

## Action Evaluation and Project Participants:

### Integrating Personal Development into Project Evaluation

By Ian Darling

The field of conflict resolution is faced with a challenge--to find the most effective means for practitioners and participants to articulate criteria for success and evaluate conflict resolution interventions and projects. Traditionally, the field has reported success anecdotally, rather than based on systematic assessment. This has negatively impacted reporting results of conflict resolution interventions, and hinders the development and promotion of the field because success is not clearly defined, and evaluation methods are highly subjective (Rothman, 1997a, 2). Action Evaluation was developed by Jay Rothman in order to answer some of these questions. Action Evaluation (AE) was designed to provide a systematic, user friendly and replicable research process to improve project evaluation in conflict resolution (Rothman, 1997a). The goal was to create a method to assist practitioners improve conflict resolution practice through effective evaluation.

Action Evaluation, in addition to being a new form of evaluation, attempts to provide users with a systematic and replicable research methodology that will offer an alternative to anecdotal accounts of success, and may also help to improve conflict resolution projects in practice (Rothman, 1997a, 3). Action Evaluation actively involves project participants in an interactive process to develop the goals for a project. It uses an Internet-based questionnaire to gather and organize analysis of participants' input. The questionnaire asks: *what* the participants' goals are; *why* they are important; and *how* the program will achieve these goals. Participants enter their responses into the web-based questionnaire. They are e-mailed a copy of their responses (this is done to give participants ownership of their goals, and promote personal reflection). An Action Evaluator supports the participants throughout the project, facilitates the analytical process, and assists participants in elaborating their personal goals for the project. The personal goals are used to create goals for stakeholder groups through a process of identifying shared, unique and contrasting goals. The stakeholder groups then negotiate the content of the shared goals for the group. Project-wide goals are created from those of the stakeholder groups, using the same process. The process of developing project-wide goals makes each shared, unique and contrasting goal explicit. Participants become aware of both the areas of commonality, and difference. The Action Evaluation process provides project organizers with a baseline, from which subsequent evaluation can be based. It can also be used to track how goals evolve over the course of the project. The AE process is repeated at least twice more throughout the project – once at the mid-point to create formative goals, and again at the end to complete summative evaluation. This repeated process of goal development allows goals to develop with the project, and evaluators and participants to track how they evolve throughout the duration of the project.

This paper explores the Action Evaluation method in terms of its influence on the individual participants in the project. Action Evaluation was developed as a result of the need to evaluate success in conflict resolution, and is heavily influenced by the Action Science school of Action Research. AE is a practitioner-driven evaluation process because the goals and criteria for success are developed and refined by project participants. AE can be integrated into the over-all project, incorporating the skills and goals that are generated in the evaluation into the project. AE was developed to support conflict resolution projects and assist program development by using the baseline and formative stages to articulate project goals. As a result, the role of participants is central to the AE process. AE provides the means for participants to use reflective practice and reflexive analysis of goals and motivations to track their personal development throughout the project. This places AE in a position where the project participants can be involved in a process of change and growth in their professional and personal lives, while involved in the larger project-based context.

This paper traces the roots of AE through Action Research and conflict resolution. It explores AE as a form of Action

Research, and its development in terms of influences from Action Science, and conflict resolution. The paper then turns to an analysis of reflection-in-action and reflexive practice, which are key elements in the personal aspect of AE. It the differences between personal Action Research and Project-based Action Research, and concludes with an assessment of the role of the Action Evaluator in creating a bridge between the two types of AR, and a discussion of the implications of this paper for project planners and program evaluators.

## Action Research

As mentioned above, Action Evaluation has a strong connection to Action Research. At this time it is worthwhile to turn some attention to the intellectual precedents that influenced the development of Action Evaluation. The first area to explore is Action Research, including Participatory Action Research and Action Science. The term Action Research (AR) describes a family of systematic research methods which include the following steps: data gathering, feedback, and a cycle of planning, action, observation and reflection, with the goal of producing knowledge and improving practice (Brown et al, 1988). Kurt Lewin is generally recognized as the father of Action Research. For Lewin, the goal of research was to test ideas about change in a social system (Ketterer, et al. 1980, 3). AR has been defined as:

a collaborative self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own... practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988).

Lewin died before he could articulate a unified model of Action Research. Subsequent to his death, researchers deciphered the generic characteristics of Action Research. These characteristics have been defined as:

- 1 Problem-focused research: with the goal of developing and testing theory, and solving practical problems;
- 2 Collaboration: practitioners, rather than researchers generally assume responsibility for solving problems;
- 3 Development of Science and Practical Knowledge: the goal is to solve practical problems and develop new knowledge;
- 4 Research Utilization: project must result in actual use and dissemination of research products (Adapted from Ketterer, et al. 1980);
- 5 Research goes through four phases: planning, activity, observing and reflecting. The reflection process is focused on the research results, and the context in which the research was conducted.

AR methodology is consistent although there are different philosophical justifications for the researcher's approach to a problem. These approaches differ according to the school of AR with which the practitioner is associated.

The term Action Research describes the characteristics of several different types of research. Action Science (AS), and Participatory Action Research (PAR), are two examples of research that fall under the Action umbrella. PAR involves practitioners as both subjects and core searchers. It is based on the proposition that casual inferences about behavior are more likely to be valid and enactable when the people in question participate in building and testing them (Argyris and Schon, 1991, 86). PAR was designed to give voice to individuals and groups that were traditionally excluded from decision-making processes (Foote Whyte, 1991, 1). Action Science shares the same strategy, but places greater emphasis on the spontaneous, underlying assumptions, values and strategies that participants bring to practice and research (Argyris and Schon, 1991, 86). AS places a stronger emphasis on interpersonal relations and processes that affect individual decision-making, and on conducting replicable research (Foote Whyte 1991, 97). This necessitates that the intervention team in an AS project gain more control of the intervention and research process than in PAR in order to ensure that the process can be replicated. By comparison, PAR focuses more heavily on social structures and processes.

Action Science is a bridge over the chasm between *action* and *research*. It is an inquiry into how human beings design and implement action in relation to one another (Argyris 1985). Argyris delineates the key features of AS as

containing:

- 1 Empirically disconfirmable propositions organized into theory;
- 2 Knowledge that human beings can implement in an action context;
- 3 Alternatives to the status quo that illuminate what exists, and informs fundamental change in light of the values freely chosen by social actors;
- 4 AS intends to enact communities of inquiry in communities of social practice;
- 5 AS is directed toward producing knowledge in service of action, rather than knowledge for its own sake;
- 6 AS is characterized by interpretation of empirical, interpretive, and normative claims;
- 7 AS focuses on the meaning and logic of actions more than regularities among contingent events;
- 8 Testing of knowledge claims in AS is guided by norms of public testing. These norms are used to structure and refine practice;
- 9 In AS, the context of discovery and justification cannot be sharply distinguished;
10. AS intends to create alternatives to the status quo and promote learning at the level of norms and values (which is based on analysis of context of the research, not just content) (Adapted from Argyris, 1985, 4, 78-79).

These characteristics place AS between normative scientific inquiry, with its relation to practical knowledge, and AR with the goal of social change. Action Science attempts to create valid scientific theory, and strengthen the connection between improvement of practice and the relationship between social science and the community.

Action Science offers a practice-based alternative to the traditional research paradigm of the scientific method. Rather than being descriptive, Action Science works with the community to create conditions in which members can engage in public reflection on substantive matters of concern to the community, and on the rules and norms of the inquiry (Argyris, 1985, 34). The normative aspect of AS is similar to traditional research methods, however, it is centrally concerned with research influencing practice and seeking knowledge that will serve action (Argyris, 1985, 35-6). We will see below how the theory and practice of Action Research have influenced AE in subsequent sections.

### **Conflict Resolution and Action Research**

Another influence on the development of Action Evaluation was the professional environment in which it was designed to function--the field of conflict resolution. Conflict resolution is highly interactive, where the interests of individuals often influence the direction of project-based interventions. Rothman (1997b, 4) notes that AE fits well with an interactive approach, where third parties help educate of the disputants, assisting them in studying their own situations and the nature of the conflict as they seek to resolve it. Conflict resolution and the ADR movement have been directed toward providing disputing parties with fora where they could control both process and substantive elements of dispute resolution. In these terms, conflict resolution can be deemed to be very similar to Action Research--the process is different, but many of the underlying values are similar.

Conflict resolution in practice is a process rather than a single intervention. Fisher (1996, 8) calls it a "gradual, complex process of escalation and recognition". Kelman's (1972, 168) model of conflict resolution was influenced by a research program on social influence and commitment to social systems. Fisher (1996, 59) noted that Kelman "sees interactive

problem-solving as a program of Action Research that integrates efforts at conflict resolution with opportunities to observe and learn about conflict in general." Action Research is an essential component of Interactive Conflict Resolution, as researcher-practitioners seek to develop the process by linking theory development with improvement of conflict resolution practice (Fisher, 1996).

Action Research in Conflict resolution is different from many of the mainstream applications of AR because it is more consistent with the work on initiating change in social systems. The influence of AR on conflict resolution can be felt in different theories and methods designed to help the parties increase their level of understanding of the conflict and themselves. There is also a direct link between Lewin and modern conflict theory. Morton Deutsch was a graduate student under Lewin in the 1940s. Deutsch extended Lewin's ideas on social interdependence to create a theory of cooperation and competition (Johnson and Johnson, 1995, 208). Deutsch continued to study conflict resolution, and is credited with supervising many of today's prominent academics in the conflict resolution field (Bunker and Rubin, 1995, xxiii). Despite this connection, the similarity between conflict resolution and Action Research cannot be entirely credited to Deutsch. It is apparent from the emphasis Kelman placed on AR, Deutsch's legacy and Fisher's (1996) description of Interactive Conflict Resolution, that there has been a convergent evolution toward a participant oriented methodology that encouraged reflection and self-discovery during the conflict resolution process.

Action Evaluation continues the link between AR and Conflict Resolution. It maintains a focus on participants and the research process. More importantly, it places participants at the core of the evaluation process, just as they should be at the centre of any resolution to the conflict in question. This relationship is explored in the following section.

### **Action Evaluation and Action Research**

Action Research has influenced the development of AE. It has provided the theoretical basis for the connection between theory and practice, and inclusion of project participants as key members in the research process. There are strong connections between Action Evaluation and Action Research. In analyzing AE in practice, it is impossible to eliminate the connection between AE and the conflict resolution process with which it is associated. Both evaluation and conflict resolution lend themselves toward incorporation of Action Research as a working process for interveners. Based on the similarities between conflict resolution and AR, and the reflective nature of the AE process, it is clear that Action Evaluation is a form of Action Research. In a previous paper (Darling, 1998), I explored AE and the intellectual precedents that influenced the development of the process. Through personal communication, and in reading Rothman's descriptions of AE, it is clear that AE was created as a form of Action Research. Rothman's conception of AE was influenced by both AS and PAR. Descriptions of PAR indicate that the research includes a strong element of input from participants as practitioners in process design, and conducting the research. I found that Rothman's use of a pre-determined system conflicts with the goals of a practitioner defined process. AE is participatory because all parties in the intervention are involved in delineating personal and project goals, and establishing the criteria for success; however, the process is ultimately controlled by the Action Evaluator. If the parties in the project are able to internalize the process, it may eventually take on the practitioner-driven characteristics of PAR. It would take a significant amount of work within the confines of the AE structure for the participants to be able to internalize the AE process. Another characteristic of PAR is that participants define both the problem, and the structure for the research intervention. In AE the problem and the process have been determined, as have the roles of the participants. While these criticisms do not preclude AE from being deemed AR, it suggests that Rothman's connections between AE and PAR are inappropriate. It appears that Rothman has connected PAR to AE because it falls into a unique category where project participants are able to participate and embark on their own reflective journey throughout the duration of the project-based research. The implications of this connection are discussed below.

The Action Evaluation process has a great deal to offer project evaluations, and it is an important tool for participants to prioritize and understand their goals. As mentioned above, AE attempts to adopt a PAR approach and espouses the goal of including participants in all levels of the project, however it falls short of this goal because of the need to ensure

the predetermined AE process can be replicated. AE is closely connected to the ideas of Action Science as its attempts to improve the rigor of evaluations in conflict resolution are based on the work of Argyris (1985). The strength of AE is that it is able to offer a systematized form of evaluation that promotes the characteristics of Action Research and reflection. Rothman's orientation is closer to Action Science because he has stressed the rigor of AE and seeks to promote replicability of the process. Another indication that AE is closely associated with AS, relates to the purpose of the research. Argyris places a great deal of importance on publishing the results of Action-oriented research (Argyris, 1985). By comparison, publishing of results is not as essential in PAR projects because it is more interested in implementation of results that will bring about change, and influence practice in the environment being studied. Rothman has stated that his goal in creating AE was to design a system that could be used to increase the effectiveness of conflict resolution and evaluation in general. Inherent in this desire is the need to also publish the results and promulgate the system's efficacy. The primary purpose of AE is to facilitate the conflict process, but there is also the essential component of producing knowledge relating to conflict resolution and evaluation.

AE is a form of Action Research with a strong emphasis on process control with the Action Evaluator working to encourage reflection within the Action Evaluation model. More important than the intellectual precedents, the AE process encourages participants to develop specific and well-reasoned goals. AE facilitates goal setting and prepares participants for goals to interactively change and evolve throughout the project. AE offers participants a way to reflect on their goals as they change and develop throughout the process, it also provides participants with a means of reflexively (Rothman, 1997b) analyzing their participation in terms of self, other, and context. The next section features a more complete explanation of this dynamic.

### **Reflection-in-Action and Reflexive Practice**

We now turn our attention from the intellectual precedents at the project level, to the participants in the evaluation. They are placed in an interesting position, as they are responsible for articulating their personal goals, which will be used to evaluate the project. They are able to benefit from this position as they can follow their goals' development and evolution throughout the project. There are two concepts which describe the relevant processes; reflection-in-action, and reflexive practice. The terms reflection-in-action, and the reflective practitioner were first posited by Donald Schon in *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) where he described how reflection-in-action could be used by professionals as an analytical tool to improve practice. Schon noted that it is possible to describe the tacit knowledge implicit in our actions through a process of observation and reflection (Schon, 1987, 26). Schon's work influenced Rothman's concept of Reflexive Practice in conflict resolution.

Reflexivity was developed during Rothman's work in conflict resolution. Conflict resolution in practice is based on interventions, which require a high degree of interaction between disputants. Reflexivity benefits both practitioners, and participants in an intervention, as it can improve communication processes, and content of the messages. There are two separate forms of reflex. The first a visceral response, similar to a reflex test in a doctor's office. This creates a single loop feedback between action and reaction (Rothman, 1997b, 35). The positive form of reflexivity takes on the exact opposite meaning. This form of reflex will be referred to for the duration of this paper. Being reflexive involves delaying instinctive and unexamined reactions to external stimulus, and analyzing them before responding (Rothman, 1997b, 36). If participants are able to reflexively examine the situation, they can *pro-actively* analyze their assumptions, and relationships with others, rather than just responding reactively. This enables participants to mitigate destructive reactions in the context of dialogue with other parties and can redirect them from destructive interaction, to more productive communication.

Reflexivity is an interactive process that takes into consideration the relationship between self and other, and expands the frame to include an examination of underlying assumptions and priorities that shape interaction. Being reflexive requires that parties examine their priorities before they react. If project participants are able to embark on a reflexive process, they may be able to be more responsive in the context of their interactions. In a project-based research

initiative it can lead to an understanding of self within the larger research context.

Single-loop analysis is based on a given frame of reference that may be defined and improved, whereas double-loop inquiry investigates the nature of the frame, the assumptions that underlie it, and questions whether an alternative frame would be more appropriate (Argyris and Schon, 1978). In the context of conflict resolution, reflexivity encourages parties to abandon the single-loop approach to the conflict, and expand their focus to incorporate analysis of the context, and how their roles as participants shape the conflict. Practitioners are able to incorporate reflection-in-action into their work, by using a step-by-step process of reflection. Throughout the reflective process, the focus of the practitioner is on their role and how their actions influenced the course of events. The reflective practitioner then uses these insights to improve practice.

The differences between reflection and reflexive practice are readily apparent. Reflection is related to improving practice through a retrospective analysis of action. In the reflection-in-action process, reflection is *post facto*, relating to analysis of completed stages, and using that to shape future actions. Reflection is future focused as it seeks to improve practice by promoting an understanding of the relative successes and failures of previous events, however it remains connected to the past by focusing on completed stages. Reflection creates a cumulative body of knowledge that can then be used to improve practice. The best example of reflection-in-action comes from *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (Schon, 1987), where Schon describes building a gate. He recounts a process of inferring design criteria based on the experience with previous components of the gate. Thus he is able to learn, and improve practice while designing and building the gate. His concept of reflective practice involves the same process on a larger scale, with reference to professional practice.

Although reflection influenced the development of reflexive practice, there are profound differences between the two processes. Reflexive practice is *pro active* as it provides users with a tool that will simultaneously improve communication and help make them aware of assumptions and priorities that shape their interaction with others. Reflexivity can be used to provide insight into priorities before the party reacts to the other, and practitioners are able to incorporate new insights into each interaction. The difference relates to when the process of introspection takes place. In reflection, it occurs after an interaction, whereas the reflexive process incorporates introspection into each interaction. Providing an example of reflexive analysis of an interaction is slightly more difficult. Reflexive analysis involves challenging underlying assumptions through a deliberate process. For example the practitioner would ask himself or herself: ***What is going on here? Why is it happening? How can I change it?*** They would also consider the situation in terms of self, other's perception and the overall context of the situation. This deliberate process helps slow down communication, and provides the practitioner with a more clear understanding of their approach and the general context in which the interaction is occurring. Although the reflexive process has been described in terms of communication, it can also be used to help understand many other situations. The AE questionnaire process is a rudimentary form of reflexive analysis of project goals.

Another difference between reflection and reflexivity, relates to whom the introspective process considers most relevant. In the reflective process described by Schon, the actions of the practitioner are foremost, and the context is passive. Reflexive practice involves interaction between the practitioner, and their environment. These differences arise as a result of reflexivity being developed for use in an intensively interactive process. Being reflexive necessitates that the parties slow their reactions, and consider their position in terms of self, other, and context. This is known as Reflexive refraining (Rothman 1997b). Reflexive reframing can help parties understand their role in a situation. As a result, reflexivity becomes a tool for improving communication, and can help parties reorient their approach to the project. Reflexive analysis and reflection-in-action have an aspect of complementarity. Participants in an AE can reflect on the reflexive process to heighten understanding of the context of the reflex and can help to improve their practice within the project. This can serve dual purposes, by helping to understand the project and one's place in relation to the context in which the project is functioning.

Reflection-in-Action, and Reflexive practices are essential components of the evaluation process. Action Evaluation is a useful tool with which the reflexive process may be started. In the context of a conflict resolution project, AE provides support for incorporating reflexive practice. It provides an example, which can be adapted from the baseline evaluation into the conflict resolution process. In the Baseline evaluation stage (before the conflict intervention begins), the steps of reflexive analysis are introduced to the participants through the Action Evaluation questionnaire. This prepares participants for the analysis of underlying motivation that occurs in reflexive practice. Maintaining a focus on reflexive analysis throughout the project also facilitates the AE process because it helps participants develop and articulate their goals throughout the formative and summative stages of the evaluation. Reflection-in-Action, by comparison, provides a form of ongoing formative evaluation where practice is evaluated and reflected upon on an ongoing basis. Being a reflective practitioner involves analyzing actions and the implications of the actions, with the goal of improving practice.

Reflexive practice helps participants understand motivations for practice, and can help improve communication in a conflict situation. It can also help evaluation, as participants seek to incorporate understanding their underlying motivations into the evaluative process. In essence, these processes, which were designed for personal understanding and professional development, aid project evaluation because participants are conscious of improving practice, and are better able to articulate their underlying motivations in terms of self, other, and context.

### **Personal and Project-Based Action Research**

There appears to be an unofficial dichotomy in Action Research, between research that is directed toward personal growth and project-based research. This seems to have developed by the use of Action Research methods, for the purpose of personal and professional development. I have called these *personal*, and *project* Action Research. In personal AR, the researcher/practitioner uses methods based on traditional Action Research to focus analysis of their professional conduct, and work toward its improvement. Project AR is focused on creating change within a system, but the overall system has greater prominence than the individuals within. The distinction became apparent to me when I was a participant in an on-line conference on "The Reflective Practitioner." I became acutely aware that the authors of the conference papers were describing, and using Action Research terminology in a way to describe introspective analysis of their professional practice. At the same time I was reading a book that described an organizational change process that was based on Lewin's AR model (Agocs, Burr and Sommerset, 1992). These sources both attributed their purpose and methods to Action Research, however they were vastly different in both their approaches and aims. I have drawn this distinction to the attention of the readers because it influences how people understand the AR process. It will also affect readers' perception of the AE process and its ability to fulfill the needs of researchers and practitioners.

Personal AR tends to be more introspective as it is directed toward personal improvement and professional development. Although some feel the need to promulgate their methods, there is less emphasis placed on publicizing the results of personal Action Research. Essentially it is a personal journey of discovery toward self-improvement. Project AR, which is closer to Lewin's initial conception of AR, looks toward initiating change in a social system while involving participants in the change process. The source of personal Action Research can be traced to *The Reflective Practitioner* (Schon, 1983). Schon advocated adapting methods of Action Science to facilitate analysis of professional conduct through the reflective process (Schon, 1983, 319). As time has passed this form of AR has converged toward mainstream AR. Meanwhile, practitioners of traditional Action Research and Action Science have tended to focus on project-based research. The result of this trend is that an apparent dichotomy has developed between personal and project AR. A notable exception to this trend is Participatory Action Research (PAR), where the relationship between participant and project is integral to the success of the endeavor.

The distinction between personal and project-AR is important, because it identifies that there are two different processes using the same language and terms to describe their research, yet the application, and aims are very different. Identifying these differences is an important step in ascertaining from which path, the research methodology should be

chosen. Researchers need to have a clear understanding of their goals and where the research is directed before they choose a research process. If they do not, the process chosen may be incompatible with the goals of the research. It is also essential that researchers and participants know the potential of the research process on which they are embarking.

AE is a project-based AR process as a result of its connection to Action Science and project evaluation. AE is unique because it offers project participants the opportunity to develop and grow throughout the project process. AE offers the opportunity to integrate personal AR, with its focus on personal growth and development, and project AR through reflexive and reflective analysis. The role of AE in creating a bridge between the two types of AR is discussed in the following section.

### **Action Evaluation, Personal Development and Project Action Research.**

Action Evaluation can act as a medium to foster personal development within a project-based AR agenda. It is designed such that project participants are essential elements in defining the project's goals and evaluating its success. As mentioned above, AE was developed to help articulate and evaluate success in conflict resolution. Rothman's choice to have the participants in the intervention play a central role in the development of project goals ensured that there would be a relationship between project level research and individual development. This creates the potential for a link to be established between the project-based evaluation and personal development.

The relationship between participant and project is linked through the AE process, however, if it is not acted upon, the link is no greater than a process for transferring information from participants to evaluator. The key lies with the participants' articulation of their goals for the project, as they represent an opportunity to track personal, as well as project development. If no further thought is put into the relationship between process and its effect on participants, two different situations may occur. In the first scenario, all the researchers' focus is on the project, and not on how participants relate to the larger goal. In this case, attention is paid to project evaluation through focusing on stakeholder groups and project level of the AE process and it is unlikely that personal development will occur because it is not a priority. The second option is that the intervention is focused on the project goal, and something triggers participants to reflect, which subsequently fosters an individual focus for participants who are in that situation. In both of these scenarios the potential for personal development within the larger project focus exists, but is not made explicit because this is not the concern of the Action Evaluator, and project facilitator. The question then arises; how does one create a system that moves personal development and reflection, as exemplified in personal AR, into the project context? There are two ways to ensure that the process will foster development in the vein of personal AR. The first is by ensuring that the AE process is conducted in a manner that does not contradict the aims and methods of AR. The second is by encouraging the Action Evaluator to support the participants throughout the project. In both of these choices, the role of the Action Evaluator is essential in the process of personal development. From here, we turn our attention to the role of the Action Evaluator in promoting personal development within the AE process.

### **The Role of the Action Evaluator**

From an AR perspective, there are several concerns that should be addressed by the Action Evaluator to ensure that the process works according to its design. Brown et. al. (1988, 339) warns that over reliance on technology in the research process can have a dire impact on the research in practice. They claim that personal transformation can be constrained if the facilitator relies too much on technology as a means of reflection. If facilitators fall into this trap, the participants are brought to an anticipated state of knowledge and expertise already achieved by others (Brown et. al., 1988, 339). Another problem arises when questions are closed, reducing self-reflection to a problem solving process. These two criticisms are important because if they occur, the conditions can lead to "arrested" Action Research where the critical process of reflection (and reflexive analysis) is incomplete (Brown et. al. 1988, 339). It is important to consider these criticisms when considering using Action Evaluation because they show the degree of commitment that is required to make the knowledge produced in an AR project useful. There are many factors that can limit the efficacy of the research

process, and it is necessary that researchers are aware of them and work to ameliorate the factors that can influence the project.

The caveat offered by Brown et al (1988) regarding the danger of an arrested AR process is important, and should be considered by practitioners, researchers, and participants alike. What separates AR from traditional qualitative research is its focus on the connection between theory and practice, while promoting transformation and reflection. If the transformative elements are removed or prevented, it threatens to corrupt the initial purpose of the project. AE, with its heavy reliance on the Action Evaluator to collect and organize participants' goals has the potential to fall into this trap. Vigilance of the Action Evaluators to ensure there is effective participation from all parties, and to help participants ensure the goals they set are appropriate, will prevent it from being trapped.

The potential danger of the AR process being corrupted by over-reliance on an outside facilitator is a serious consideration in terms of Action Evaluation. The Action Evaluator serves as a process facilitator, both to introduce the technology, and facilitate the organization and presentation of the participant's responses. This can lead to the participants relying on the facilitator, rather than actively participating in the process. This is a serious consideration for Action Evaluators to be aware of, however there are several factors in the design of the AE process that should ensure that the process is not corrupted. The data the Action Evaluator works with is generated, and organization validated by the participants, and thus requires their active participation. It is also important to bear in mind that the AE process is generally connected to a conflict intervention. The form of the intervention, or project dictates that the participants are active throughout both the AE process and the conflict intervention. This should prevent Action Evaluators from exerting too much control, and thereby stifling the process.

These tactics ensure that the process does not become corrupted, however it does not guarantee that the participants will reflectively approach analysis of their goals and actions throughout the project. This requires specific actions on the part of the Action Evaluator to facilitate personal development. These tactics are variations on attempting to help participants take ownership of, and understand how their goals develop and change throughout the project. One approach is to suggest a process of reflexive journal writing, based on a variation of the *What*, *Why*, and *How* questions used in the AE questionnaire. Journal writing is a very useful tool that is often used in personal AR, and it may be transferred to a project context. That being said, it is not sufficient for the Action Evaluator to say, "write a journal." There needs to be a process of ongoing support for participants and an effort should be made to create internal motivation amongst project participants toward using the journal as a tool. There is also a danger because the journal can be too introspective and can neglect consideration of the project-wide focus. Using a reflexive journal can be useful for participants to track the development of their goals, and monitor the AE process; however I am not convinced that it can be used on a large scale to help participants to monitor goal development. There are certain areas, such as education, where the journal can be used, with success, to track students' personal development. Logistics may dictate that journal writing be recommended to participants as useful, but tracking and monitoring them may be too difficult. If sufficient numbers of participants are writing journals through the process, the Action Evaluator could adapt a portion of the discussion of goals to include reference to insights gleaned from journals.

Although the use of journals can be a powerful tool to promote systematized reflection, I would argue that it is more important for the Action Evaluator to focus on creating conditions where the project participants can decide that personal AR is something important to them. When that decision is made, the Action Evaluator can then help them to take advantage of the opportunity. Attention would center around ownership of personal goals, and willingness of participants to engage in personal reflection. These are relatively minor changes as they relate to the AE process and do not affect the overall structure of the project. They relate to specific activities that are directed toward helping participants take ownership of their personal goals. The contracting and entry stages of the project are essential, because that is where the evaluation process is introduced. At this point, the AE process should be introduced to organizers and participants, and an effort made to introduce the primary goal of project evaluation, and the secondary goal of improving practice and producing theory related to practice (derived from the goals of Action oriented research).

The potential for personal development should also be addressed and participants should choose if this is a priority. If a personal AR approach is a priority for participants, then the program can be adapted accordingly. These adaptations would involve including a greater personal focus in discussing, and reflexively analyzing, the goals and how they develop.

There are ways to ensure that the AE process affords as much opportunity for personal reflection as possible. One of the most direct is to give greater prominence to the goals developed by project participants. Under the current AE process, the personal goals are used to develop goals for respective stakeholder groups. Once they are used for that stage, they are often forgotten. The current AE process provides for the goals to be reflected back to the participants by a return e-mail message that contains the participant's goals. (In cases where the survey is conducted in another way, the goals are reflected back to the participants in an appropriate manner). In the group stage, as much as possible of the original wording of goals is retained--this helps participants maintain ownership of the goals. Despite these efforts, personal goals can become lost. At the formative and summative stages, participants rearticulate their goals. Again the goals are used to derive the group and project goals. Project participants may be able to reflect on the development of their goals over the three stages, but only if they save all three messages outlining their goals. Personal reflection would be enhanced if the goals from previous stages were included when the new goals were returned to the participants. This would provide a record of how the goals developed and changed throughout the project.

Another means of making personal goals more prominent would be to include a discussion of personal goals while developing the group and project goals. This would facilitate integration of personal perspectives into the group and project levels. Another area where personal goals become alienated from the overall project goals is when they are unique and contrasting goals. Unique goals are generally discarded once the shared goals are developed, but they are important in reflecting the diversity within a project. Unique and contrasting goals should be given prominent place because it will help participants if they are able to see their own goals represented within the shared, unique and contrasting goals. By ensuring that none of the goals are lost, it is possible to also compare how the unique and contrasting goals evolve over the course of the project. This is as important for tracking the course of the project as it is for promoting reflection.

Promotion of personal AR within the AE context involves a slight change in the role of the Action Evaluator. Rather than being passive with regard to the connection between personal development and project focus, the Action Evaluator must make a concerted effort to integrate personal development into the project's agenda. AE was designed to provide participants with a voice in goal development and project evaluation. This same voice can be captured and reflected inward within the project or intervention. In some cases it is easier than others. There are several cases where AE has been used where there is a stronger emphasis placed on personal goals. A personal focus can easily be adapted to encourage an element of personal AR. For more complicated projects, where there are multiple stakeholder groups, participants have ownership of the collective goals through their participation in developing the group and project-wide goals. However, as a result of the same process, they are also in danger of losing ownership of their own personal goals. As noted above, the role of the Action Evaluator can be expanded to include responsibility for facilitating personal reflexive analysis of their goals. This will enhance the AE process, as personal introspection leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the motivation for the project's goals.

### **Implications for Project Planners and Evaluators**

The preceding discussion of the AE process, its intellectual roots, and potential for incorporating personal Action Research within a project context has covered a great deal of territory. Perhaps the most important aspect of this paper deals with the implications of this information for project planners and evaluators. Although the theoretical heritage of AE is considerable, it was designed to solve problems encountered by practitioners. As a result, this section incorporates a perspective of what this discussion means to practitioners who are in search of an evaluation methodology.

Most important, evaluators and project planners must be aware of their own goals for the evaluation, and how they would like to use the evaluative process. Although I have stressed that AE provides the potential for personal Action Research, too much emphasis on the personal aspect can obscure the project-wide focus of the program. If the project planner's goal is to have an evaluation process that is based on personal development, they would either have to adapt the AE process to suit their needs, investigate the use of reflexive analysis and journal-writing, or choose an AR process akin to Participatory Action Research. In identifying the existence of personal AR, I was attempting to explain that the potential for inclusion of personal AR existed within AE. In making this argument, I wanted to make readers aware that the potential existed, but that facilitating personal development and reflexive analysis should not over-shadow the project-wide evaluation. As I see it, the personal aspect of AE is like using hot sauce when cooking--enough should be used to make the dish interesting, however it should not obscure the overall taste.

Action Evaluation developed in a context where projects included an element of personal reflexive analysis because it was created to assist evaluation of conflict resolution projects. In conflict resolution, the first steps of engagement, contracting and project development essentially introduce an element of pre-negotiation into project design. These are often the first steps toward developing a common goal for the project. In this respect, AE is not part of a separate process used for evaluating; it helps to establish the baseline goals for the project, from which the course of the intervention is tracked. Action Evaluation was designed to help create good theory about effective practice in conflict resolution. As a result, the evaluation process and development of the project are connected. AE is most useful when it is used to develop goals that are used to direct the course of the project. At the same time, the AE process helps teach participants how to be reflexive in their analysis of conflict communication and their actions in a conflict situation.

If project designers do not want to integrate AE into the project, then they can still use the AE evaluation process. In choosing this option, the designers are using a method that is better than traditional evaluation methods because it is based on three phases, and uses participant derived goals; however it does not provide for the integration of the goals into project design in the same manner as when AE is fully integrated into the project. Choosing not to incorporate AE into the design creates an artificial distinction between the project and evaluation. Perhaps this artificial barrier is what has hindered the development of an effective evaluation process for conflict resolution projects. If project designers choose not to incorporate personal development into the project goals, it does not overly affect the validity of the evaluation process. AE offers the opportunity for personal development to occur; however should project leaders exclude it, the project evaluation will remain valid.

As mentioned above, AE was influenced by AR and Action Science. It is a form of inquiry that is directed toward improving practice of evaluation, and practice of those involved in the project. Program planners are able to develop the process to suit their circumstances, however the key element to effective AE is the adoption of a participant-based Action Research orientation for the evaluation. If it is eliminated, AE is stripped of its ability to provide participants, program designers and evaluators with an accurate indication of the project goals. Similarly, if AE is used only for summative evaluation, the personal development and project integration aspects are minimized. The strongest advantage of AE is that it provides the opportunity for the evaluation process to shape the project, for the project goals to develop interactively with the project, and for it to influence the practice of participants in the project.

## **Conclusion**

The value of Action Evaluation as a form of evaluation that improves the practice of conflict resolution has been discussed in several papers (Rothman 1997a). One area that is neglected by these papers is an investigation of how AE helps improve practice of participants. AE is useful for researchers and facilitators in an intervention because they are able to reflect on their practice. It can also be beneficial for project participants, allowing them to interactively explore and reflect on their experiences within the intervention through reflexive analysis and reflective practice. AE is unique because it allows for all participants to engage in introspective analysis, and encourages a personal Action Research

focus within the context of project-based AR. This potential exists without having to change the structure of the AE process; however making personal development a concern of the Action Evaluator will require a concerted effort to fully integrate personal development into the intervention. Overall project evaluation is enhanced when the participants have a better understanding of their own personal goals. A better understanding of personal motivation leads to a more articulate description of goals and motivations. This then provides abundant material from which the project goals are derived. If AE can promote personal development within the project context, it will go a long way toward Rothman's goal of having a project's participants claim ownership of the goal development and evaluation aspects of a conflict resolution project.

The most important aspect of AE is the ability of the process to facilitate the improvement of projects by integrating evaluation into project design, while providing for the development of new knowledge of evaluation practice, and helping project participants and coordinators to improve their own practice. This paper has traced the development of AE, and has shown what the outcome of that development means in terms of the structure of the evaluation process, and implications for program planners. Refinement of the AE process is ongoing, and it is readily adapted to suit the needs of each project. Action Evaluation stands as an effort to improve conflict resolution and how it is reported and evaluated. It represents an effort to develop the conflict resolution field and move from anecdotal reporting of success to a systematized process. Action Evaluation allows project planners to integrate the evaluation into their projects without substantively changing the process. Action Evaluation and the technology that assists the process are not final products, and their evolution will continue as different projects stretch the limits of the methodology. This process of development will necessitate an expansion of AE into new and different contexts that will test the ability of the practitioners and users of the process. Perhaps this represents the next generation of AE research, expanding applications of the process such that it can be used with similar efficacy in different contexts.

### **Author's Note**

This paper is the result of a journey through the field of Action Research and Action Theory. It started as an attempt to understand the Action Evaluation process, and has resulted in this paper. Portions of this paper have been adapted from *Action Evaluation and Action Theory: An Assessment of the Process and its Connection to Conflict Resolution* (Ian Darling, 1998, unpublished manuscript). For further information, please contact the author at [idarling@sympatico.ca](mailto:idarling@sympatico.ca).

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