"SUSTAINABILITY AT WORK" THROUGH AN ACTION RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE: KNOWLEDGE CREATION AND VALIDITY CONCERNS

CESARE KANEKLIN
MARA GORLI
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF MILANO

In this paper the authors reflect on a case of action research conducted in a health and social service organization that provides services for people who are elderly or have disabilities. The aim of the intervention was to explore and support the possibility, at different organizational levels, of building and maintaining a sustainable working life despite the difficult situations faced by this type of organization and the turbulence in the delivery of its services.

The authors discuss the concept of sustainability and the action research approach, referring to the description and analysis of the case study: the initial steps to create a committee group and a research group, the proposed process and its development, and an evaluation of and conclusions concerning the intervention. The case will contribute to the debate around some epistemological research questions and issues concerning the validity of the knowledge created: what kind of knowledge does action research produce? What are the proper link and balance needed between theory and practice, and between knowledge and action? What kind of validity is necessary to sustain people's recognition in an action research process?

EXPLORING AND PROMOTING SUSTAINABILITY AT WORK: THE ACTION RESEARCH CHOICE

In this paper we present some reflections raised by our participation in a case of action research conducted in 2004-2006 by our group, a team of researchers of the Catholic University of Milano[1], in which we entered a health and social service organization that provides services for people who are elderly and/or have disabilities. Given the nature of such an organization, where people deal in their everyday practice with "difficult patients" with no hope of recovery, we were invited to explore and support the possibility of building and maintaining a sustainable working life despite the difficult situations faced and the fact that these types of organizations are coping with increasing changes and turbulence at different organizational levels. Not only are clients' and families' needs changing, but also the values that used to attract people to this profession and helped them cope with the strains of the job in the past are no longer the same.

In the paper we will discuss the concept of sustainability and the approach of action research, referring to the description and analysis of our case study: the initial steps to create a committee group and a research group, the proposed process and its development, and an evalua-

TPM

tion of and conclusions concerning the intervention. The case will promote debate on some epistemological research questions and issues concerning the validity of the knowledge created.

Why Sustainability?

People and organizations are increasingly asked to develop new knowledge and strategies to cope with complex problems. This need for creativity and change challenges individuals and groups, often generating anxiety and "less sustainable" work conditions. Although in the literature it has always been common to talk about "quality," "safety," and "security" at work (Avallone & Paplomatas, 2005; Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Danna & Griffin, 1999; Hoffman & Tetrick, 2003; Kiernan & Knutson, 1990; Martel & Dupuis, 2006; Sirgy, Efraty, Siegel, & Lee, 2001), we believe that the term sustainability introduces a concept that supports broader reflections and opportunities.

If we look at the current definition of sustainability in the literature, we find more than one application (from ecological and environmental to sociological and business fields), but all are connected to express a unique concept. The broad definition of sustainability, coined in the book *Our Common Future* (United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), introduced the business world to a new goal for economic development: to "meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." For the social community and for the organizations, the UN report established sustainability "as a code word for a variety of emerging standards and expectations by which society judges the performance of corporations, and by which corporations can judge themselves" (Senge, Laur, Schley, & Smith, 2006, pp. 7-8). The emerging literature is now suggesting to use the concept of sustainability to support actions and consultancy inside our workplaces (Doppelt, 2003; Dunphy, Griffiths, & Benn, 2003; Edwards, 2005; Fullan, 2005; Senge et al., 2006).

Moving from an economic and sociological framework, we refer to human resource sustainability as the capacity for organizations to create and regenerate value through the application of participative policies and practices to promote both organizational performances and people's well-being. In other words, it means for us to put into relief the social dimension that inhabits our organizations and to maintain it close to the functional and strategic organizational changes, all concepts linked to the idea that the action system (the structural and functional dimension of an organization) must come together with the social system (the organization's social and cultural dimension). Maintaining this connection can help the members of the organization search for and sustain more meaningful work (Cox & Cox, 1996; Lévy, 2005).

A challenge arises, however, when talking about sustainability in these terms. If we see sustainable workplaces like the one described above, we then promote a hypothesis that working in connection with the social system of an organization means removing the distance from more technical solutions or from impersonal strategies. In our perspective, technicalities and standardized tools and settings can only produce temporary solutions and benefits, whereas getting close to people and their mind-set can allow deeper changes or movements.

Our claim is, therefore, that sustainability at work would be better promoted from an action research perspective because of its focus on the involvement of people in their workplaces,

TPM Vol. 14, No. 3-4, 185-206
Fall-Winter 2007
© 2007 Cises

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

its requirement to allow reflective time against the constant hurry, and its attempt to develop situated and participative knowledge and change (Hart & Bond, 1995; Heron & Reason, 2001; Olivetti Manoukian, 2002; Park, 2001).

Why Action Research?

Action research is, in fact, an approach that uses the lever of participation and personal involvement to create and share knowledge through the different parts of an organization. Both in its classic definition (Peters & Robinson, 1984; Rapaport, 1970; Susman & Evered, 1978) and in more recent views (Dubost & Lévy, 2005; Olivetti Manoukian, 2002; Reason & Bradbury, 2001), action research is characterized by some key elements (Gilardi & Bruno, 2006):

- it is embedded in a *specific context and field*;
- it is *action oriented* (i.e., emerging knowledge is spent for promoting and managing change);
- it aims at the production of *local knowledge*, usable by people involved in the action research process but also transferable to other contexts and population;
- it is *participative* (it requires comparison between individuals as well as commitment and involvement both from researchers and from participants);
- it is subjected to *rules*;
- it is based on a *cyclic methodology* for knowledge creation; and
- it brings the knowledge back to participants *during* the process, not *after* it.

The last statement differentiates action research from traditional research. Returning the knowledge to the participants who are creating it feeds the process and becomes a central and crucial focus for its further development.

The action research method aims to develop research movements that help people connect with one another in an attempt to share visions and representations of problems and to accept together the challenge that these problems carry with them. Problems therefore become chances to create relational bonds that make people stronger in terms of strategies and possible actions.

This appears even more important when dealing with a subject such as the one in this research: sustainability at work. Well-being at work is often jeopardized, in many turbulent contexts, because people find themselves *individually* linked to problems and questions, experiencing a feeling of "being closed in a box," with very few opportunities to share work issues with others. In such a situation, each person sees the facts from his/her point of view without considering his/her colleagues. This feeling of loneliness toward problems often contributes to a climate of complaints, pain, and guilt (Kaneklin, 2006, p. 121).

Working toward a sustainable workplace means, for us, promoting connections and shared visions on organizational problems and changes; that is, using a proper method of inquiry and intervention that has the chance to become a way of experiencing the organization and its movements. This is, for us, typical of the action research method.

For our case study exploration and for our research goal we therefore adopted the methodological choice that sustains narrative and "clinical" tools (Kaneklin, 1990; Kaneklin & Bruno, 2003; Reason & Bradbury, 2001) such as interviews, group discussions, autobiographical and narrative writings, and document and storytelling analysis (Denzin, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). All of these are examples of methods that focus on subjective and contex-

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

tual variables that change according to the kind of population the researcher considers and works with. We therefore present the kind of researcher that *enters the field* and gets involved with people in their processes and thinking for enough time and space to provide explorations and inquiries with new meaning. We have in mind the theoretical contribution provided by some authors from the psychosociological tradition (Barus-Michel, Enriquez, & Lévy, 2002; Bruno, Kaneklin, & Scaratti, 2005; Kaneklin 1990; Kaneklin & Bruno, 2003; Olivetti Manoukian, 2002), and from the constructionist tradition (Amovilli, 1993; Butera, 1977; Gherardi, 2002; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2004; Marshall, 2001; Park, 2001; Piccardo & Benozzo, 1996; Wenger, 1998).

<div align="center">

APPLYING ACTION RESEARCH:

THE CASE OF A HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICE ORGANIZATION

</div>

Moving from these considerations, we here briefly present the one-year action research project promoted by the Catholic University of Milano and sponsored by ISPESL (Higher Institute for Safety and Prevention at Work, Ministry of Health, Italy), a research and development center linked to the Italian Ministry of Health and interested in financing projects on safety and well-being at work. Our target organization was chosen for the research because it serves elderly and disabled people; it is an organization with a long history, a strong tradition of Catholic values, and a profound commitment to helping people in need.

This large organization includes more than 800 employees and about 950 patients, distributed into 20 units (according to the patients' pathology), which are grouped into five divisions. Every unit is composed of social workers, physicians, nurses, and medical professionals that together usually deal with 20 to 100 older or severely disabled people with no hope of recovery. Each unit and division has, respectively, its own head of unit (the unit manager) or head of division (the division manager). At the top level of the organization a directive staff (the CEO, a vice-director, and other top managers in charge of different departments, such as human resources, administration, and commercial services) coordinates the broader strategies.

When we entered the organization, as in most services of this kind, many changes were about to happen, creating turbulence. Patients' and families' needs were changing, the market was becoming more competitive, and the system of values that used to attract people to this profession was changing. Continuous reorganizations had modified the structure and the culture of the service: a change of personnel (new employees and middle and top managers), new technologies implemented, and units and divisions downsized or merged. The challenge was to move from a traditional "value-centered" and familial functioning toward a more rational and hierarchical functioning, where budget and efficiency were becoming the priorities.

To meet the challenge of work for sustainability in this specific situation, we first of all had in mind a few preliminary actions to explore people's representations of what was and what was not sustainable from their points of view in the organization by encouraging them to reflect on and increase their awareness of their internal models, habits, and practices connected to a sustainable life in their workplace. Our assumption is that working for sustainable organizations means helping people to take full responsibility and commitment in promoting change and well-being; that is, becoming actors, not just agents, in their workplaces.

The first step, therefore, was to create:

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

1) a steering group, the Committee Group, which included the management (six top managers of the organization directive staff, including the CEO and the vice-director); and

2) a potential group of participants for the intervention, selected by the steering group: 14 middle managers coming from two specific divisions (2 division managers, 2 medical directors, and 10 unit managers), who, accompanied by the research staff from the Catholic University (three researchers in total), composed the Research Group. The aim of the action research was discussed with people at both of these organizational levels. Agreement was reached on an intervention that could explore and support a sustainable working life despite the difficult situations in coping with chronic patients and the fact that the organization was facing continuous challenges and changes.

Together with a set of initial meetings with the Committee Group to gather data and ideas on the problems the organization was facing and the implications in terms of sustainability at all levels, we started regular monthly meetings with the Research Group. The aims of these research meetings were:

- to explore participants' representations of life sustainability at work, focusing particularly on perceived problems related to the role and professional identities, work organization, and productive processes;
- to promote people's exchange of experiences and knowledge acquired and accumulated during their history and belonging in the organization; and
- to highlight emergent needs, promote projects, and change strategies for a more sustainable working life.

In one year monthly meetings put the Research Group into an exercise of reflective and cyclic processes (Olivetti Manoukian, 2002) that allowed us to collect and to interpret data together with the group. We gathered semistructured interviews, storytelling, and group discussions reports. The process produced a large amount of data that testified to the reflectiveness and the learning steps of the group. Qualitative data were first analyzed through content analysis and through the use of T-LAB software (Lancia, 2004) at the university, then discussed and interpreted in the organization within the Research Group and summarized in shared written reports.

A final workshop was launched to establish a dialogue between participants (the Research Group) and the Committee Group. The event was organized to discuss the emerging representations of sustainability and to promote shared strategies to face the problems highlighted. This was considered a precious opportunity at a time when people suffered from a perceived distance between the top of the organization and the middle management level.

At the end of the process (planned to last about one year) both groups were involved in evaluating the action research outcomes through individual interviews and a final event at which the research report was presented and discussed.

THE ACTION RESEARCH CHOICE: METHODOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL ISSUES

The case described above gives us an opportunity to enter the current debate around issues of methodology and epistemology in action research (Coenen, 2002; Dick, 2004; Dubost & Lévy, 2005; Gustavsen, 2001; Hart & Bond, 1995; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Schein, 2001;

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

Stringer, 1999; Wilson, 2004). We would now like to meet this challenge by returning to our case and by reading it across a few core questions that we intend to explore.

We propose to consider and discuss the following assumptions, which we believe to be strongly related to ethical and epistemological research questions.

1. If action research reveals in its process a dialogical and participative nature (Heron & Reason, 2001; Park, 2001) and a reflexive use of knowledge among its actors, → *what is the kind of knowledge that is produced?*

2. If action research is strongly related to processes of change (Hart & Bond, 1995; Reason & Bradbury, 2001) because it encourages the participants to modify their outlooks toward organizational and social problems in the real world they experience, → *what is the proper link and balance needed between theory and practice, between knowledge and action?*

3. If these premises are correct — that is, action research produces knowledge usable toward new understanding and new actions — and, therefore, a form of validation and evaluation is required, → *what kind of validity is necessary to sustain people's recognition in an action research process?*

Action research encounters different contexts and organizations with their own histories, cultures, routines, and specific knowledge management practices. The questions we have just stated are not always shared and understood at the beginning of a process by the people that will become participants. It is actually more common to find more than one epistemology in use in the context where action research is hosted. Any epistemology is there for us to work with, especially where different ones are at play together. Because epistemologies also come from different professional identities, role identities, and organizational or suborganizational cultures, we are convinced that action research moves primarily from processes of confrontation, integration, and conflict that put in the arena a possible dialogue between these existing meanings.

In this paper we will therefore use our action research process to point out the knowledge creation activated and its consequences in action and for people's actions. Attention will be given to the particular requirements, methods, and tools that allowed us to build an "epistemological contract" between researchers and participants. By going into the details of the process, we will highlight the key steps that occurred in our creating a new way for the organization involved to produce knowledge and change, starting from the initial different epistemologies in use. Finally, we will discuss the processes and the method used to validate the knowledge and change produced.

THE PROCESS OF KNOWLEDGE CREATION AND CHANGE:
COMPARING EPISTEMOLOGIES

During the process the Research Group and the Committee Group were challenged to change their representations about the critical and problematic issues that threatened their work quality. They were also stimulated to recognize their usual ways of intervening in the everyday problems as well as to explore and find new practical solutions to cope with them.

As soon as we started working with these two populations, we, the university researchers, understood that different perspectives and representations were at play, especially regarding the relationship between knowledge and action/practice or the validity and legitimacy of different

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

ways of exploring the facts and the problems. This "match" between perspectives represented for us a striking point in the process: we recognized that different epistemologies were in place. It was then necessary for us to work on the definition of an initial contract (What kind of knowledge are we creating? When is this valid? What are we going to use it for?) but also to work on monitoring the contract changes in time and along the process. We thought that as the process was developing, the level of participation and engagement of people could change as well. The same could be said for the products deriving from the work and the relationship between researchers and organizational actors.

The history of the development and transformation of this initial epistemological contract is for us an interesting key point in understanding the growth of the research and its quality. We will try to pay specific attention to which representations of knowledge and knowing emerged among the participants, and what changes they went through and in relation to what kind of aspects of the process. This will allow us to reflect on ways of and crucial points in conducting an action research project in an organization like the one presented here. The characteristics of both this specific organizational context and the theme of the research make epistemological reflection even more necessary.

First, the organization we met had (and still has) some cultural features and ways of functioning that can be found in other Italian social service organizations, especially the ones that deal with patients with serious and chronic illnesses. Although employees in these organizations are usually motivated by strong values (often similar to the ones in volunteer groups) and a high commitment toward the mission of the organization, they are now challenged by a growing competitiveness in the field as well as by the requirement of high standards and structural developments. This often clashes with the complex hierarchy and bureaucracy of some parts of the functioning of the service that are typical of the public health and social system.

This organizational culture, as it emerged from the first steps of our research, fed an epistemological perspective on knowledge and change quite distant from the one that we as researchers were suggesting. This distance had a crucial role in the course of the process, although it did not compromise the start-up of the research. We actually decided to use this difference to reflect more deeply on the field characteristics. Second, the specific theme of sustainability soon appeared strongly connected with the process of knowledge creation and management, and with the possibility for people to participate instead of delegating their relationship with the life of the organization.

From the beginning of our consultations with the organizational actors, work sustainability appeared strongly linked to the possibility of being involved in the processes of problem solving and change management. A concept of sustainability emerged that was close to the feeling of organizational belonging and to the perception of being part of community projects, as opposed to loneliness in coping with problems. Many parts of the organization were expressing the wish to reduce the distance between the top and the middle level but maintain proximity to the practicalities of the working life.

The theme of the action research highlighted the importance of the relationship between subject and organization, between subject and change, and between subject and knowledge, all issues connected to the management of the working life. Themes such as participation, dialogue, and work integration seemed the crucial points of our sustainability exploration as well as the

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

conditions that were necessary to promote knowledge and change creation processes coherent with an action research approach.

In the various phases of the process researchers, participants, and the top management of the organization worked together on three levels:

1. a substantial level to reflect and find shared solutions for a more sustainable life;
2. a methodological level to experience settings and tools for knowledge creation;
3. an epistemological level to think about knowledge and change creation and their feasibility and sustainability in this specific organization.

These three levels appeared to be strongly connected with one another: as soon as the level of participation was modified, new knowledge took place and a new epistemological contract, more explicit and shared, was developed.

Here we present the history of this interlacement with regard to the processes of knowledge, learning, and change produced by the action research process.

Phase 1: Start up and First Contract with the Organization

In the start-up phase, our work was first directed to "opening the doors" of the organization through consultations with the CEO and the vice-director. A first meeting took place with the whole Committee Group (CG) aimed to negotiate the project and selecting the members to constitute the Research Group (RG).

Once put together, the RG was involved in a "kick-off" meeting, where the research proposal was presented and discussed. After that, participants agreed on proceeding to individual interviews to explore their concept of sustainability but also to investigate wishes and expectations toward the process. We then organized a second meeting to discuss the main topics that emerged from the interviews and to decide how to proceed.

In this first phase sustainability appeared as a crucial and complex issue. The CG and the RG perceived the relevance of an action research process for its possibility to touch important knots of the organizational functioning, although expectations and visions of the process were quite different.

The Contract with the CG

The CG's expectations were to use an action research process to provide a formal analysis of the organizational processes in action. These expectations were soon declared in the preliminary consultations with the top level of the organization. The CG was looking for clarity on "roles and duties of the middle manager:" it was focused on people's efficiency more than on their well-being.

An organizational analysis is what we need. We have to improve the system efficiency. This is our key theme today. (CEO).

I would like to see where the role of the middle manager is not clear. I would like to see how do they perceive themselves, in their duties and expectations. (Human resources director).

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

The perception also emerged, from an epistemological point of view, that a "situated" exploration was necessary, and with an unforeseeable ending. This process was seen as a formative as well as a data-gathering process.

We are not looking for a traditional training exercise. We would like to engage in this process of action research even if we don't know where it will end up and how. We need to keep ourselves linked to the real situation that people experience in their daily practice. (CEO).

In the CEO's mind, the formative and unforeseeable quality of the process depended on the design of the research more than on its inquiry aspect. The process of problem setting and problem solving was seen as different and progressive rather than as a unique process. We therefore worked on illustrating our vision that the process could be continuous and that it could engage people both in understanding the problems and in learning through and about them.

When we say organization (and organizational analysis) we don't think of its structure. We have processes in mind. We think about a process of formative research to give participants an opportunity to understand and work on problem setting activities. (Research staff).

These two visions, thus made explicit in the first consultations with the top management of the organization, met for the first time as initial declarations. They were not yet ready to touch or to be mutually contaminated. What seemed necessary was to start circulating the idea of intervening, committing to a mutual investment. We soon understood, however, that the idea of focusing on problem solving (and acquiring proposals on that) was surely a sign of openness toward the research, but it also showed an attitude toward the process of delegation itself. The CG's expectations were that we researchers, together with the RG, could produce and provide an analysis of current problems and efficient solutions for them.

This research is an opportunity for the RG: the middle managers are asked to detect functional ways of working. (Vice-director).

Moreover, the CG expressed the idea of a "linear change:" a change that could be described, analyzed, planned, and then put into practice. The representation of change was also linked to a top-down tradition: as soon as the organizational system is planned, it will affect and influence the social system. Human resources, in this perspective, can only be adjusted to the current changes and motivated to make the best of them.

The research staff was instead promoting a different perspective. Our focus was on the social system of the organization, as we thought that participation and involvement were the key elements to promote cycles of changes that could be sustainable and acceptable for people.

The more the organization has to be flexible, the more it is useless to try to define a priori structures and to plan changes. Instead of concentrating on the organizational and action system, we think it is better to focus on the social system, taking distance from the logic of hierarchy and authority (idea of linear rationality) to get close to the logic of power (power to express everybody's views) and emotion (involvement and closeness of people in staying in the processes and dynamics). A key question is how the social system affects the action system. (Research staff).

Our epistemological challenge was launched. We had to see how it could be elaborated together with the RG and the CG in the course of the project.

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

The Contract with the RG

The RG's expectations moved around the possibility of sharing ideas and thoughts with colleagues, and finding a place to be listened to by the top levels of the organization. The participants expected to work on situated knowledge (Mezirow, 1991; Schön, 1983; Wenger, 1998) connected to the real-life contexts, to the actual roles and the functioning of the organization.

Every possible intervention on role and problems we face is precious. It is also a chance for us to have a confrontation. (Participant, middle manager).

The expectation was also to produce practical knowledge useful to invite further reflections on choices and work practices available. A confrontation between colleagues was crucial at that point of the organizational history. The presence of an external team of researchers was considered fundamental in supporting such a process for its intrinsic possibility to allow new visions of the organization (vision from a distance, vision from outside).

It will allow us to breathe. New fresh air for understanding this organization! (Participant, middle manager).

We also felt ambivalence: some participants looked for expert and technical knowledge. Others felt that external researchers could not easily understand the real organizational complexity. Some perceived themselves as unable to contribute to the process of knowledge creation, feeling that they too were far away from some issues (especially the medical directors).

The truth is that we are not used to trusting each other for such a challenge. We have always been used to being enclosed in our little garden without any vision of the open field. Sure we need to share thoughts with our colleagues, but who knows if we will be able to? (Participant, middle manager).

Knowledge seemed an "expert's product:" something deriving only from many years of professional experience. Although the activity of problem setting was conceivable, an attitude toward the possibility of solving problems of delegating still prevailed. Solutions were expected from the top of the organization, creating a feeling of lack of confidence and disillusion.

I don't expect to create a revolutionary workplace. I would just be happy if the top management could listen to us at the end of the process. (Participant, middle manager).

I doubt that after our research the top management will consider our findings in order to really change things here. (Participant, middle manager).

Even here, the relationship between knowledge and change appeared linear and progressive. Change was seen as something that could be planned sitting around a table, with strong rational components. For the RG, the history of the organizational changes was mainly a history of decisions taken from the top, and as such it was difficult to accept.

Discussion is so important! We have always received directions from the top so far, with no possibility of replying or asking for better understanding. (Participant, middle manager).

Action research was therefore perceived as a way of declaring problems more than trusting each other in suggesting new visions, for which "some other people" should be responsible.

Once we accepted these views, we put ourselves in the position of listening and giving feedback. Some aspects were crucial for the commitment of the whole group. First, was the pos-

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

sibility of exchanging the different points of view present in the scene? Second, it was important to reinforce the availability expressed toward a proposal from the top management: the RG was a group specifically chosen, and it could value this premise and decide how to get involved.

Looking at all this, we saw the attitude of the CG and the RG as a kind of feeble consent toward the research: availability to stay in the process but strong delegation in the problem-setting (CG) and problem-solving (RG) phases. The process management was assigned to the research staff.

Life Sustainability at Work

In this phase, epistemological perspectives of both groups appeared to be closely related to their representations on life sustainability at work. In the CG's representations, sustainability was associated with problems in communication between the top and the micro levels of the organization. The CG members also had the perception that the middle managers were too old and not able enough to adapt quickly to organizational changes. On the other hand, the RG described their unsustainable life as a feeling of loneliness, with a lack of support and separation from the top of the organization in managing the work-life challenges.

Both the CG and the RG were focusing their attention on problems of change management: from their perspectives, problems were due to individual causes ("lack of competencies," "lack of support") and external causes ("others had the responsibility for the problem"). Both at the content and at the process level, the action research showed two key issues: the problem of organizational change and people's attitude toward delegating its management.

Phase 2: Going Deep Inside the Key Issues

In the core phase of the research we went deep inside the key issues about sustainability, and most attention was given to the work with the RG. We used narrative exercises to get inside the key issues, group discussions to interpret the outcomes, and shared reports of the proceedings and final documents to promote participants' responsibility for the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a, 1998b).

During this time, only sporadic attention was given to the CG, although a few conversations helped us to evaluate the ongoing process. In that period top management was also very busy redesigning the organizational profile and coping with economic problems, so it was difficult for them to participate in the process.

After a few months of exploration, to promote wider participation in and a stronger sense of responsibility for the research process, the RG and the CG were involved in the preparation of a workshop to share and discuss preliminary outcomes and suggested solutions coming from the research. The workshop was intended as an intermediate passage within the research process, a fundamental step for building a different epistemological contract between us, the CG, and the RG, where all the participants could evaluate the ongoing outcomes and share the highlighted problems.

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

Working with the RG: Knowledge and Delegation

In this phase, working with the RG was characterized by high levels of complexity. The reflection on the core themes (What kind of work sustainability?) was intertwined with more explicit discussions on the research process, on what kind of knowledge was being produced and what kind of learning and change was being sponsored.

The work was hard: going deep inside the problem setting often caused an attitude of denunciation and complaint. The analysis of the organizational functioning appeared as a bundle of "objective facts" and "truth-claims" that were hard to deal with. No dialogue can originate from such objective visions.

Decisions are taken in other rooms. The top managers will just inform us, never communicate with us. (Participant, middle manager).

Solutions appeared as radical changes that had to be taken somewhere else and as soon as possible. Problem representations coming from the group were "absolute," never partial, always objective and never subjective. Participants often ended up having very similar views and perspectives on problems: speaking as a chorus was simpler than using the difference and complexities between the views. Trying to introduce the concept that problems can be seen from different points of view was hard work.

The rest of the organization was considered as an "addressee" of the problems, not as a partner to discuss them.

I can't wait to have a meeting with them. But I expect they will tell me exactly what they want. (Participant, middle manager).

From the point of view of their participation in the process, the theme of delegation was frequently emerging. The RG was strongly involved in discussions and data interpretation but always weak in engaging proactively with the process possibilities and tools. We asked them for example to give voice and to put into written documents the emerging data, but they did not allow themselves to process problems by integrating their views; they just made a list of the issues raised and passed it on to us.

After a few months, we pushed the group to think about creating a chance for a meeting between the RG and the CG to think together about the process and the responsibility to keep it alive and to share the knowledge commonly produced. We suggested a one-day workshop to share views and data gathered with the CG.

The preparation of this meeting constituted a chance to play different parts in the RG. Some participants started being more proactive, engaging with the research staff in writing and discussing documents and speeches; others took a spectator role. The opportunity of the workshop was seen by some as a challenge to the top levels of the organization and by others as an opportunity to listen, to be listened to, and to engage in questions and thoughts.

We are working on constructing a picture of our organization, a map of the problems. I hope this will be taken into account. I'd like to receive questions and answers, I'd like to discuss with them what we see. (Participant, middle manager).

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

Working with the CG

This meeting represented a turning point in the research process.

Aim of the workshop is neither to communicate the final outcomes of the research, nor to take immediate decisions on what emerges, but to open a space for reflection and build a less partial and more shared vision on problems. (Research staff).

Opening this space was not easy. The position of listening is never just linear, and sitting at the same table was no guarantee of comprehension of the overall process. After we had heard the problem stated, the temptation was to translate everything into action. But who? And how? And where?

The vice-director suggested that the CG would take into account all the emerging issues for further consideration. Only a few members of that group formally signed up for another phase of reflection, starting from some problems raised in the workshop. They decided to open a set of consultations with other parts of the organization on the key issues raised by the RG: the functioning of the technical services, for example, the information exchange system, and so on. For some others, however, the main concern was to take decisions and to promote immediate change. The linear and top-down vision of change management was present here again.

The workshop ended up with some agreements. The CG promised to take into account some relevant outcomes raised and to organize work groups for first agreements about changes. The RG decided to continue with the monthly meetings to further explore possible ways of taking an active part in these changes.

Life Sustainability at Work

In this phase the debate on sustainability shared some significant issues with the epistemological level. The ongoing exploration of the data promoted a modification of the RG's perception of life sustainability. Life sustainability at work appeared as a complex issue related to a wider perspective on the organizational culture, its functioning, and change. Participants started to link their sustainability to their participation in the organizational change: change was no longer something that affected the work life; it was a challenge to take part in.

If change is perceived as coming from the top of the organization, linked to power issues and inaccessible, it carries in itself a strong feeling of frustration. People can feel dependent (and in this case the top management might be seen as "bad") or too weak because of their inability to have any influence. These are, we reckon, interesting cultural data: an organization in which change is seen as independent of people risks promoting inertial forces. Therefore, it might be of great importance to work on a different perspective by inviting people to think that very small changes can make a difference and to value the small aspects that they see as relevant in their work. This is a way of increasing the possibility of their influence on change and on their workplace.

In the process described, promoting life sustainability started to be seen as a common task, closely related to the opening of a new dialogue with the top of the organization. People were developing a consciousness of experiencing their workplace in a particular historical phase, in which the organization was moving from a traditional familial functioning to risking of an ex-

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

cess of bureaucracy. These reflections allowed them to have an *organizational* eye on problems and to think about more participative and less *individualistic* solutions:

We need to intervene at the divisional level of the organization if we want to feel less lonely: divisions can be the links between the top and the operative level, places where it is possible to share and take decisions about common problems. (Participant, middle manager).

While going deep inside the core issues related to sustainability, the RG started to explore organizational solutions to promote better life conditions at work (intervening at the level of the divisions, modifying their mission and functioning, etc.). This level of analysis allowed the two groups to exchange ideas during the workshop and to achieve substantial agreement on the contents of the research. Their cooperation on the research process and their agreement on how to put the proposed solutions into action, however, had still to be built.

The Final Phase

After the workshop the RG showed intense and contrasting feelings about the meeting and its outcomes. They were satisfied at having had the opportunity to share their problems and to present themselves as a united and committed group, concerned and competent in analyzing their organization.

Now our reflections are more shared and common... That's important. (Participant, middle manager).

Something new happened: we crossed our boundaries and Divisions. We showed we can work as a working group... we need to go on working this way. We also need to accept our responsibilities too to play our part. (Participant, middle manager).

This action research was a good opportunity for us; we had the possibility to share our problems. Our jointly-written documents are the evidence that we became a group. (Participant, middle manager).

In most of the participants' words there was a feeling of belonging to a group, their perceived efficacy in communicating and sharing problems, and their consciousness of being there to build "a shared and new product" in spite of their initial distrust.

On the other hand, the RG had conflicting representations about the role played by the CG during the workshop and, more generally, within the action research process. Some participants started feeling the need for a stronger CG contribution not only to manage the problems explored but also to analyze and to process the research issues: they showed more responsibility and less of a tendency to delegate. The problem-solving process stopped appearing as separate from the problem-setting phase; the expectation was to engage the CG in going deep inside the problems highlighted during the workshop.

Engaging in dialogue with the CG was fundamental not only to solve the problems but also to construct them in a different way:

Thanks to the research staff, our analysis was listened to. ... The important work for us was developing a different attitude, like for example thinking of the CG as interlocutors and not just listeners. This helped us to prepare a speech and a presentation of our work with a different language, having in mind the chance for a real collaboration. (Participant, middle manager).

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

Most of the RG participants were waiting for a "first move" to come out of the CG:

Do they have the willingness to go on? We need their effort. (Participant, middle manager).

I'm convinced that nothing will happen if we wait for their first move... We must tell them our proposals. (Participant, middle manager).

The RG had some difficulties in that phase in recognizing that knowing and changing can be gradual, partial, and long-term processes. Although it took about one year for the RG to become a real working group, committed and engaged in the action research process, they were not prepared to let the CG take their time to do the same. Most of the RG members had the feeling that the CG's engagement was too weak:

My impression is that despite their declared interest, we won't see many practical outcomes. (Participant, middle manager).

The RG members were in a hurry; they wanted to receive quick answers and confirmations from the CG.

From the beginning of the process, the emergent epistemological contract showed a new idea of socially constructed and situated knowledge, but the perception of graduality and partiality of the process of knowing and changing had still to be built. We decided as research staff to reflect on that with the RG to help them take position in a nonlinear and long-term change process.

Talking about problems is different from acting. If we want some actions to be started, we need time, we need to avoid being in a hurry. If the organization is in a hurry, people will be sacrificed to the organizational needs. What is needed is a relational space *where organizational problems can be discussed and shared.* (Research staff).

Reflecting on the uncertainty and partial nature of change allowed the RG to think not only about the committee's engagement, but also on their own participation in the action research process:

We must defend our achievements, and think about strategies for putting efforts on them although we are always involved in our everyday work. (Participant, middle manager).

Some changes will be proposed by the top soon. We must ask ourselves how to contribute, as a group, to influence this process. (Participant, middle manager).

The RG level of participation "swung" from expectant to more active positions, from the demand of rapid and ready solutions to the consciousness that change was a complex and gradual process, and that it was important to take part in it.

What happened later showed us that the CG had a different epistemological perspective. A few months after the workshop, the top management started an extensive reorganization. Although they followed some recommendations coming from the research, the mechanism was definitely top-down. They informed the rest of the organization that in a few months all divisions would change their mission and their functioning; middle managers' tasks and responsibilities would also be modified. The relationship between the RG and the CG seemed "frozen:" there was no room for organizing either meetings or other workshops to go on searching and reflecting together.

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

The action research time was coming to an end (as planned at the beginning of the one-year process), and the organizational climate was uncertain and close to a crisis.

Nothing has changed. We are tired. (Participant, middle manager).

In this situation, our choice was to conclude the action research process. We could not go on with the work of the RG without the contribution and the participation of the CG, which was involved in managing the reorganization to the exclusion of everything else. We decided to write a final report, waiting for the right moment to present it to the committee in order to evaluate with the top management how to use the research outcomes within the ongoing reorganization.

Life Sustainability at Work

In the final report we presented a complete analysis of the key issues related to people's perception of life sustainability at work. It was clear now that sustainability was a complex construct, related to the challenge of organizational change and to the *culture* of change present in the organization.

From my standpoint sustainability means having a project for the future. (Participant, middle manager).

Starting from a *short* perspective on problems ("Sustainability means receiving support from the top managers, improving the competencies of the middle managers"), a *wider* perspective was developed, related to the organizational culture and history, its functioning, and its change ("In order to promote more sustainable conditions it's necessary to understand the historical crisis of today and to engage in planning projects for the future"). Sustainability appeared not only a *result* to be achieved but a *process* to be activated; what created sustainability was a participative work of knowledge exchange to share organizational problems and to manage the change.

The action research itself was a sample of sustainable work because of its epistemological focus on people's responsibility to and participation in the organizational processes.

I believe this is the way to promote change. This methodology respects us and makes our voices listened to. (Participant, middle manager).

The End of the Action Research Process and the Follow-Up

A few months later, we had the opportunity to present the final report, written by our research staff and shared within the RG. We met the CG without the RG members with the aim not to open a debate on the research issues but to evaluate the process and to decide whether and how to go on together. We started defining the produced knowledge as *subjective* and *partial*, highlighting the participative and gradual process of searching for sustainable solutions in the field of the explored organizational problems.

Most of the CG managers confirmed our perception that it was time to take our recommendations into account. Unfortunately, their perspective about "how" to do so was not very different from their initial vision:

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

We face communication problems and see lack of competencies in our middle managers. We should give them some answers and solutions. (Committee Group).

Problems were represented as "objective obstacles" that should be eliminated rather than socially constructed products to be explored and managed cooperatively and gradually. We realized that the CG had the willingness to work on the highlighted issues, but it seemed to us that they had no clear ideas about how to do it, and when. They showed us gratitude and professional esteem but said that they needed more time to manage the pressing needs of the reorganization before opening the doors to new "epistemologies."

After presenting the report, we decided on a follow-up phase: we proposed interviewing all the RG participants to evaluate the short-term research outcomes. The interviews showed gratitude for the work accomplished together but worries about the future of the organization. Participants' representations highlighted the development of a new perspective on knowledge, a practical, shared knowledge:

The most useful outcome was sharing practical advice and suggestions with my colleagues. (Participant, middle manager)

I was no more alone with my problems. (Participant, middle manager)

and a reflective knowledge:

I had the opportunity to reflect on our tendency to delegate. It could be the inheritance of our organizational history and culture. (Participant, middle manager).

On the other hand, most of the participants felt disoriented about the practical effects produced by the action research. According to the process outcomes, the organization was changing, but it was not clear how the research had an influence in this change.

Some participants confessed their suspicions that everything had been already decided, although one had no doubt that our research had a determinant role in the organizational change:

Maybe everything had already been decided; the research just confirmed we were on the right direction. (Participant, middle manager).

We achieved most of our objectives. We played a role in this situation. (Participant, middle manager).

Other members read the situation as a complex process whereby the action research represented an opportunity to take a more active role in the change. From this standpoint, the outcomes of the action research were perceived as new tools that helped people to play a role in and to influence the changing organization.

I got some learning, a new method. We need to go on this way, we'd like to be accompanied during this reorganization, to read the present situation more clearly, to take position in it. (Participant, middle manager).

As first outcomes, the action research promoted individual and group learning: a deeper capability in organizational analysis and a new sensibility around research tools and skills for managing the change.

I often reflect on our organizational functioning, and on how to cope with the actual problems. (Participant, middle manager).

We've learnt a new way to coordinate team work and conduct meetings: people show more willingness to come and to participate. (Participant, middle manager).

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

The follow-up phase ended with an RG request: they asked for a new research project to deepen some issues related to their new organizational situation.

Despite the present difficulties due to the crisis, most of the people seemed to recognize in the action research a more sustainable way to promote knowledge and change that is useful (in terms of individual and group learning) and potentially powerful (in terms of organizational change). At the end of the research, however, it was not clear to us if and when the organization would support new spaces and resources to sustain and to integrate this process in its everyday functioning.

CONCLUSIONS

The action research ended with partial outcomes, some possibilities for further developments, but a persistent level of uncertainty about the future.

In socioorganizational contexts it is not always possible to solve problems quickly. What is possible is to find ways to think about them differently in order to plan strategies and attitudes to cope with them.

In our action research process it became possible for people to get some relief regarding the opportunity to think about problems and organizational issues *together*. Formulating, sharing, holding, and "containing" problems thus made organizational life more sustainable. Treating problems as *thinkable* means accepting that they are perhaps not immediately *resolvable*, but this is already an acquisition in terms of sustainability of the working condition.

Although we still consider the action research process as potentially open, it is possible for us to make a first balance of what we achieved. Working with the RG and the CG produced different epistemological agreements. It can be now useful to go back to our initial questions in this paper and discuss the conditions that facilitated or hindered the process of knowledge and change creation. The efforts put into returning these considerations back to participants *inside* and *during* the process (instead of afterwards) is what helped create knowledge and mutual commitment.

What is the Kind of Knowledge that Was here Produced?

Both groups (RG and CG) appreciated the *local* and *situated* character of the knowledge produced with the action research. The RG also recognized the *dialogic* and *socially constructed* essence of the work. The initial diffidence toward putting together different views and working on problems representations was overcome. Looking "through the eyes of the colleagues" was valued and appreciated. The external researcher, initially seen as the person to refer to (or to mistrust, being a stranger), was welcomed as a resource for comparison and questioning within a logic of less delegation and less dependency on the authority. The RG and the CG, initially far apart from each other, found a way — and a challenge — to dialogue.

The CG, although weakly engaged in the process of problem setting, showed signs at the end of the process of opening up, despite the ongoing organizational crisis. The CG welcomed the analysis made by the RG and used it as a chance to reflect. There were still hopes that a path

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

together could work: discomfort and tiredness were perceived at all levels because of the crisis and complexity of the current situation, and a broader consensus and sharing of point of views could only help in the future as well.

The *reflexive dimension* of the created knowledge was appreciated mostly by the RG, especially for the contents raised and the method adopted (Mezirow, 1991). Through the action research it was possible to discuss and to interpret together research data that were keys for further confrontation. The process raised thoughts about people's tendency toward delegation. For some of the RG participants the process provided a chance to understand some cultural features active in their workplace and their influence on the interpretation of facts and organizational movements.

For the CG, the reflexive side became less entrenched because of the rapid changes they had to deal with. This constituted a critical point of the action research process. The engagement and participation of the committee is, in fact, a crucial factor, not only when it is time to evaluate the process but also during the process itself, during its interpretation and its formative value.

What Was the Proper Link and Balance Between Theory and Practice, Between Knowledge and Action?

The link between researching (producing knowledge) and acting (producing change) appeared a core and crucial theme along the process. Sustainability, as well, appeared strongly connected to the possibility for people to take responsibility in participation and influence toward the organizational challenges.

Action research was then progressively acknowledged for its formative essence. At the end of the process, the RG had acquired knowledge and new awareness of the organization. The request for a new phase of action research was motivated by the fact that people wanted to feel more confident in using participative tools (for analysis and problem solving). A formative essence meant, in our case, the possibility of accompanying people in connecting change and learning, as well as an action system and a social system.

A crucial factor was here the different level of participation experienced by some members of the RG and the possibility of differentiating their role within the organization. The ones who fully engaged in analyzing, interpreting, and communicating their thoughts to the CG, developed the possibility "to be transformative" in practice. The ones who stayed apart had fewer opportunities to count and to reflect on their own strategies and ways of coping with challenges. They remained linked to a vision of linear and "inaccessible" change.

What Kind of Validity Was Necessary to Sustain People's Efforts?

The validation of an action research is for us strongly related to the context in which the process is taking place, a *contextual validity* linked to the value-in-use of the knowledge created for the people engaged in a system or in an organization. The coherence with the context was in our case sustained by the fact that we stayed close to the main issue we were there to explore,

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

work sustainability, seen as a proper and interesting inquiry exercise well grounded in the everyday concerns of people.

Considering the different eyes through which it was possible to reflect and to produce knowledge, the research guaranteed a plurality of knowing (Bradbury & Reason, 2001), achieved by continuous efforts to link reflection with people's experience and validation in the field. The achievement of relevant outcomes, especially in terms of perceived learning and the "right" to action (Piccardo, Benozzo, & Gatti, 2006; Schein 2001), was sustained by the creation of processes in which different levels of participation were allowed, together with the possibility to experience and to manage responsibilities, tools, and inquiry activities.

The kind of validity we advocate here is the one that aims at *practical utility* in the course of the process and after it (achieving skills in organizing and representing aspects of the working life, ability in analysis and calculation, prioritizing and decision making, access to resources, etc.). The validity and the quality of an action research means also a *relational praxis* (where participation is achieved, interdependent relations are created, and people find more powerful links and action to test) and a *participative validity* (Bradbury & Reason, 2001; Piccardo et al., 2006). Finally, quality and validity of an action research, like in this case study, means making the experience of a *plurality of knowing* (i.e., working through different epistemologies-in-use) (Bradbury & Reason, 2001) and a plurality of *embedded knowing*.

As we conclude this paper, there could be space for many other reflections. A critical point that we immediately raised for evaluating ourselves and the project regarded the relationship maintained with the committee group and more generally with the cultural and historical organizational context in which the process took place.

The action research was promoted in an organization that was in the middle of a crisis: both the action system and the social system showed tensions and deep troubles. The crisis made the process of thinking (in which all the parts were involved) meaningful, providing each one with new tools to interpret the difficulties and orientate the change, but at the same time it made it difficult to unblock it. In this context, the engagement with the Committee Group appeared difficult. Assuming a more complex and diversified committee (by considering RG and CG as two committee groups) is undoubtedly the greatest challenge in such a critical scenario, as is sustaining people in resisting the temptation to respond to the crisis through "a triple step forward." The anxiety of *staying* in the crisis and in its complexity is high, but learning to cope with it is one of the most powerful tools that one can have when directions are no longer clear and it is necessary to build them together by making spaces for new visions and energies. These are the biggest challenges that action research processes encounter in organizations that produce services, where quality of the product and quality of life in the social system are key points for the success of the core foundations of the organization itself. New visions are also key challenges to safeguarding the quality of the action research itself. In fact, they make action research sustainable and possible as a socially responsible option to promote learning and well-being of people at work.

NOTE

1. The research staff is composed of Cesare Kaneklin (the project Scientific Director), Full Professor in Work and Organizational Psychology, Catholic University of Milano; Mara Gorli (Researcher), PhD in Work and Organizational Psychology, Catholic University of Milano; and Laura Galuppo (Researcher), PhD Student in Work and Organizational Psychology at the Catholic University of Milano.

Kaneklin, C., & Gorli, M.
"Sustainability at work" through an
action research perspective: Knowledge
creation and validity concerns

REFERENCES

Amovilli, L. (1993). Costruttivismo e metodologia della ricerca-intervento in psicologia del lavoro [Constructivism and action research methodology in work psychology]. *Risorsa Uomo*, *3*, 30-42.

Avallone, F., & Paplomatas, A. (2005). *Salute organizzativa: Psicologia del benessere nei contesti lavorativi* [Organizational health: Well-being psychology in work-life contexts]. Milano, Italy: Cortina.

Baard, P. P., Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2004). Intrinsic need satisfaction: A motivational basis of performance and well being in two work settings. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *24*(10), 2045-2068.

Barus-Michel, J., Enriquez, A., & Lévy, A. (2002). *Vocabulaire de psychosociologie* [Dictionary of psychosociology]. Ramonville Saint-Agne, France: Érès.

Bradbury, H., & Reason, P. (2001). Broadening the bandwidth of validity: Issues and choice-points for improving the quality of action research. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research* (pp. 447-455). London: Sage.

Bruno, A., Kaneklin, C., & Scaratti, G. (2005). *I processi di generazione delle conoscenze nei contesti organizzativi e di lavoro* [Knowledge creation processes in organizational and work contexts]. Milano, Italy: Vita e Pensiero.

Butera, F. (1977). *La ricerca-intervento sull'organizzazione: Casi e teoria* [Action research in organization: Cases and theory]. Roma: Cedis.

Coenen, H. (2002). Ricerca-azione: Rapporti tra ricercatori e attori [Action research: Relationship between actors and researchers]. *Animazione Sociale*, *11*, 41-49.

Cox, S., & Cox, T. (1996). *Safety, systems and people*. Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Danna, K., & Griffin, R. V. (1999). Health and well-being in the workplace: A review and synthesis of the literature. *Journal of Management*, *25*(3), 357-385.

Denzin, N. K. (1994). Evaluating qualitative research in the poststructuralism moment. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *7*, 295-308.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.) (1998a). *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.) (1998b). *The landscape of qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.) (1998c). *Strategies of qualitative inquiry.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dick, B. (2004). Action research literature: Themes and trends. *Action Research*, *2*(4), 425-444.

Doppelt, B. (2003). *Leading change toward sustainability: A change-management guide for business, government and civil society*. Sheffield, UK: Greenleaf.

Dubost, J., & Lévy, A. (2005). Ricerca-azione e intervento [Action research and intervention]. In J. Barus-Michel, E. Enriquez, & A. Lévy (Eds.), *Dizionario di psicosociologia* [Dictionary of psychosociology] (pp. 377-401). Milano, Italy: Cortina.

Dunphy, D., Griffiths, A., & Benn, S. (2003). *Organizational change for corporate sustainability*. New York: Routledge.

Edwards, A. R. (2005). *The sustainability revolution*. Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society.

Fullan, M. (2005). *Leadership & sustainability: System thinkers in action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, Sage.

Gherardi, S. (2002). From organizational learning to practice-based knowing. *Human Relations*, *53*(8), 1057-1080.

Gherardi, S., & Nicolini, D. (2004). *Apprendimento e conoscenza nelle organizzazioni* [Learning and knowledge in organizations]. Roma: Carocci.

Gilardi, S., & Bruno, A. (2006). Action-research negli studi organizzativi: Lo stato dell'arte [Action-research in organizational studies]. *Risorsa Uomo*, *12*(2/3), 132-133.

Gustavsen, B. (2001). Theory and practice: The mediating discourse. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research* (pp. 17-26). London: Sage.

Hart, E., & Bond, M. (1995). *Action research for health and social care*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Heron, J., & Reason, P. (2001). The practice of co-operative inquiry: Research "with" rather than "on" people. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research* (pp. 179-188). London: Sage.

Hoffman, D. A., & Tetrick, L. E. (2003). *Health and safety in organizations: A multilevel perspective*. San Francisco: Wiley.

Kaneklin, C. (1990). Lo sviluppo della ricerca intervento in Italia [Action research development in Italy]. In E. Scabini (Ed.), *Conoscere per intervenire. La ricerca finalizzata sulla famiglia* [Knowing in order to intervene]. Milano, Italy: Vita e Pensiero.

Kaneklin, C. (2006). La ricerca-azione e il suo sviluppo in Italia [Action-research and its Italian development]. *Risorsa Uomo*, *12*(2/3), 121.

Kaneklin, C., & Bruno, A. (2003). Progettare nel sociale: la ricerca-azione [Working in social contexts: Action research]. In V. Alastra (Ed.), *Valorizzare l'organizzazione, organizzare il valore: Gestione e sviluppo delle risorse umane che promuovono la salute* [Valuing the organization, organizing the value: Human resources management and development to promote well-being] (pp. 55-63). Perugia, Italy: Edizioni Sedes.

Kiernan, W. E., & Knutson, K. (1990). Quality of work life. In R. L. Schalock & M. J. Begab (Eds.), *Quality of life: Perspectives and issues* (pp. 101-114). Washington, DC: American Association of Mental Retardation.

Lancia, F. (2004). *Strumenti per l'analisi dei testi: Introduzione all'uso di T-LAB* [Tools for text analysis: An introduction to the use of T-LAB]. Milano, Italy: FrancoAngeli.

Lévy, A. (2005). Organizzazione [Organization]. In J. Barus-Michel, A. Enriquez, & A. Lévy (Eds.), *Dizionario di psicosociologia* [Dictionary of psychosociology] (pp. 208-216). Milano, Italy: Cortina.

Marshall, J. (2001). Self-reflective inquiry practices. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research* (pp. 433-440). London: Sage.

Martel, J. P., & Dupuis, J. (2006). Quality of work life: Theoretical and methodological problems, and presentation of a new model and measuring instrument. *Social Indicators Research*, *77*, 333-368.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimension of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Olivetti Manoukian, F. (2002). Il circolo virtuoso conoscenza-azione [The virtuous circle of knowledge-action]. *Animazione Sociale*, *5*, 19-26.

Park, P. (2001). Knowledge and participatory research. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research* (pp. 228-237). London: Sage.

Peters, M., & Robinson, V. (1984). The origins and status of action research. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *29*(2), 113-124.

Piccardo, C., & Benozzo, A. (1996). *Etnografia organizzativa* [Organizational ethnography]. Milano, Italy: Cortina.

Piccardo, C., Benozzo, A., & Gatti, P. (2006). Decostruendo e costruendo l'idea di validità nella ricerca-azione [Deconstructing and reconstructing the idea of validity in action research]. *Risorsa Uomo*, *2-3*, 159-172.

Rapaport, R. N. (1970). Three dilemmas of action research. *Human Relations, 23*, 499-513.

Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2001). *Handbook of action research*. London: Sage.

Schein, E. H. (2001). Clinical inquiry/research. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research* (pp. 228-237). London: Sage.

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflexive practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.

Senge, P., Laur, J., Schley, S., & Smith, B. (2006). The fifth discipline meets sustainability. In P. Senge, J. Laur, S. Schley, & B. Smith (Eds.), *Learning for sustainability* (pp. 7-8). Cambridge, UK: SoL (The Society for Organizational Learning).

Sirgy, M. J., Efraty, D., Siegel, P., & Lee, D. (2001). A new measure of quality of work life (QWL) based on need satisfaction and spillover theories. *Social Indicators Research*, *55*, 241-302.

Stringer, E. (1999). *Action research* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Susman, G. I., & Evered, R. D. (1978). An assessment of the scientific merits of action research. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *23*(4), 582-603.

United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). *Our common future*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice, learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Wilson, H. N. (2004). Towards rigour in action research: A case study in marketing planning. *European Journal of Marketing*, *38*(3/4), 378-400.