Towards theory for the design of social settings in action research

Timothy Lynam, Cécile Barnaud, Patrick D'Aquino

Social settings are an important if not dominant arena in which social interaction occurs. Social settings comprise a physical space, the people or groups that interact in or in association with the space, the relationships among these people or groups, the beliefs and information these people bring with them to the setting which may include the implicit and explicit rules pertaining to the setting and their expectations or intent with regards the setting. Social settings occur and are embedded within a social context. A meeting to agree on a plan of action for the management of an irrigation scheme in the context of reduced water availability or the presentation of scientific papers in the context of academic theorising in this symposium are examples of different types of settings.

Recognition of the importance of settings in social action and social change is not new but builds on the theories of Sarasson (1974), Lewin (1951) and Bourdieu (see Jenkins 1992) as well as on recent theory from social psychology (Semin and Smith, 2002). Our experiences in action research support the observations of these theorists that social settings are important determinants of the outcome of social interaction and may play a larger role in determining the outcome of social interaction than the attributes of the individuals involved in the setting. If, as we suggest, this observation has broad validity then it has important implications for action research in the context of contributing to social change; it compels us to answer questions associated with how we might create settings from which positive social change is more likely to emerge. We do not pose these questions with the expectation of developing predictive theory of the relationships among social settings and social change. Rather we seek firstly to identify patterns in the settings we have seen giving rise to significant social change and secondly we seek to define and reflect upon a research agenda that seeks further clarity on the relationships between settings and social change.

In this paper we examine the relationships between social settings and significant social change across three cases of social change that we have been participants in. The first case dealt with issues of land tenure in the Sahel region of Africa. The second case was associated with conflict over water management in Thailand and the third case had to do with rural resettlement in Zimbabwe. All three cases involved the creation of multiple settings. Two of the cases (the Sahel and Thailand) used a companion modelling approach as the basic participatory action framework whilst in the third (Zimbabwe) a process of adaptive enquiry was used. The cases and settings that were created are examined from the perspective of learning how we might create social settings that are conducive to the emergence of positive social adaptation and the avoidance of undesirable situations.

In the paper we briefly define social change and social settings. We outline the context of each case and our relationships with these cases. We then highlight the settings that appeared to be instrumental in enabling the
observed social change and analyse what made these settings so important. We conclude by identifying a body of research that we seek to undertake to further explore the important relationships between settings and social change.