with incentives; outsiders decide agenda	for
Consultation	Local opinions asked, outsiders analyze and decide on a course of action	for/with
Cooperation	Local people work together with outsiders to determine priorities; responsibility remains with outsiders for directing the process	with
Colearning	Local people and outsiders share their knowledge to create new understanding and work together to form action plans, with outsider facilitation	with/by
Collective action	Local people set their own agenda and mobilize to carry it out in the absence of outside initiators and facilitators	by

There is some ambiguity here as to what kind of study this is. Is it a self-study, in which the researcher is studying her own practice as a facilitator, using journaling and field notes? Is it a study of the teachers and their ability to problematize their practice without the help of an outside facilitator? If so, how would authentic teacher data be gathered given the researcher's position in the organizational hierarchy? How does the researcher problematize her own positionality and her thesis about teachers' need for outside facilitation? These are the kinds of sticky positionality issues most action researchers doing dissertations have to resolve in order to carry out a valid and ethical action research study.

This example illustrates that positionality occurs not only in terms of inside/outside, but also in terms of one's position in the organizational or social hierarchy, and one's position of power vis-à-vis other stakeholders inside and outside the setting. As we will discuss below, all of these nuances must be taken into account in an action research dissertation.

Outsider(s) Studies Insider(s)

This category may seem irrelevant to action research because it describes a traditional outsider position taken by quantitative and qualitative researchers. However, this end of the continuum does contain some gradations of insider-outsider collaborations and some interesting debates about whether action research is really that different from traditional research. In this section we will discuss (a) how action research is different from what social scientists call *applied research*; (b) collaborative research among outsiders; (c) research done by outsiders who study action research projects; and (d) scholarly work on action research as a methodology (its history, epistemology, etc.).

There is some debate about whether action research is a separate epistemology or merely a type of applied social science research. Spjelkavik (1999) states,

> The difference between the applied research model and the action research model is that participation with the actors in the field is an important part of action research. . . . Although the applied research model is very general, it is no different epistemologically from an action research model. Action research is simply one of several possible ways to conduct applied research. . . . Thus, action research is a method that can be fruitfully combined with other methods (questionnaires, interviews, observations, whatever), and in this respect it does not require specific epistemological commitments. (p. 126)

He sees the participatory aspect of action research as merely supplementing the applied model. Thus, an action research study on this end of the continuum is viewed as applied research in which the outsider may engage more closely with the study's participants. This level of engagement, according to

Spjelkavik, can vary during the life of the study. In his study of Norwegian fish farms, he began as an outsider doing applied research aimed at generating knowledge about rural development and survival strategies in marginal or remote areas. The study evolved into PAR as the questions shifted and as relationships with informants deepened. Thus, it is not uncommon for qualitative or ethnographic studies to start out as traditional outsider research, but over time evolve into more participatory action research.

Ethnographers have traditionally lived in their informants' communities and have called what they do *participant observation.* They often develop close relationships with their *key informants.* In fact, the ability to participate effectively in community life is often a sign that the ethnographer has learned the culture. Nevertheless, few ethnographers would call what they do PAR. Thus, the notion of outsider is complex and nuanced. In fact, just as insiders collaborate with other insiders to do action research projects, outsiders sometimes collaborate with other outsiders to form collaborative research teams. They are not necessarily doing action research, but they are doing research collaboratively. When doing any kind of applied research with participants, it is sometimes difficult to predict how a study will evolve in terms of its action orientation or the extent to which participants are included in deliberations about questions, methods, data gathering, findings, and dissemination of the research.

Because action research has gained popularity in recent years, there are a large number of doctoral students who have studied action research projects but are not using action research to do so. Most of these are qualitative or mixed methods studies of teacher research teams in schools or international development projects. Although these are not action research dissertations and thus not the focus of this book, it is important to emphasize that action research projects can be documented by insiders, outsiders, or PAR teams.

For instance, O'Donnell-Allen (1999) did a study for her dissertation of a teacher research group, but positioned herself as an outsider. She makes no pretense of doing collaborative research of any kind. Her goal was to observe the group and gather examples of teacher discourse. It is an example of a study *of* teacher research rather than a study *with* teacher researchers.

Besides outsider research *on* action research projects, there is also scholarship on action research methods and epistemology. These dissertations use a combination of historical, philosophical, or sociological methods. Noffke (1990), who has published extensively on action research since her dissertation, did a conceptual analysis of action research, asking the following questions central to understanding and evaluating action research:

> 1) Under what conditions does it emerge as a competing form of research? 2) How do forms and intentions of action research vary? And 3) What forms of action research offer a possibility for educational research that is responsive to teachers' working conditions, to theory, and to the furtherance of social justice? (p. 4)

Using primarily historical methods and feminist theory, she found—among other findings—contradictions in action research between democratic and social engineering intentions and methods.

Zuniga-Urrutia (1992), who herself did action research in Chile in the 1970s, interviewed 31 action researchers, not "to define what 'true' or 'real' action research was, but to construct a conceptual framework to facilitate dialogue about issues and differences in action research practice" (p. 2). Like Noffke (1990), she found that views of action researchers varied from

> a "restricted" view which is micro-based and emphasizes social efficiency and traditional research; a "broad" view which is macro-oriented and emphasizes empowerment and social action; and a mixed view which attempts to integrate aspects of each of these approaches. (p. 3)

We have further discussed these views of action research in Chapter 2, drawing on what Habermas (1971) called the *knowledge interests* behind different types of action research.

MULTIPLE POSITIONALITIES

In this chapter, we have attempted to help action researchers clarify their often-complex relationships to the setting that is being studied. There are other ways, however, to think about researcher positionality. The list below provides multiple ways of thinking about one's position within an action research project and some citations of work that can help sort these issues out.

1. Insider/outsider positionality vis-à-vis the setting under study (Anderson & Herr, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993)

2. Hierarchical position or level of informal power within the organization/community (Anderson & Jones, 2000; Israel et al., 2003)

3. Position vis-à-vis dominant groups in society—class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability/disability, religion, and so forth (Anzaldua, 1987; Bell, 2001; Collins, 1990)

4. Position within colonial relations within and between nation states (Chambers, 1997; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Villenas, 1996; Willinsky, 2000)

The complexity of the notion of inside/outside is captured by Collins's (1990) discussion of being an "outsider-within." She suggests that one's location in an organization or community makes for varying vantage points and differing lenses of "reality." Some people are outsiders-within, residing in the margins

and observing "the contradictions between the dominant group's actions and ideologies" (p. 11). Collins maintains that outsiders-within offer a specialized, subjugated knowledge, a "peculiar marginality," that provides a unique standpoint on self and society. For example, women in a male-dominated organization may become expert observers of the male culture as they navigate their day-to-day interactions with colleagues. The knowledge they possess in this case is not unlike that of Collins's example of black slaves who have "special knowledge" of the white household because their survival is dependent on knowing the culture of whites. The dominant group is under no equivalent obligation. As Foucault (1980) points out, subjugated knowledge is offered by those who are sufficiently outside the mainstream of an organization or entity, perhaps those located down low on the institutional hierarchy. This specialized knowledge can foster organizational learning or be seen as a threat to the maintenance of the culture of an institution.

But each of us as researchers occupies multiple positions that intersect and may bring us into conflicting allegiances or alliances within our research sites. We may occupy positions where we are included as insiders while simultaneously, in some dimensions, we identify as outsiders. In the latter case, these dimensions often encompass one's race, social class, gender, or sexual orientation in relationship to the site being studied. These dimensions extend into the worldview that one brings to the institution, both in terms of political or ideological beliefs as well as cultural assumptions. Each of these dimensions enters into the construction of the reality we capture in our research. We suggest that our obligation as researchers is to interrogate our multiple positionalities in relationship to the question under study. Our sense is that, in making explicit the tensions we experience as researchers in our varying roles and statuses, we have the possibility of crafting uniquely complex understandings of the research question. In addition, we hope to avoid the blind spots that come with unexamined beliefs.

Tammy Ann Schwartz's (2002) dissertation research exemplifies the complexities of positionality. Schwartz was a doctoral student at the University of Cincinnati who did a PAR project with 11 urban Appalachian girls to explore their writing practices.

> After dialoguing about writing and related issues, the girls conducted their investigation by interviewing their sisters, mothers and female friends and cousins. Themes of place, identity, class and writing emerged from subsequent analysis and dialogues. These dialogues, in turn, led to action as the girls began to confront class-specific stereotypes connected to place. (p. 2)

On the surface, Schwartz appears to be an outsider convening group dialogues with these girls in a classic PAR model. Her adult status and educational level also make her an outsider to the girls. However, Schwartz is also

an insider in terms of her working-class origins, which matches that of the girls, but, more important, it turns out she also grew up in a neighborhood adjacent to the one in which these girls live.

> What follows is a story of lives and research. For me, it is a story of traveling away from the community, traveling back, traveling between knowing and not knowing, between insider and outsider. For the girls, it is a story of traveling between knowing and conscientization and action, and between living and revising neighborhood narratives about what it means to be a girl in this place at this time. For all of us together, it is a story of questioning our selves, our neighborhood, our identities, our worlds. (p. 12)

We share her introductory narrative below in part as an example of how researchers can narrate themselves into their dissertations, but also to demonstrate the tensions that arise when one shares certain positionalities with one's participants.

> I am home again, indeed, and it is this research that brings me home. It brings me back to my days as a young urban Appalachian girl growing up in a "bad" neighborhood full of "hillbillies" and "white trash." Willingly, I assumed the shame so often associated with my neighborhood, a shame outsiders expected me to claim. "Oh, you are from City Hill?" they would say with disdain. I also heard what they didn't say. "You are no good if you are from that neighborhood, that place." "Well, they must be right," I thought. Of course, they were right. After all, they were better dressed than me, they didn't use no double negatives, they had their own washers, and they didn't have to ride the bus—they owned cars. Different, I was . . . from them.
>
> Who I was, according to so many "others," was associated with where I lived, City Hill. Trash on the streets, crowded Laundromats, corner convenience stores good for pops, bags of chips, and rolls of toilet paper when the big grocery store five blocks up the Avenue felt too far away. Section-eight housing, food stamps, Mom's welfare check, roaches in the kitchen, no child support for my mother, trips to the local Goodwill for "new" sweaters, and lots of love, hard work and a stubbornness to be somebody. I wanted out. Out was the only way to claim an identity as someone—at least as someone who mattered in ways that gave one access to power. In my adolescent eyes, getting an education could get me out. There were problems with this "education-gettin'," though. Education-gettin' meant I might not talk like my family, I might move away and become part of a foreign and scary world. Sometimes, accepting my "white trashness" was simple and comforting. I knew the expectations.
>
> Now, more than twenty years and lots of education-gettin' later, it is ironic that what I used to escape, education that is, is what brings me back to the place I longed to flee, the place that filled me with shame to call home—City Hill. I am home again, indeed, and it is haunting.
>
> The research presented in this dissertation takes me back to my youth by taking me back to a neighborhood similar and adjacent to the one in which I grew up. It also takes me back to my adolescent self. Because of this work I am

reminded of struggles I encountered growing up, struggles that I can only now name as ones related to my class—poor, my race—white, my gender—female, and my ethnicity—Appalachian, and the strange and mysterious ways in which all of these identities intersected with place—my neighborhood. (pp. 6–7)

Rivera (1999) did a similar PAR study with six Puerto Rican and Dominican young women. She studied their strategies of resistance for self-determination and collective determination within various relationships and contexts, including their schools, neighborhoods, and homes. She found that forms of resistance varied by setting and were often simultaneously oppressive and liberating. She explored resistance patterns by engaging with the young women in three participatory projects over two years: a community video project, an arts-centered project on Latinas' lives, and an educational workshop series. Rivera found that participatory methods were instrumental in developing relationships with the women and maintaining the integrity of the study.

An Appalachian woman studying Appalachian girls or a Latina woman studying Latina young women provides a certain insider status and deep tacit knowledge about the participants' ethnic communities and gendered perspectives. There is also an added sense of self-discovery and social advocacy for the researchers. However, being an insider in any sense also brings a subtle tendency to take some aspects of the setting for granted and a need to make the apparently familiar seem strange.

THE OUTSIDER-WITHIN STANCE AS A FLAWED APPROACH TO ACTION RESEARCH

While Collins (1990) and others have discussed the special vantage point that being a marginalized member of society—an outsider-within—provides, there is another way that action researchers—particularly practitioners—use an outsider-within approach that is misleading and tends to skew the research process. Too often, when insiders to an organization or community do dissertation research, the researcher and the dissertation committee members treat it as outsider research. This may be because few dissertation committees are trained to deal with the complex issues of research positionality, or they may feel the study will appear more legitimate if presented as qualitative research instead of action research. Often, they simply draw on the validity criteria for more traditional forms of research and ignore the insider status of the researcher. In such cases, insiders end up taking an outsider-within stance in which they frame the study inappropriately, using outsider validity criteria (e.g., prolonged engagement with the field) that fails to address the unique dilemmas of practitioners studying their own sites or participatory action research projects.

This most often occurs when members higher up in the organizational hierarchy engage in action research and when neither the doctoral student nor the dissertation committee has familiarized themselves with the tenets of action research. We believe that this outsider-within stance toward practitioner research causes epistemological and methodological problems, since validity criteria—particularly for qualitative research—was designed with nonparticipatory outsiders in mind. The dilemma of the insider is the opposite of that of the outsider:

> Academics (outsiders) want to understand what it is like to be an insider without "going native" and losing the outsider's perspective. Practitioners (insiders) already know what it is like to be an insider, but because they are "native" to the setting, they must work to see the taken-for-granted aspects of their practice from an outsider's perspective. (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 27)

The outsider-within position also ignores the potential of studying the researcher/practitioner's ongoing actions and shifting perceptions as an actor within the setting as part of the research. Instead, following the norms of outsider research, one's actions within the setting are either not acknowledged or seen as a problem of reactivity or contamination of the setting. Such a position is part of a research tradition that sees the sole purpose of the research as generating valid knowledge as a contribution to a knowledge base in a particular field. Anderson and Jones (2000), in their study of practitioner research dissertations, found that "although personal, professional, or organization/social transformation might be a byproduct of insiders doing 'outsider within' research, it was usually reported—if at all—as an afterthought in the dissertations" (p. 440).

To downplay or fail to acknowledge one's insider or participatory status is deceptive and allows the researcher to avoid the kind of intense self-reflection that is the hallmark of good practitioner research. Such deceptive studies are often done for the sake of convenience or to use an evaluation of a local program as a dissertation study. Anderson and Jones (2000) found that when researchers authentically positioned themselves as insiders doing action research or self-studies, they focused more on individual, organizational, and social transformations that resulted through actions taken within the setting. These authentic studies were more likely to engage in the traditional action research spiral of iterative cycles of plan-act-observe-reflect (Lewin, 1948). The increased understandings of practice and the practice setting that result from these studies represent the "findings" of this type of self-reflective research.

Conclusion

Our purpose in this chapter is not to recommend any particular positionality as an ideal. Although it is true that position 4 on the continuum in Table 3.1 (the insider-outsider team) represents the most potentially democratic approach,

we believe that knowledge production from all positions is valid as long as one is honest and reflective about the limitations of one's multiple positionalities and takes them into account methodologically. All dissertations have a limitations section because all research methods have limitations. Unless researchers are honest about these limitations, they will end up making claims not substantiated by the evidence.

As we have argued, self-reflection has important consequences for the study's trustworthiness and on the ethics of the research. In the following chapter, we will discuss in more detail how positionality determines how one thinks about the criteria for quality or trustworthiness of the study. Insiders, outsiders, and insider-outsider teams all have different dilemmas to resolve in designing and carrying out an action research project. For students doing action research dissertations, it is crucial to think these issues through as much as is possible prior to beginning the study, and to make them explicit in the dissertation proposal.

NOTE

1. See Anderson and Grinberg (1998) and Barker (1993) for a poststructuralist discussion of how such groups can exercise what Barker calls concertive control, resulting in a more subtle, but effective, form of control.