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CONDUCTOR:

Our first speaker of the day is coming to us from Oregon. This is Professor Hilary Bradbury-Huang. She is a professor at the Oregon Health and Science University, and she will be speaking to us on Action Research and the Transformation of Knowledge Creation. Good morning, Hilary, or whatever time of day it is for you, and welcome.

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HILARY:

Thank you so much. It is indeed afternoon here, and it's just a real pleasure to be with you. This is my first video conference in this format, and I just think of all the carbon and the carbon footprinting that we're saving. So I'm just really delighted, especially grateful to Gabrielle.

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As it happens, I'm just back from Switzerland, so I'm totally jet-lagged. It also means that I haven't quite seen as many digital posters as I intend to. I've seen a few, for sure. And so, I look forward to joining the conversation in the questions that will come after my talk.

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Let me just jump in. I'm a journal editor, and I'm interested in how journalists talk about the nut graph, which really is the heart and soul of anything that they're writing. And so the heart and soul, the nut graph of what I'm going to say is really that the spirit of human science, by which I mean the systematic inquiry into life as it is empirically need not be based in objectification, need not be based in the conquering of nature, but more importantly, is about partnership with others somehow muddling through to make life better.

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And next slide. And I think action research exemplifies that kind of thing. A slide before that. So my intention is to share the basics of action research, acknowledging that some of you may not have even heard of this strange term before, and for those of you who have, I'm hoping to share a little bit more about the multidimensionality of the work, give some illustrations and talk about first-person research, which is the work that the individual does.

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Second-person research, which we're probably most famous for as action researchers that's working with other people. And third-person research, that's work that we do in great big populous networks. There's plenty of further reading. I'd particularly direct you to the journal because we've just celebrated our 10th anniversary.

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Next slide, please. So we'll start with a brief definition. You can read it there yourselves. I would just draw your attention to the number of "ands" in that statement. Action and reflection, theory and practice, working with others. So the multidimensionality is there, and when I say it's multidimensional, I mean that in contrast with conventional social science.

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Next slide. And I think to really get the spirit of the work is to ask ourselves the question, what is knowledge for? And we must remember that the purpose of knowledge is so rarely debated. Now, of course, once we get into the purpose of knowledge, and I mentioned up front that for me, that's really about the spirit of partnership.

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It's about sharing experience. It's about making the world a better place in the very complex ways that can take on working with many stakeholders. But once we get into that level of complexity, of course, it's important to ask how do you know what good action research is. And we take the term validity and we blow it up into more dimensions than internal and external validity.

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And so I would point you. If you're interested at all in this kind of conversation to the digital poster on quality in action research, and I believe that's digital poster number 609. What's important to underscore is that we live inside complex social change efforts, action researchers being we live inside complex social change efforts.

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We move from a stance of pragmatism, so we're not trying to simply describe reality, we're actually trying to make something meaningful happen that stakeholders together have decided needs to happen, and we bring reflexivity to that.

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Next slide, please. And so this kind of picture I think cutely captures this issue of objectification. Where is objectification even acceptable anymore? Certainly, men aren't supposed to objectify women. Or if they do, they have to do it with a certain level of consciousness about what's up. Because really, what's behind objectification is the reduction of the other to a mere object, and yet, objectivity in conventional social science, continues as being the good thing to aim for.

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We, as action researchers say, that debate's been won. We're living in a post-linguistic turn. The linguistic turn has happened. Constructivism has happened. And We want to meet the other as an active subject, somebody with agency, somebody who's alive.

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Next slide, please. To talk a little bit just about the history, the term Action Research is often said to have originated with Kurt Lewin, who also happens to be the father of social psychology. In reality, it comes from a guy called John Collier, who everybody seems to have forgotten. But the work was exemplified back in the 50s, the beginnings of organization development, and all the work that has come from that.

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In the coal mines, funnily enough, asking very practical questions, how can you tell what's high versus low productivity, not so much to describe it, but so that you can have more of what you're looking for? How do we begin to work with coal miners, so that they're subjects in creating coal mines where things work, where things are safe where things are productive? In the 1970s, our colleague Orlando Fals Borda who passed away a few years ago down in Colombia pointed out that, knowledge, popular knowledge was always and in every place about creating a better life for people.

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And so, I think these two strands come together, both Orlando's work and then the early work in the 50s in the Western world to say that action research is really about the production of work where the primacy of what is practical is key.

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And so, just briefly a little bit more how we can complement conventional science. We're not saying we're better than conventional science.

We're simply saying we could complement it. Because there's been too much emphasis on simply describing things. Only focusing on the past. Focus only on third-party research. That's research about others, for others. It's aimed simply at understanding.

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Understanding is important, but we actually also want to make the change. And so, these things we say are not enough. So action research comes along to complement these kinds of efforts.

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Next slide. And so when I say it complements, we are more than just describing, we're trying to actually emancipate, which is a big word. So this relational, this thing of beyond objectivity, this means being in a relationship with co-participants. It means including the future. For example, when we talk with people about their future efforts, we're actually bringing consciousness to how we're going to make change.

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So we're deeply influencing the future through being conscious about what we want in the present. I think that's what makes action research quite special and therefore of great relevance to sustainability efforts, which I think is one arena in which it's been particularly picked up. Integrating personal reflexivity, I think also makes a break with conventional social science.

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And by this, we're simply saying, that sociologists talk about subject position, by which I think they're meaning that if an executive and a frontline employee are both involved in action research, they're going to have very different perspectives. What Donna Haraway calls partiality.

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They're going to have very partial perspectives. Partial both in what they want to happen and partial both in its limitations. Bringing an effort to understand that feels very important. And this is another way of moving beyond objectification. There is no one truth. How do we therefore work with multiple truths in a kind of, what Habermas talks about as communicative action.

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Next slide. Some action researchers that you may know by name, certainly good colleagues over the years, Otto Scharmer and Peter Senge, they call their work Community Action Research or CAR, and they essentially talk about how the community of scholars and practitioners comes together.

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As we all know, when working with practitioners, there's tremendous know how, tremendous practical know how, but there's a great loss of that knowledge when we try to capture it or codify it. And then, as we also know in the world of scholarship, there's tons of theories and methods that's often just ignored. And so together, working together, the creation of tools that can be helpful can be important.

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Next slide. I want to give now three kinds of categories of action research with examples associated with each one. I'm hoping they're just one example for each, but it might give you a sense and a feel and therefore an interest in reading the many, many, many types of examples that exist obviously in the journal and in other publications.

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So second-person action research, I mentioned it essentially, it's a fancy way of saying research with you. And next slide. This is something that we're probably most familiar with as action researchers and most known for. So this work I draw from my colleague Peter Reason. And this is the Marks & Spencer's Eco Factory.

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Marks & Spencer's a big what would you call them, department store. It sells all types of food and clothing, for the everyday person. Located originally in the UK and now spreading. But here in their eco-factory in Sri Lanka, where they make underwear, Peter became interested in how such an effort inside Marks & Spencer's would happen and what some of the spirit is essentially behind it.

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Because in understanding that spirit, we then help to have it spread throughout Marks & Spencer's. So Peter's work was at the early stages of the development of sustainability strategies within Marks & Spencer's. Next slide. And so, as an example of how he went around, he went about this work taking from Ken Wilbur, this notion of, looking both internally at the subject externally.

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And then internally at the organization and externally at the environment in which work is happening. He did some interviews to understand what the people in the factories and the folks in the UK, at the executive levels were understanding as the subjective reasons. And frequently finding that concern for their children, their kids, was deeply motivating.

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Objective factors, of course, were efforts in England and ongoingly in Europe, less so unfortunately, in the United States, to ratchet carbon out of supply chains. And then there were collective subjective factors, and then collective objective factors. So his work, which I won't get into, you can certainly read about it, his work, therefore, illustrates how interview at the, with you level than marriage to a deeper understanding of what's happening at the more collective level when put together can be very useful.

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Next slide. So the action research at the second level, if you will, really takes off when we bring what we're finding from these subjective kind of studies and objective studies into conversation with other people who need to be touched. And so that happened inside this larger program called Low Carbon Works.

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And next slide. And there. Oops, it's turning around. Let's go to the next slide. And there the practice of learning history becomes useful in research with the other. The learning history both uses video these days, previously, was just a written format like a magazine, was producing some of the interviewee's words so people would get a rich sense of what was going on.

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Bringing that into a context where others who wanted to use the work but didn't fully understand how and in the case of low carbon works, it was a lot of invitation to government officials in England, say at one city they could have this conversation around this document using these videos to reflect on, "Well, if that's what's going on in their organization, how could we learn in our very different organization without feeling any pressure?" We could be a little bit more creative in understanding their results for us.

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So the whole purpose of that work forthcoming this new paper on learning history the idea is to not just document, but also to emancipate best ideas in other contexts.

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Next slide. An example of third-person action research, a third person for them, for others, refers essentially for action researchers to great big populous networks. I think here the work of Bjorn Gustafsen in Scandinavia in developing dialogues on how to have more democratic workplaces deserves a lot of emphasis.

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His work, as far as I know, because it was funded for many years by the EU, the European Union, to the tune of, I believe, 30, 35 million euros is some of the best-funded, not just action research, but any social science in the EU, and I think he put the term Democratic Workplace on the map, such that nowadays, I think, in the West, the idea of having a democratic workplace is a foregone conclusion. We don't really tolerate autocracy and so issues of empowerment, et cetera.

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Next slide. Socio-Technical systems. Next slide. Is a term that came out of that work. It was used in action research in the 80s and 90s. I give here, a quick example of my own work-Sustainable Enterprise Executive Roundtable.

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Next slide. While a professor at the University of Southern California near Hollywood down there in Los Angeles, I became aware that tremendous pollution and high carbon were connected with the cargo transshipment that was coming in through the port of Los Angeles and essentially serving large numbers of consumers in the United States.

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The burden, however, of pollution needed to be addressed. It's very hard for any one organization, no matter how big and rich they are to address that. And so at the University of Southern California, we call together this network informed, inspired, if you will, by Bjorn's work in Sweden. And we said, how could we do together what any one individual organization cannot do alone? The big partner in this is the insider partner. With me as the research partner at the university, the insider partner was the port themselves. Very interested because they like to see themselves as a green port. And it's so hard to regulate because there's so many things that can go wrong. How do you bring people together into a conversation?

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Next slide. Which can have many creative manifestations, bilateral agreements between, garbage makers and Disney to create different packaging, et cetera. The one the one here that I'll point to is carbon reduction efforts that came through systems interventions. We used system dynamics scenarios to help people understand what was going on.

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So again, just illustrating what third person work looks like and the kind of research that comes out of that, the importance of dialogue, bringing many stakeholders together, action research, as we call this, third person work.

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Next slide. And then to finish out, first-person work that I do, me, or I invite others to do work for them, focusing on themselves. Next slide. Here the effort was, that I'm situated at a medical-oriented academic center. And here the effort was to bring together a team from the palliative care units, where people have given up on heroic medical interventions.

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And working with that team, which included volunteers as well as medical providers, I invited people to take on the practice of meditation once a day for 12 weeks. And then studied that, and there were really unexpected benefits. People refer to being seated in their groove. I think that the bottom line was people got over the sense of anxiety that is naturally present when we're in the presence of death.

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And again, if you were interested, you could read a little bit more in an upcoming article, but again, I'm just trying to emphasize and illustrate these categories of action research many examples in these categories. The suggestion among contemporary action researchers is that combining third-person work with second-person efforts, in some ways, Peter Reason was already doing that.

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He was doing these interviews and bringing them into larger populous networks of government agencies. But how do we also bring in the first-person work into that? Or how do we bring second person and first person work together? So I think that's what contemporary action researchers are up to.

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Next slide. Go in the other way. Next slide. Yeah. Yeah, I think this may indeed be my final slide. So essentially, I'm inviting us into a conversation about the kind of science that we think serves a more sustainable world, a world in which there's a partnership, a world in which we're engaging with subjects as equals, as partners and trying to figure things out. Make things better for all of us.

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And here I paraphrase one of my favorite quotations from Dana Meadows, who's better known as a systems researcher inside of sustainability. And the paraphrase is, "We can describe, of course, in ever finer detail the world that we already have, or we can foment a revolution."

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And so in that way, as action researchers, perhaps we're invited to be more scholarly activists. Thank you.

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CONDUCTOR:

Thank you very much, Hillary, for that wonderfully clear explication of the scope principles, and sensibility of Action Research. We're going to get some questions from the audience now. Michael.

[00:20:42]

MICHAEL:

Hi. Thank you very much for that presentation. My name is Michael O'Rourke. I'm at Michigan State University. And I'm curious about the role that values play in this sort of work. It sounds like the one key dimension of action research as you've defined it is the embrace of values all around on your part, on the part of the researcher, on the part of the participants and stakeholders and others that you work with on these projects.

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And I'm curious how you balance the values you bring to a project as a researcher, your own vision of what sustainability and a positive future look like against possibly conflicting, or at least intentional values that you might find with the groups that you collaborate with and how you balance that, how you negotiate as an action researcher through those kinds of challenges.

[00:21:42]

HILARY:

Thanks for that question, Michael. I share with you and join you in understanding that values are a very central part of our work. And in that again, we're quite different from conventional social science. And so, my simple answer, although it implies a very complicated kind of way of working, the simple answer is dialogue.

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So by being in partnership with stakeholders, no one agenda can be so easily pushed. At the very least, there has to be consciousness and clarity about whose agenda, why is that right now, et cetera, et cetera. I think there's more danger when working with certain types of populations, let's say, less empowered populations.

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And that certainly shows up. Action research is very popular in the educational world. It's very popular in social work and so on. However, I will say in the organizational world, in the professional world, if anything in working with executives, as you saw there in Los Angeles, these are large corporations.

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Executives from these corporations don't like to, in any way be told what to do. So I think the work of action research is actually to bring a little bit more open-mindedness to values and the importance of holding, many kinds of values because the valueless type of research really just reinforces the status quo.

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However, it takes a little bit of artistry to bring a conversation on values to executives who are simply not used to having those kinds of conversations. So again, the simple answer is dialogue, and I'm sure that the very reason for posing the question on your part is that you've had some experiences, good and bad with this issue.

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CONDUCTOR:

We have one question online before we move to the other live people.

[00:23:47]

NICKIE:

Yes, and we've got another one that Gabrielle just given me by email as well. So I'll start with the one on Twitter by Mysterious Networker – “Liking the action research plenary but skeptical of Senge and disagree with Wilbur. Is the method adaptable?”

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HILARY:

Skeptical of Peter Senge and, disagreeing with Ken Wilbur. What can I say? What can I say? I see them both as people who have done tremendous work to popularize, in Peter's case, systems thinking. Sometimes when we popularize, we may be seen as having oversimplified very complex issues. Peter's work has deeply informed my own.

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Maybe this is a values judgment that I hold. He's been an important mentor. Of course, also to me over the years, but I can certainly see how in the realm of the level of complexity that, systems work automatically brings us into, there can be differing opinions.

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Ken's work, I know less. I'm introducing it here through Peter Reasons. The little feel that I gave, I find actually very useful. It's a very simple notion, this quadrant of bringing attention to internal as well as external subjective as well as objective. We've all say yeah, but how frequently do we overfocus on one particular part of the quadrant?

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There might indeed be better ways to say this. And I could say as somebody who knows a little bit about the work of Habermas this quadrant in a way comes also from the work of Habermas, but Habermas of course makes things way more complicated. So I appreciate Wilbur for the simplicity, but like my earlier

comment, where there's tremendous complexity being reduced not everybody of course will be happy, particularly if they know the details.

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I don't know if that's a good answer. I certainly appreciate the reminder to be careful of our sources.

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CONDUCTER:

Go ahead, Nick.

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NICKIE:

And we have one other from Bill Muir from the Association of Interdisciplinary Studies. "Why shouldn't we worry that action research delegates decisions about what should happen to individual action researchers on-site rather than to the marketplace of ideas and peer reviewers?"

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Aren't other perspectives and values, as well as insights from other locales, left out in the process? Might not interventions by action researchers prove well-meaning but premature, idiosyncratic, or even biased by personal values?"

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HILARY:

I think my answer here would be to reiterate the answer I gave to Michael's question originally. I would actually go so far as to say the chances of these dangers are much more lessened in the action research orientation to research, precisely because dialogue with stakeholders is very, very key.

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In fact, that's the center of the work. One danger could be not having the right stakeholders or the right sampling of stakeholders in the work, and we could certainly talk about that. But the idea that an action researcher gets to push her/his agenda is, in reality, it doesn't happen. It absolutely doesn't happen.

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And I would also refer us back to what is quality in action research. This is a conversation that's quite vibrant now. It happens to be a conversation that I particularly care greatly for. There has been a lot of crappy, if I may use that French word, crappy action research over the years, and I think it behooves us to look more carefully at what really is quality and begin to share and make discussable the quality choice points that we have. But the partnership is key.

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There's seven quality choice points. I won't get into them, but quality is absolutely key. Excuse me. The partnership is absolutely key. And where there is partnership, no one person can push an agenda, or at least not easily, not without bringing consciousness and dialogue to that.

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So really, we come back to what Habermas calls ideal speech situations. How do we create a context in which people are not afraid to speak and which agendas can be shared? As I shared in my particular context. If anything, the Action Researcher's emancipatory agenda, if you will, it absolutely starts off more in a sidelined place, although more and more the marketplace embraces sustainable development. There's no question about that. I would just simply end with the word dialogue. Where there is dialogue, there is not a pushing of a particular agenda.

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CONDUCTOR:

We can take one more question, I think before we move on.

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WENDY:

Wendy Elford, Canberra. I work in as a consultant, but also an independent academic.

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I see a crossover between action research sense-making and anticipatory frameworks. Action research, reference your own work and others. Sense-making, perhaps Dave Snowden, and also, anticipatory frameworks from a sort of foresight perspective, they seem to have a lot in common. I see a little bit of an argument happening here between the personal perspective, which has got face validity, and getting the scaled-up version of that so we can get some statistical, quantitative, as well as qualitative information about how to make decisions in real time.

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Could you talk about action research, sense-making, and anticipatory frameworks? Whether you see any real crossover is anyone having a conversation about how they can help each other and how are we going to get this quantitative value from qualitative, which I see is needed?

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HILARY:

Let me try to connect with you in the place that I feel most competent. I don't know Snowden's work. For me, sense-making connects me to the work of Carl Wike. And I know some action researchers who have brought that paradigm into information technology implementation inside organizations.

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Whereas we all know, perhaps also in Australia, an enormous amount of money is lost where engineers create these systems that end-use customers don't actually get to sense make about their actual use in day-to-day life, right? In that sense that work has been very useful. I'm thinking now of the work of Chris Dymock.

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I would actually like to see an awful lot more work on this. But, to speak to the issue of quantification, first things first, there's no reason that an action researcher couldn't or shouldn't use a quantitative paradigm. I myself have found particular value in network analysis, a heavily quantitative orientation, but it's built inside a relational understanding of how the world works. So we're not at all against quantification.

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Generally speaking, however, I think it's true that we're not hypothesis-testing, not as much as we used to be. We tend to be more qualitative, and more inductive. Ivana Lincoln has written about the huge overlap in the work. Of course, in the end, action researchers are about taking action, not just having a deep understanding. And so, that's the beginning of my answer to you.

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I think that there's phases inside of research and quantification, perhaps where it's most useful, is coming out of a phase of inductive qualitative research and then moving into more quantification. That said, I do want to throw out the notion or throw in the notion of social networks, and social capital.

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So rather than thinking about replication and generalizability, which I think is the more conventional way of thinking about what's next building upon our work, I want to introduce Gustafson's notion of what we're actually and more importantly trying to do is build social capital. So knowledge that moves through social networks may indeed be more valuable to the general population than knowledge that moves through replication, and quantification, which is notoriously difficult to do.

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So that's the thought that I would like to leave. The idea of knowledge through social networks, and the importance of building social capital to take the place of the emphasis that we have conventionally placed on replication and generalizability. I hope that in some way speaks to your question.

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CONDUCTER:

That's very good. Thank you very much, Hilary. It's a perfect point to end. Your talk elicited more questions than we're able to handle in our time frame, but they'll linger in the follow-up discussions. Thank you again.