

# Ethical Issues and Role Duality in Insider Action Research: Challenges for Action Research Degree Programmes

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**Abstract** Insider action research describes the process when a member of an organisation undertakes an explicit action research role in addition to the normal functional roles they hold in an organisation. Real-world work-based research is relevant and important to many full-time managers, consultants and members of organisations including those who choose to undertake higher degrees in business as part-time postgraduate students. Within these programmes a proposal for an insider action research project is often associated with important and interesting research projects that have already arisen in an organisation where the researcher works full-time, and are part of their existing role and established working relationships with key stakeholders. Ethical issues in organisationally located insider action research can differ from other forms of action research because of role duality, i.e. that the researcher holds an ongoing work role and power relationships associated with this as well as the action research role. Ethical issues can be associated with choices about alternative options, expected impacts and outcomes on the researcher, participants, organisation and stakeholders, and these are important considerations for academic supervisors, institutional review boards and human research ethics committees.

**Keywords** Insider action research · Ethics · Role duality · Institutional review boards (IRB) · Human research ethics committees (HREC)

## Introduction

Real-world work-based research is relevant and important to many full-time managers, consultants and members of organisations including those who choose to undertake higher degrees in business as part-time postgraduate students (Coghlan 2001; Coghlan et al. 2004;

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Costley et al. 2010). In particular, within masters and doctoral programmes insider action research can be conducted on important and interesting projects which have already arisen in an organisation where the person works full-time as part of their existing work roles and established internal and external relationships.

Action research is understood to be an approach to research which aims at both taking action and research in a collaborative, emergent inquiry process that is simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in organisations, in developing self-help competencies in organisational members and in developing co-generated actionable knowledge (Shani (Rami) Pasmore 1985). Insider action research is centred on the process whereby the action research is conducted by a full member of an organisational system, rather than by one who enters the system as a researcher and remains only for the duration of the research. Coghlan and Brannick (2010) emphasise that attention to the three core elements of insider inquiry—managing the tensions between closeness and distance (preunderstanding), organisational and researcher roles (role duality) and managing organisational politics—are critical to effective insider action research.

Over the past 20 years action research and insider action research have become established and accepted as ‘real’ and credible forms of research in business and organisations. As a consequence of being recognised as satisfying the criteria for being research, action research projects conducted in places which are governed by formal sets of rules regarding ethical research conduct are required to demonstrate clearly how the research will follow ethical processes for collecting data from, about, and involving people, who these rules often refer to as ‘human subjects’.

During the past 20 years we have been engaged in exploring, planning, implementing, facilitating, leading, monitoring, assessing, evaluating and above all reflecting on how to do insider action research collaboratively and effectively in order to address practical issues and enhance the well being of members of organisations and communities. As part of this work we believe it is important to strive to be not only intelligent and reasonable, but also ethical and responsible. This article explores the particular challenges that arise from role duality in relation to the ethics of insider action research during both design and implementation, and is structured as follows: what we mean by action research and insider action research, dual and multiple roles of researchers in insider action research, contractual and covenantal agreements, planning and doing insider action research, and recommendations about how to address ethical issues in insider action research.

## Action Research and Insider Action Research

Action research’s origins lie in Dewey’s pragmatism, in various forms of liberationist movements and Lewin’s social psychology (Greenwood and Levin 2007). Its two critical dimensions are that: (i) it works through a cyclical process of consciously and deliberately, (a) planning, (b) taking action and (c) evaluating the action, leading to further planning and so on and (ii) it is collaborative, in that the members of the system which is being studied participate actively in the cyclical process. Greenwood (2007, pp. 133–134) describes a central aim of action research as ‘the creation of more democratic, just, fair, and/or sustainable human situations’ with ‘local expertise’ an essential ingredient ‘because we start from the premise that human beings are intelligent, experts in their own lives and life situations, and that the mobilization of their expertise is a fundamental ingredient in any successful and lasting social change process’.

Insider action research is centred on the process whereby the action research is conducted by a full member of an organisational system, rather than by one who enters the

system as a researcher and remains only for the duration of the research. Coghlan and Brannick (2010) identify three core elements of insider inquiry.

- *Preunderstanding* Preunderstanding refers to such things as people's prior knowledge, insights and experience. It relates particularly to the tacit nature of organisational culture and being able to distinguish what we know, what we think we know and what we don't know that we don't know. The key challenge is to hold both closeness to the data and to have distance from it.
- *Role duality: organisational and researcher roles* When insiders augment their normal organisational membership roles with the research enterprise, they are likely to encounter role conflict and find themselves caught between loyalty tugs, behavioural claims and identification dilemmas.
- *Managing organisational politics* Insider action researchers need to be politically astute in deciding in what topic to engage, in working the political system, in maintaining their credibility as an effective driver of change and as an astute political player.

While each of these three challenges may feature in action research undertaken by an external agent, we are focusing on the insider challenges of role duality in this article. This is because, in our experience, we think it to be pertinent in formulating ethics and neglected in the action research literature.

Insider action research in organisational settings includes research by managers with staff, other members or external stakeholders of an organisation. It can be initiated by people in the middle or be bottom up as well as top down. The nature of such insider action research projects are wide ranging and are influenced by the size, culture, purpose, governance and structure of organisations. Insider action researchers include business, health, educational and other professionals who engage in research involving colleagues, or clients, or patients, or students, and different discipline related standards, ethics and practices add a further dimension to role complexity, ambiguity and duality.

Insider action research projects usually focus on issues that have been identified and selected by the researcher in collaboration with others which are seen as either an opportunity worth further exploration or problems that need to be addressed. The puzzles and dilemmas of interest to insider action research practitioners are messy, complex and networked, difficult to describe and control, and not easily operationalised, estimated, or measured. Insider action research is bound up with practical issues in an organisational context and seeking to understand, reduce or resolve these jointly by the use of iterative processes rather than sequential steps which can be planned in detail in advance and easily managed.

For example, in our experience part-time postgraduate students undertaking insider action research may have a normal work role as a manager, frontline supervisor, administrator, internal organisation development or human resources consultant, which involves the provision of specialist advice and services to department managers and staff. As part of their normal role they may be invited to assist an established work group with communication, team building, strategic planning, and decision making. This work may have both contractual and covenantal aspects, in that it is for a particular purpose often with an agreed duration, is based on shared understanding and values and takes into account participants knowledge, skills, and preferences.

In order to decide which aspects of organisational work may also be suitable as a focus for part-time academic study a range of issues need to be considered. These include factors which may help or hinder obtaining agreement for the work-research, including organisational politics, what may be commercial-in-confidence, whether organisational members

will agree to be involved, any extra time or tasks involved, avenues for ongoing feedback, and what details can be included in academic papers. Insider action research can be quite overt, with members of the organisation informed and aware of the dual work and academic nature of the project, invited to participate and free to decline to be involved. Some insider action research may appear more covert, for example if the focus of the researcher is on understanding and improving their own practice, including keeping a personal reflective journal to assist them to examine their thoughts, behaviours and reactions. In these cases it may be desirable to collect data under normal working conditions and if the practitioner were to draw attention to the temporarily added dimension associated with their research this could alter the circumstances, impact on behaviour, and contaminate this aspect of the data collection.

In addition to methodological, theoretical and practical issues associated with an insider action research project, attention also needs to be paid to common ethical issues which arise as well as those which may be specific to the researcher, organisation, or proposed project. These can be associated with involvement, impacts and outcomes both on the researcher themselves as well as on participants, organisations and stakeholders, and these are all important considerations for researchers and academic supervisors and members of institutional review boards (IRB) and human research ethics committees (HREC).

The integrity and expertise of the researcher is a central issue in insider action research and this requires awareness of a range of ethical issues. As Macfarlane (2009) points out, many codes of research ethics include the term, integrity. However there is a tendency to concentrate on what is meant by a lack of integrity rather than the virtues of research which he describes as including: 'courage, respectfulness, resoluteness, sincerity, humility, and reflexivity' (p. 42).

Ethical issues in organisationally-located insider action research can differ from other forms of action research because the researchers hold both multiple organisational functional roles and the researcher role concurrently, with ambiguities and conflicts between these roles making demands which may impact on the research.

### First Person, Second Person, Third Person Inquiry in Insider Action Research

The construct of three voices in action research is well established and provides a useful lens for exploring role duality and ethics (Coghlan and Brannick 2010). While insider action research may be written up from a 'third person' perspective for publication and dissemination, it is likely to have been conducted as second person inquiry, and also involve first person reflective practice. Reason and Bradbury (2008) and Coghlan (2011) describe three voices or practices in action research as first, second and third person. In insider action research first person inquiry typically involves the insider action researcher concentrating attention on aspects of their own practice, personal values, assumptions, beliefs and behaviours, and includes the use of a personal reflective journal. Second person inquiry involves insider action researchers working collaboratively with others on issues, problems, or opportunities of mutual interest with face to face dialogue, joint decision making, action, reflection and review of outcomes. Typically, it is the second person engagement that drives first person reflexivity. Third person inquiry involves dissemination, reporting and publication.

Second person inquiry can occur naturally as part of business as usual, quality assurance procedures and change management processes. When there is also an intention to include third person inquiry by incorporating research with the intention of publication or for higher degree studies, insider action research can be seen to satisfy the definition of 'research' involving collection of data from 'human subjects' which requires application to

and prior approval by an IRB or HREC. When insiders take up a dual role as a researcher it may not always be clear where a line could be drawn between what is already being done as part of normal work and when this may also become ‘research’ in terms of the relevant local or national laws or regulations and requirements for prior approval of the proposed methods of collecting data to meet legal and ethical requirements. The International Compilation of Human Research Standards (2012), developed for use by researchers, IRBs and research ethics committees, sponsors, and others lists over 1,000 laws, regulations, and guidelines regarding research with human subjects from a number of international organisations as well as more than 100 countries. The degree of precision of definitions of what is considered to be ‘research with human subjects’ varies between countries and organisations. The Higher Education Funding Councils of England, Scotland and Wales and the Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland’s (2005) definition of research for the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was relatively comprehensive and this included:

work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce, industry, and the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship; the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances, artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights; and the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes, including design and construction (p. 28).

When insider action research is conducted as part of normal work or as part of studies towards a higher degree from a university it is likely to involve first person, second person and third person inquiry. The nature and use of the data and information collected as part of first person inquiry differentiates insider action research from similar organisational research conducted by an external researcher with a more distant stance. An external action researcher may include aspects of first person inquiry, such as their own research or consultancy skills and practices, as part of a research project conducted within an organisation. However the role duality of an insider action researcher adds additional complexity to their first person inquiry experience, such as, how what they already know impacts on what they can do, how they interpret observations and events, what they learn and what they can report, and the potential positive or negative impact on their ongoing work role, relationships, and personal well-being.

Ethical issues in research which involves ‘human subjects’ related to second and third person inquiry are relatively well covered in social science research texts (e.g.: Mirvis and Seashore 1982; Homan 1991; Aguinis and Henle 2002; Patton 2002), and incorporated into what is covered in institutional and organisational ethical guidelines and, where applicable, associated standard proformas for ethics applications. Ethical issues associated with first person inquiry, in particular where the researcher is an insider are not yet as well covered in academic literature or local guidelines and as such are not yet as well known or understood.

Insider action research project designs and applications for ethics approval may at first appear to be similar to action research which has a focus on second person inquiry, and an assumption that it is not important who the researcher is or who will do the research since this will be from a detached perspective. While it may be tempting to omit to mention in an ethics application that the research will also include first person inquiry in order to ‘simplify’ the approval process to neglect to consider these issues can be dangerous. Insider action researchers themselves, as well as other parties involved, need to be made aware of the potential for negative impacts on their career, and their health and wellbeing and have put processes in place to monitor and deal with issues should these arise.

## Dual and Multiple Roles of Researchers in Insider Action Research

The integrity and expertise of the researcher is a central issue in insider action research. The researcher's experience, values, ideas and choices and how these impact on the research are important considerations. Individual characteristics related to differences in knowledge, experiences, preferences, and established working relationships can influence the choice of research focus, priorities, research questions and objectives.

Brydon-Miller (2008) argues that prior to entering a research setting we should critically examine ourselves as individual researchers, a first-person approach. She uses a metaphor of dance training, to find your centre first—core values, then engage in open dialogue with others, while remaining aware of the broader community and institutional contexts. This is a useful analogy, and is similar to how we have approached doing insider action research ourselves, working as consultants with members of organisations who engage in insider action research, and as academic supervisors of managers, consultants, and practitioners who are also undertaking higher degrees at a university. We have found that it is important to begin this process with being attentive. Critical examination of the motivation for initiating the research, intentions and expectations, includes addressing questions about who may benefit and who may have to carry a burden. The potential benefits of a successful insider action research project can be seen as for me, for us, and for them (management, shareholders, colleagues, staff, clients and other stakeholders). Insider action researchers may be perceived as having a primary role as an active member, change agent, manager, or consultant within their organisation. Their dual role as a researcher may not be apparent to others, and need not be associated with current formal studies. From an insider action researcher's perspective part of 'what is in it for me?' may include obtaining a tertiary qualification, for those doing a part-time masters or doctorate, while at the same time endeavouring to also improve their own and their organisation's work practices. For potential co-researchers or participants 'what is in it for me?' may include consideration of the impact on working relationships as well as the time and effort involved. Some may not agree to data about their behaviour being included in the research even though they are involved in what is being studied as part of their normal organisational activities, and processes put in place need to provide informed consent, a genuine choice to be able to decline without negative repercussions and a right to withdraw from the research.

Academic requirements can be satisfied without the particular organisation or individuals involved in a research project being named or identified in reports and publications. It is possible to ethically conduct and complete successful insider action research to address practical issues and contribute to improvements in organisations while at the same time satisfying the standards of 'good' academic research.

## Ethical Issues in Insider Action Research and Role Duality

In our view, ethical issues in insider action research are inherently linked to role duality. Existing roles and relationships: past, present, and future, as well as the role, position, and intentions of the individual researcher, participants/co-researchers, gatekeepers of the organisation, and internal and external stakeholders comprise the arena in which ethical issues are played out.

Research which involves people as 'human subjects' differs from research on objects or with chemical elements. While objects or elements may be functionally identical, uniform and consistent over time and place there is a great deal of variation both within the same

person as well as between different people depending on the context. People have reactions to, perceptions about, and relationships with researchers and each other. These differences in personal and interpersonal characteristics can impact on research in profound ways.

Individuals may relate a story from their own perspective, as the way they wish things to appear, bolstering reasons for decisions and adding spin. Members of an organisation may agree to be involved as co-researchers in an insider action research project to either earn or pay back 'points' in organisational games involving reciprocity and favours. Organisational sponsors and gatekeepers also have agendas, sometimes hidden, about what they expect to be the outcomes of the research and how these can be used to their advantage. Insider action researchers face challenges as to how flexible they can be about what to include and exclude in reports of their research findings without being manipulated or part of a cover up.

As part of formal ethics procedures researchers can be required to provide a plain language statement inviting voluntary participation on the basis that consent to include information that has been provided can be withdrawn at any time. When data has been collected individually this may be a relatively simple edit, however where the person has been a member of a group discussion removing all the information provided by a member can impact on the quality of what remains. If data included in the initial analysis are later withdrawn this could also impact on which of the researcher's reflections from their personal journal may be able to be included. It may be important to mention that some information was withdrawn if this has had an impact on the findings which can be reported. In some cases a separate written report may also need to be prepared for the organisation and participants if the critical analysis included in a thesis or academic paper could have a negative impact on working relationships, or the researcher's future career.

### **Insider Action Research and Ethical Committees**

In many countries the principles of scientific-biomedical approaches to data collection and analysis underlay the ethical guidelines and institutional 'proforma' used by an IRB or HREC for the assessment and approval of research projects involving 'human subjects', across science, social science, education, business, and creative arts discipline areas (Brydon-Miller and Greenwood 2006). For example, in Australia this is covered by a National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research developed jointly by a National Health and Medical Research Council, Research Council and Vice-Chancellor's Committee. These ethical principles and guidelines usually work well in general, particularly when the process is in the hands of experienced researchers and experienced members of an IRB or HREC.

As DeTardo-Bora (2004, p. 248) outlines and discusses in detail, 'IRBs were created with positivistic research designs in mind, making the review process unsuited for most research efforts characterized as action research'. Many standard forms for IRB or HREC applications were initially developed for use in medical related research where researchers typically take an objective stance (Maiter et al. 2008). In insider action research where the researcher is an insider with established working relationships there are subjective aspects which also need to be considered. The nature and impact of role duality and multiple roles on the research in insider action research impact on ethical elements of research design as well as being part of ongoing monitoring and reflection during iterative research processes and decisions. Ethical issues include the impact on the researcher and this may not be explicitly requested on standard ethics application proforma.

The proformas and procedures associated with processes for formal ethical review by an IRB or HREC can be detailed and appear onerous. We do not wish to argue that all the



possible potential implications and impacts on the researchers' personal wellbeing, future career opportunities and working relationships need to be incorporated as standard. Rather we recommend that where insider action research projects are involved these issues are considered prior to the commencement of the research, in order to better anticipate, monitor, and address the ethical issues which can arise. It may also be useful to include discussion of these issues in what is submitted as part of a formal written ethics application, even though there may be no specific requirement to do so.

Standard research ethics procedures for working with 'human subjects' are often based on approaches used in health research designed from within a positivist paradigm where the role of the researcher is seen as 'objective and impartial'. Boser (2006, p. 12) points out how some ethical challenges in action research arise because:

our mechanisms for assuring ethical research processes are predicated on maintaining a distanced objectivist researcher stance' ...[which is not present in AR and that]..... informed consent and confidentiality cannot be assured in an AR process in the same way they are handled in conventional research.

Research ethics procedures may need to be adjusted to adequately cover action research, and insider action research, where what will be done is jointly negotiated and there are existing and ongoing relationships between the people who choose to engage in the research. Ethical issues may arise in action research with regard to differences in perceived power and roles, organisational and professional codes of ethics and whether the nature of the agreement between the researcher and participants is a contract or covenant.

Maiter et al. (2008) argue that equality and exchange are central to the notion of reciprocity, and as such respectful relationships are primary, with the research process including reflexive and overt exploration of power, interests and possible outcomes. They suggest that ideally researchers should think of a particular project as a cross-section in a longer relationship and cycle of exchange, and about both short and longer term impacts to build capacity and increase benefits for both individuals and communities.

Particular aspects may need careful consideration for action research and insider action research projects which involve emergent processes, collaborative planning and iterative decision making and often have dual purposes to enhance understanding and take action, linking theory with practice (Holian and Brooks 2004). Options for data collection, reduction and analysis need to be flexible and responsive to feedback with participants as 'co-researchers' actively engaged in the processes of making meaning of the information, data analysis and the dissemination of findings.

Ethical issues in insider action research often need to be considered in two parts: (i) the consideration of ethical issues which would form part of the initial research planning process and design and (ii) how these issues are summarised and addressed in a formal ethics application made to an IRB or HREC. While covenantal ethics may be present in the initial planning stages once the project also involves formal ethics approval by an IRB or HREC the process for obtaining this may then need to follow a more contractual approach in order to protect the university or other institution hosting the research from repercussions or legal responsibility for non-approved activities, if these result in adverse consequences. Nevertheless as Brydon-Miller (2008, 2009) argues, there may also need to be a covenantal agreement between primary researchers and co-researchers in an action research project, with mutual commitment to shared values rather than just a simple contractual agreement. An appreciation of the nature of covenantal ethics may therefore be essential to both the design as well as the ethical review of insider action research.



There are also ethical and credibility issues associated with reporting findings from insider research (Smyth and Holian 2008). The findings from insider action research may include commercial in confidence, personally confidential or potentially embarrassing information related to the organisation, members and stakeholders, or the researcher. When publishing or reporting the findings it may be necessary to go beyond anonymity by removing details which would potentially permit identification of the organisation or the people involved. This may be necessary in any write up which is submitted for assessment as a case study or assignment as part of academic studies, or what is included in a masters or doctoral thesis sent to external examiners, as well as any papers submitted for publication or dissemination.

### Role, Role Duality, Organisational Politics and Power

Insider action research may be initiated by organisational members who are at the top of the organisational hierarchy, however it can also be bottom up, or conducted with peers. The level of authority and influence of an insider action researcher within their own organisation, as part of their normal work role, will impact on their access to information, opportunities to observe actions and reasons why other members of the organisation choose to participate or not participate in the research.

Research projects from a range of methodologies can involve those who hold roles with more power exploring aspects of the lives of those with less power. Different levels of power may be held by those who initiate the research and define the topic and questions, those who facilitate and coordinate the research process, those who hold gatekeeper roles and responsibilities (including within universities), and those engaged in information gathering and exchange, making meaning, interpretation, writing, reporting and dissemination of findings.

In the view of Bjorkman and Sundgren (2005) the importance of power relationships and organisational politics, particularly at the actor level had been neglected in the action research literature, which they found astonishing given that in their studies ‘the ability to execute political entrepreneurship is a critical success factor in long-term insider action research projects’ (p. 411). Houston (2008, pp. 140–141) describes how the ‘interested’ insider nature of his research and interplay of ethics and power politics affected the project, and how his ethics application was initially rejected by his university’s human ethics committee due to a perceived potential for harm associated with issues of ‘privacy, access and the ongoing relationships with staff’ with ‘colleague relationship pitfalls (especially if views differ) as a potential source of harm to participants and to me as a researcher’...the ‘major areas of concern both seemed to relate to political dimensions of the project ...rather than the ethical conduct and potential consequences of the project itself’.

Insider action researchers have ethical responsibilities associated with their normal work roles and ethical responsibilities in their additional role as a researcher, even when the research role is for a limited period. As Hilsen (2006) points out, power and responsibility are unavoidable issues for those who hold positions which make a difference in other people’s lives, and they have ethical responsibilities for the consequences of both what they do and what they do not do. Ethical dilemmas arise as part of normal work, particularly for those with decision making roles, however the role duality in insider action research can provide additional ambiguity and role conflict.

Maxwell and Beattie (2004, pp. 245–248) describe how researchers who are also HR practitioner managers.

arguably have a raised awareness of and sensitivity towards ethics in their in-company research. They may be mindful too of the code of conduct of their professional

body in the UK, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) which has the principles of fairness, confidentiality and justice as its hallmarks'. For the MSC in HRM students their first role, in chronological and economic terms, is as an employee who has a background in and history with their employing case organisation. Issues of confidentiality, anonymity and disclosure, always important in research into human activities, have heightened importance in in-company research. In extreme instances, whistle-blowing may potentially raise its head.

Differences in perceived power and roles influence behaviour and perceptions about the range of options available, and therefore choices and decisions about research processes, practices, and outcomes. The principles of AR/insider action research are associated with doing research 'with' others as co-researchers, rather than research 'on' subjects/participants, or even 'for' a client or organisation. Depending on how the role of the researcher operates in conjunction with others insider action research can be a force for good which enables positive change. As Gaventa and Cornwall (2008) discuss, power, knowledge, consciousness and action are 'inextricably intertwined', what may appear to be consensus about issues from a community may merely replicate the dominant discourse depending on which voices are able to be heard. Perceived ethical issues may also reflect the values of a dominant power group. Researchers who identify themselves as members of a recognized profession may view themselves as more knowledgeable and powerful than people invited to participate in the research, and believe they are in a position to judge what is the 'best' way for the research to be conducted. Who holds the power to make key decisions in insider action research projects can be influenced, determined and controlled by the organisation, researcher, co-researchers, academic supervisors, and IRB or HREC members.

Members of the same organisation may have power to influence the behaviour of others whether or not they are in a management or senior role. Seeking personal approval from or avoiding rejection from a researcher who is liked or valued can involve aspects of referent and reward power (French and Raven 1959; Raven 1999), and peer pressure, role modelling and links to positive or negative power of third parties may also influence working relationships. Ongoing working relationships in organisations are reciprocal in nature. While an insider action researcher may need to be careful not to coerce other insiders to participate, those invited can then consider if there are benefits associated with agreeing to be involved. This may not differ greatly from accepting an invitation from an external researcher conducting a similar research project, which would also involve an evaluation of what will be involved and the potential costs and benefits for individuals and the organisation.

### **Contractual and Covenantal Agreements in Insider Action Research**

The nature of the agreement between a researcher and others involved in the research can range from a relatively clearly specified contract, which outlines who will be involved, how when and where, to that of a covenant based on a more general notion of what may be done governed by a relationship of mutual trust and on-going collaborative decision making. A covenantal approach can also be related to an obligation for the researcher to do their best to care for those with less power or who may be dependent in some way on the researcher (Brydon-Miller 2008).

Both researchers and potential participants may wish to have a choice between having a contract or a covenantal research agreement, whether the research is part of normal work or also associated with university studies. Organisational members in a work setting may appreciate

having a choice between a contract where what is proposed to be done is set out in detail in advance and viewed as binding to both parties, and a more flexible covenantal agreement which is monitored and re-negotiated as the research develops and progresses over time.

Supervisors of postgraduate insider action research students' research may sometimes have sufficient information to be able to trust the student to use a covenantal approach, while others may be more comfortable with a contract. Members of an ethics committee tasked with the assessment of an ethics application based on responses on a standard form, with little information about the researcher and the academic supervisor, may prefer an explicit contract rather than a more open ended covenant so that potential participants, organisations, the university and supervisors, are as aware as possible in advance about what is intended to be done.

### Professional Ethics and Covenantal Agreements

There are expressions of shared values among those who do action research and insider action research which unite people from separate disciplinary, occupational and professional backgrounds (Boser 2006). While the precise wording in local documents varies between countries and organisations, overall these are guided by general principles of respect, justice, and beneficence. Agreed principles and expectations as to what constitutes ethical practice can be part of normal day to day work practice, whether or not research is also involved. While some organisations have a code of conduct or code of ethics, these may be more general, flexible and voluntary than those for professional associations. The standards required of members of a profession can prevent and check the abuse of power over others. Health practitioners, teachers and educators, and ministers of religion, are usually regarded as bound by professional ethics. Professional codes of ethics can be seen as related to the covenantal nature of the professional/client relationship, in a context of shared values and mutual obligation. There may be additional ethical considerations when professional work also becomes part of a research project and any differences in standards and practices need to be reconciled so that both can be met.

There are differences in the nature of the relationship between teacher/student, health practitioner/client and manager/staff member. Management is not usually recognized as a profession in the same sense as teachers or health practitioners. Managers are not usually required to have formal academic qualifications, be members of a professional management association, or required to undertake and document ongoing training and development to maintain accreditation (Holian 2004). Some insider action researchers are both managers and members of a recognized professional group. While there are many synergies between the ethical principles of professional behaviour and the ethical principles of research, role duality can also create dilemmas and conflict when a researcher wears both hats (Holian 1999). As the complexity of competing roles and responsibilities increases to include a variety of internal and external stakeholders, the need for an approach which is flexible enough to permit the navigation of grey areas becomes increasingly clear, as the ability to set out in advance explicit details of all possible options that may be considered diminishes.

### Designing and Planning in Insider Action Research

Insider action research acknowledges the importance of subjective perceptions and values on what is selected for study, what data is seen as important, how information is collected, analysed, and reported. In insider action research there are existing roles and relationships, with a range of history and quality, both positive and negative (Coghlan 2005). This has

both advantages (pre-understanding, role duality, access, politics) and disadvantages (influence, expectations and role ambiguity and conflict) just as there are advantages and disadvantages of other research approaches. Because insider action research involves existing working relationships this has implications for perceived levels of dependency, informed consent and a real choice to not be involved.

Insider action research normally involves established genuine working relationships, and ethical aspects may include impacts on individual members of the organisation, including the researcher, organisational goals and reputation, as well as other stakeholders, clients or customers. The potential impact on the insider researcher themselves is also an important ethical consideration when planning and conducting insider action research.

Insider action research may involve both developing an ethical project proposal in consultation with others, and also obtaining formal approval from an IRB or HREC prior to commencement. When insider action research is conducted in conjunction with a university, research institute, or other organisation which has a formal process for ethical review this may assist to protect those involved from covert agendas, excessive demands, and other abuses of power.

Consideration of ethical issues associated with a research project is an important part of any research proposal. Ethical issues to be considered include the potential for benefit or harm for prospective participants, organisations, communities, as well as possible impacts on the researcher: personally, on their working relationships and on their future career. In addition to considering these aspects of a research proposal an organisation or university HREC or IRB may also consider the potential for complaints and adverse consequences and the possible financial or reputational impact of these—both on the organisation being researched and the research body.

### **Ethics in Research Design and Formal Ethics Approval**

In the countries where research is conducted with ‘human subjects’ by members of an organisation whether by practitioners or researchers (for example in health and in educational institutions), or by academic staff, or by post-graduate students (for example in universities) the process for ethics approval can involve a detailed written application from the primary researcher, which is first checked and endorsed by an academic supervisor, head of department or research director, before being sent on to the relevant ethics committee. Engagement in the insider action research process (which non-action researchers understand as data collection) involving ‘human subjects’ may not be permitted to commence until formal written approval has been received and this may take several weeks or months depending on whether additional information or amendments are required.

Some institutions and universities have streamlined procedures for the approval of research which is of negligible or low risk, with definitions and checklists used to assess the classification of a particular project. For example, the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research (2007) defines low risk as ‘where the only foreseeable risk is one of discomfort’ and negligible risk as ‘where there is no foreseeable risk of harm or discomfort and any foreseeable risk is no more than inconvenience’ (p. 18). Factors taken into consideration can include aspects such as if participants are potentially identifiable, if they may be more vulnerable than average adults, and whether the researcher intends to ask sensitive questions, manipulate a stimulus or use deception. Many insider action research projects may be categorised as low risk where there is no risk above the everyday as the activities involved are part of normal business in the organisation.

Standard organisational and institutional ethics procedures and proformas are often based on the assumption that the researcher will be able to state in advance in some detail who will be included in the sample, what they will be asked to do, and when and where this will occur. While this approach may sit well with what would normally be expected to be able to be included in a 'contractual' agreement, it may not adequately cover insider action research projects which have a more iterative, collaborative, participative, and covenantal approach. Standard proformas also do not normally require discussion of ethical aspects of the risks for the researcher. Since standard ethical approval procedures may not require the researcher to explain how they will address these issues researchers and their academic supervisors may neglect to consider and prepare for these possibilities and as a result face greater difficulties and dilemmas than necessary when these could have been avoided or reduced.

Ethical considerations involved in the design of an insider action research project, as well as a formal ethics application, if required, include examination of issues associated with perceived bias and coercion. Potential sources of bias can be related to what the researcher sees and asks, what participants think the researcher wants to hear, and what participants choose to emphasise, include and exclude. These issues are also present in projects where the researcher is external to the organisation, but may operate differently in insider action research because of role duality. It is important to note that while on-going working relationships may be associated with coercion or compliance there are also authentic positive ongoing working relationships which can enhance cooperation and promote genuine collaboration. Insider action research projects are often already occurring in the workplace as part of normal quality assurance processes, innovation and change programmes, or everyday management processes. The additional dialogue, reflection and rigour added as part of an insider action research project can improve the careful consideration of ethical issues in the process as well as the value of the outcomes for individuals and organisations.

### Academic Supervision and Insider Action Research

Academic supervisors have a responsibility to provide advice on ethical as well as practical aspects of insider action research projects to researchers who are also post-graduate students. This ranges from what they can do to help ensure the research outcomes are of benefit and do not cause harm, what they do to protect the reputation of the university, and how to avoid adverse consequences for the researcher as well as co-researchers. Some suggestions we have found useful for supervisors and researchers based on our own experience and from shared discussions with international colleagues are listed below.

#### *Before Starting*

Does the choice of research question, focus and approach have any ethical implications? Why was this topic selected? If the research question is successfully addressed, then 'so what'? Why was insider action research chosen? What information will be collected: how, when, where? Who is to be included or excluded? Who is likely to benefit or carry the burden of the research? How will members of the organisation be advised and invited to participate?

#### *During and Monitoring Progress*

Are mechanisms in place for both informal and regular discussion and review with the co-researchers, and other stakeholders, about the process, emerging options and outcomes?

How effective are these operating, is adequate communication and feedback being provided? How is feedback being received, acknowledged, considered, and is it seen to be acted upon? What processes are being used for information reduction, analysis and meaning making? What themes are important to and emphasised by the researcher, and others? Who is actively involved? What is being shared or with-held, by whom?

### *Report and Dissemination of Outcomes*

What can be included in the write up, and what excluded, deleted or ignored? To what extent will the report use lay-language, and relevant academic theory? What is the potential for use and abuse, for those who participated, individuals and organisations, the university, academics, the industry, and wider community? What have been the outcomes so far for the researcher? Co-researchers? Supervisors?

### **Doing Insider Action Research: Ethical Issues**

Often a project already exists in the real world as part of what part-time mature post-graduate students already do in their day to day work before it becomes insider action research. Insider action research is often about issues that are red hot and real, conducted in dynamic living contexts with multiple layers and inter-relationships, linked past-present-future, with messy boundaries, swampy lowlands, based on democratic intentions in use by principled subversives, tempered radicals, leaders and advocates of improvement and innovation (Roth et al. 2004, 2007). Participation and reflection are critical to get and keep things on track, and avoid being derailed by disruptions based on naïve or overly zealous viewpoints. Insider action research can be seen as subversive and radical, advocating unnecessary change, a form of internal whistleblowing, discussing the undiscussable (Argyris 1990), opening a can of worms, pointing out the elephant in the room or saying that the emperor has no clothes (Moore 2007).

Hilsen (2006) tells of her work to promote more democratic work places and to ensure that workers are not forced out of jobs they are willing and able to do. An important aspect of ethical review is the examination of dependency relationships between the researcher and the people involved in the proposed research. While the researcher has to have a degree of control over what happens within the research process this can come from being authorized by co-researchers to act as a facilitator, to pay attention, check, reflect, and maintain dialogue in order to help keep the project moving ahead.

Insider action researchers in organisations risk being perceived by management as either ‘too soft’ or a trouble maker if the collaborative, participative insider action research they want to pursue is seen as unlikely to also lead to more efficient and effective use of resources. Better communication, quality of work life, and work/life balance may not enhance achieving targets or levels of customer satisfaction, some changes desired by senior managers and shareholders may have negative impacts on the working conditions of staff, and actions implemented in order to increase outputs or profit may be detrimental to the environment or community.

Holian (1999) conducted part of her doctoral research as an insider action research project linked to her work role as a senior corporate services executive in a large national organisation. She was involved in leading an organisation wide program provided to intact workgroups aimed at improving people management, including merit selection, consistent performance management, and the reduction and prevention of work related stress, unfair

discrimination, bullying and harassment. The organisation initiated and endorsed improved outcomes related to these values and goals as part of the corporate plan. Implementation of these changes drew attention to perceived contrary leadership behaviour, and an increased willingness to report breaches which then needed to be addressed and seen to be addressed. While the stated objective of raising standards and expectations was achieved to some extent in the longer term, dealing with what had previously been undiscussable (Argyris 1990) created anxiety, personal crises, and challenges to trust between colleagues, managers and staff as part of the process.

### Recommendations for Dealing with Ethics in Insider Action Research

In our experience insider action research often involves projects which are part of the normal work of the researcher and co-researchers. The project is already being done and will be done whether or not it is also part of a university based research project or study. Insider action research has subjective and iterative components, which do not fit easily into standard ethics proformas designed for objective data collection and cannot be tightly defined prior to the commencement of an insider action research project. Informed consent and the freedom to decline to be involved in the research are key ethical issues in insider action research.

Insider action researchers and co-researchers are existing members of organisations who have established working relationships with each other before, during, after, and outside the research project, in addition to what becomes part of the research which is written up. Existing working relationships are related to perceived dependence, independence and inter-dependence and levels of cooperation, collaboration, coercion and compliance. Role duality, and role conflict can impact on the researcher, personally and professionally, in both positive and negative ways, and this can too easily be overlooked.

The basic principles of insider action research are ethical, and collaborative, the processes used are iterative and include both objective and subjective elements. This means that insider action researchers must be sufficiently skilled and supported or supervised to make the best available choices, to minimise problems and solve dilemmas. The integrity and expertise of the researcher are key elements of successful and ethical insider action research.

There is no simple, one-size-fits-all solution to the issues raised in this paper. The way forward in dealing with these challenges is found in the action research process itself, ethical questions are not extraneous but integral to the process of insider action research. Reason (2006) demonstrates this when he argues that action research is characteristically full of choices. Attentiveness to the multiple choices and their consequences, and being transparent about them are significant for considering the quality of action research. Reason argues that action researchers need to be aware of the choices they face and make them clear and transparent to themselves and to those with whom they are engaging in inquiry as well as to those to whom they present their research in writing or presentations. So, explicit attention to questions about participation and ethics are integrally linked to issues of research quality and integrity.

In approaching engaging with choices, insider action researchers need to demonstrate authenticity, that is that they need to be explicit about how they attend to experience, come to understanding, make judgments and make decisions as to what to do (Coghlan 2008). These operations provide a general empirical method for action researchers that are captured by four process imperatives:



- Be attentive (to the data).
- Be intelligent (in inquiry).
- Be reasonable (in making judgments).
- Be responsible (in making decisions and taking action).

In enacting the general empirical method, insider action researchers need to attend to the experiences that provoke ethical challenges, be intelligent in how they understand what is going on and what is at stake, be reasonable in making judgments and understand and be responsible for the actions they take. Insider action researchers who strive to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible, can work in conjunction with academic supervisors, IRB and HREC members and design and deliver successful, worthwhile, ethical research projects.

### Concluding Remarks

In summary, within the field of insider action research where a member of an organisation undertakes an explicit action research role in addition to the normal functional roles they hold in an organisation, ethical issues and challenges have not yet been afforded sufficient attention. In this article we have identified the critical issue as relating to role duality, i.e. that the researcher holds an ongoing work role and power relationships as well as the action research role. Ethical issues can be associated with choices about alternative options, expected impacts and outcomes; on the researcher, participants, organisation and stakeholders, and these are important considerations for researchers, academic supervisors, and members of IRBs and HRECs.

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