Origins of the ethos of action learning

Abstract

The aim of this article is to make a contribution to understanding the ethos of action learning, by exploring how it was influenced by the early family experience of Reg Revans as the originator of action learning. In order to do so it examines what is meant by the term 'ethos of action learning' in terms of its values and beliefs. The paper identifies in Revans' early family life 7 underpinning values that found their way into action learning as it later emerged as a viable practice and 7 guiding beliefs. In the light of these findings it discusses a range of issues including the definition of action learning and, therefore, what counts as action learning, the practical uses of self-knowledge and the differences between cleverness and wisdom. The paper concludes by asking some fresh questions about action learning and its development.

Keywords:
Ethos of action learning, Revans, guiding beliefs, first-hand knowledge, fresh questions

Introduction

Action learning is both a practice and an ethos. The practice of Revans' action learning developed during the years between the early 1950s with the first experiments in action learning in the coal industry and the early 1980s when action learning had become recognised within mainstream management development. Since that time the practice of action learning has continued to develop in a number of directions, including, 'self-managed', 'auto', 'on-line', 'business-driven' and 'critical' (Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook, 2005). The practice of action learning adapts to different circumstances and different contexts.

The fact that we can recognise these different practices as action learning indicates that they retain its essential character, which is often termed its ethos. In this paper we examine what is meant by the 'ethos of action learning' in terms of its guiding beliefs and ideals or values. This prompts the question, where did these guiding beliefs and values come from? Our aim is to discover which guiding beliefs and values of action learning can be found in the early life of Reg Revans as the person who developed the first practice recognised as action learning.

During his later years, Revans credited his experience as a physicist at the Cavendish laboratory in Cambridge as making a major contribution to the beliefs and values behind the development of action learning. This paper explores what underpinning values and beliefs Revans had already acquired *before* he arrived at the Cavendish. For this reason, we restrict ourselves to the years of his life up the age of 21 which defined adulthood at that time (1928).

Revans believed that peoples' attitudes are much affected by their early experiences: "… the way people look at the life they live is very powerfully determined by their experiences as little children" quoted in Boshyk and Dilworth (2010: 50). So it is reasonable, therefore, to suppose that Revans' own attitudes were 'very powerfully determined' by his childhood experiences, including his family life.

Revans placed high value on the usefulness of new knowledge so it behoves us, at the outset, to consider the potential usefulness of the knowledge we are seeking in this enquiry. Of what use is greater understanding of the roots of the ethos of action learning? Our answer is that it can potentially help us do action learning better. David Botham (friend of Revans and founding Director of the *Revans Centre for Action Learning*) has expressed this well: "By returning to the roots of action learning, it should be possible to enhance the forms of action learning in use today." (Botham in Boshyk and Dilworth, 2010: 84). Acquiring a better understanding of the ethos of action learning in terms of its guiding beliefs and values should enable us to improve the forms and the practice of action learning within each of those forms.

We also hope that this paper will help to clarify the nature of action learning's ethos itself. Revans did not give an authoritative definition of action learning (Pedler, et al, 2005). Arguably, this helped to facilitate the development of new forms of action learning and new practices. However, this only increases the need to be clear about the ethos of action learning. Greater clarity about the ethos of action learning in terms of its guiding beliefs and values can help us assess whether new forms and new practices really do count as action learning.

In addition, a clearer perception of the ethos of action learning, with its underlying guiding beliefs and values, should help action learning practitioners resolve the sorts of difficulties that can emerge within the life-course of individual action learning sets. The clearer that action learning participants and organisers of action learning programmes are about the values and guiding beliefs embodied by action learning the more successful are such programmes likely to be.

The next section of this paper addresses some background issues, including definitions and what is already known about the roots of Revans action learning from the literature on the subject. This is followed by a section that draws together such material on Revans' early family life as is relevant to the development of action learning. We then summarise our findings in two tables which present those values and beliefs with observations on Revans early family life. We conclude with a discussion of issues raised, implications and some questions raised by this enquiry that could form the basis of further work in this field.

Background

For the sake of clarity our usage of several terms need to be defined. In this paper we define the 'ethos' of action learning to mean its essential character, reflecting its guiding beliefs and values. The discussion section of the paper provides our rationale for so doing. In order to be clear about the difference between 'belief' and 'value' we use 'belief' in its cognitive sense. In other words, we use 'belief' for propositional statements ('belief that') rather than for statements of commitment, support or affirmation ('belief in'). We use the word 'values' in a literal sense to refer to that which is valued within the action learning community.

Most of the writing on the development of action learning has concentrated on the post-war period, particularly the years from 1945 to 1980. It was in 1945 that Revans first proposed a primitive prototype of action learning in the form of a 'consortium of pitmen', i.e. a staff college for the mining industry where miners and their managers would learn

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with and from each other as they shared their first-hand knowledge. During this period, 1945-80, the major 'experiments' took place, including the first attempt to implement an early form of action learning in the coal industry in the early 1950s, the hospitals' internal communications (HIC) project in the 1960s, the programme to raise the productivity of companies in Belgium in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the GEC programme in the second half of the 1970s. The last of these programmes emphasised the personal development aspect of action learning, 'action learning sets' as the 'cutting edge' of action learning, own job projects and the practice/logistics of the action learning programmes. After that, the core ideas of action learning were refined into a practice, including action learning sets, as described in the '*ABC of Action Learning',* an easy to follow guide for action learning practitioners. Thereafter, during the 1980s, action learning became a recognised method within mainstream management development.

In this paper, we are much less interested in the forms and practices of action learning than the values and beliefs that underpin them. We ask how much of the ethos of action learning can be traced back to Revans' early life? In exploring the issue one of our two main sources is the words of Revans himself. As he got older he was more inclined to reminisce about his early life. The other main source is the work of Boshyk and Dilworth (2010) and the sources listed therein. That book is an invaluable source of biographical material about Revans. However, although it claimed to be a book about the history and evolution of action learning, in fact, it is a book about the history of Reg Revans himself, at least up to his death in 2003, after which it is mostly an account of the development of one particular form of action learning, business-driven action learning, the particular form advanced by Boshyk.

By contrast, we are not interested in Revans' personal history per se but only in those elements of it that shed light on the development of action learning per se. In other words, this paper is a contribution to the biography of action learning rather the biography of Reg Revans. Revans, himself, was disdainful of personal biographies. According to his friend Albert Barker: "He eschewed biographies and other forms of personal recognition …" (Barker in Boshyk and Dilworth, 2010: 29). Revans admired humility and saw the risk that that sort of personal recognition could inflame the ego which he saw as perilous. "Allowing one's ego to go out of control (perhaps the greatest danger of all)." (Revans, 1998: 25). We have no wish to disrespect his position so, in this paper, we do not include details of Revans' life unless we can see a direct contribution to the values and beliefs underpinning the ethos of action learning. In other words, it is not our intention in this paper to reveal new facts about the life of Reg Revans from archival research but to explore what we currently know about that life to answer our question: 'what does this reveal about the values and guiding beliefs of the ethos of action learning?'

It is, of course, easier to record the facts of a person's life than the development of their ideas and values. This is always the problem facing any history of ideas (Burke, 2015). Revans was a private man who admired modesty so we have relatively little material to work with in terms of his early years. We have fragmentary knowledge about his early family life, his education and the faith in which he was raised. In this paper we focus on the first of these, his early family life, and seek to answer the question: 'what aspects of the ethos of action learning can be discerned in the early family life of Reg Revans?'

Method   We started this enquiry by collecting and collating what we currently know about Reg Revans early family life, then we interrogated that material for evidence that

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could be found of the guiding beliefs and values that contributed to the development of action learning as it was practiced by the early 1980s. We focus on the first 21 years of Revans life for several reasons. First, it is often in those early years up to full adulthood in which core values and beliefs are developed. Second, there has been much more attention directed at the next stage of his life as a physicist (particularly his time at the Cavendish laboratory at Cambridge) for its contribution to the development of action learning. And third, this is already a lengthy paper and extending it beyond his 21st year would have made it unmanageably large.

In this paper we focus on the ethos of action learning at the start of the1980s. Why that date? Until the late 1970s action learning was still in a state of on-going development. Revans refers to the major episodes such as the HIC project and the Belgium inter-university programme as 'experiments'. He did not use the term 'action learning' until the early 1970s. And it was not until GEC programmes in the second half of the 1970s that 'action learning sets' which he termed the "the cutting-edge" of action learning made their appearance. By the end of the 1970s Revans had a model of the practice of action learning that he felt confident about enough to write a book on the practice of action learning. That book, the *ABC of Action Learning*, was intended for practitioners with opening chapters on its underlying assumptions and the logistics of practice respectively. An early version of the book appeared in 1978 and it became generally available to the public in 1983 . It seems reasonable to conclude that a fully-fledged version of action learning, that we would recognise as such, existed by the start of the 1980s.

Since that time the practice of action learning has developed and its forms have proliferated. By 2005 it was possible to identify at least 6 new forms of action learning (Pedler, et al 2005). To have focused on the values and guiding beliefs of action learning as it is practiced in these different forms would take us away from the main focus of this paper, which is the *origins* of those values and beliefs.

This article is empirical in that it is grounded in what we believe to be true about Revans' based on established sources. We examine what is known about Revans' early life but with a focus on looking for implicit values and beliefs. It is therefore an exercise in sense-making and, consequently, much of the article relies on inference and interpretation of the known facts.

The research question that has led our enquiry is: what can we deduce from the early family life of Reg Revans about the guiding beliefs and values of the ethos of action learning?

Early family experience

Revans was born in 1907 in Portsmouth where his father worked in the docks as a marine surveyor. When he was still young the family moved for a few years to Merseyside (Birkenhead), where one of his brothers was born. Shortly afterwards, they moved to South London (Balham) which is where Revans spent most of his childhood. How were Revans values and beliefs influenced by his childhood experience of his family?

Revans' mother   We know relatively little about Revans' mother, Ethel, other than that she had a background of family tragedy and that she had strong religious convictions (Barker, 2010: 30). When she was 17, living in Portsmouth, her own mother died in

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childbirth, leaving Ethel to care for her 71-year old stepfather and 3 siblings. Soon afterwards, her stepfather died and her siblings were taken from her to an orphanage. Shortly after that, she met Revans' father, Thomas, and they married.

Revans was very close to his mother and remained so for the rest of her life (Boshyk, 2011) therefore it is probable that he was significantly influenced by her values and beliefs. Revans was sent to a Church of England elementary school and also to Sunday school. His mother read to him from the Bible each day. He was able to quote from memory from the Bible and often did so at length both in his published work and in person. For example, according to Pedler: "I once drove him from Altrincham to Huddersfield, during which he more or less continuously quoted the Bible. He told me that his mother had read it to him as a child and he remembered it, often word for word. Yet, he was mainly interested in the spirit behind the words." (Pedler, 2010: 85).

Revans' mother was also interested in the spirit behind the words in the Bible as she practiced what she preached. She was a volunteer in hospitals, willing to take on the most menial tasks. "…at our local hospital my mother was an energetic voluntary worker, helping to scrub the floors and sweep the corridors." (Boshyk et al, 2010: 51).   It seems she believed that actions spoke louder than words. His mother was clearly an active woman, not above manual work in the service of her values. She also organised "floor-scrubbing parties" of volunteers at the hospital (Revans, 1987).   From her example, one could infer that it is not enough to try to be good, one also has to try to *do* good. In other words one's values are important but so too is living up to one's values.

Revans clearly admired his mother and her determination to turn her Bible-based values into deeds. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to conclude from this that Revans acquired from his mother a respect for values-based living. In his later years Revans lamented the failure of managers to appreciate the importance of values in their lives and in their work. In fact, he saw the biggest problem of management as "a failure, common to Western education, of men to grasp the importance of a managerial value system…" (Revans quoted in Boshyk, 2011: 82). In his book on *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning* he wrote "The needs of mankind to believe in something other than political skill and technical knowledge have not changed in two thousand years." (Revans, 1982: 209).

Revans' father   Revans father, Thomas, started work as an apprentice in the Portsmouth docks. He was still working in the docks when he met his future wife, Ethel, and also when his second son, Reginald, was born. Thomas Revans gradually progressed in his work and was eventually promoted to Chief Ship Surveyor at Britain's Board of Trade and he also progressed to the Council of the Royal Institute of Naval Architects. Revans senior, was clearly an active, capable man and self-made man.

When questioned about his earliest childhood memories Revans often mentioned the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 when he was 5 years old, and the enquiry into the disaster that took place afterwards. Experts had claimed that the ship was unsinkable. His father played a significant part in the enquiry. Revans remembered a stream of sailors coming into the house to talk with his father as part of the enquiry into the disaster. "Some of the sailors and their families alike, were barefooted, so poorly were seamen paid in those days" (Barker, 2010: 30). It can be inferred from such memories that position and status are flawed guides to where significant knowledge can be found ie it can be found at the bottom of the hierarchies as well as at the top.

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As well as this enquiry in Britain there was also an American enquiry that was led by a different set of experts. When the reports were published the two sets of experts reached different conclusions. This discrepancy raises doubts about the value of experts as a source of authoritative knowledge. As, of course, did the 'knowledge' of experts that the Titanic was unsinkable. Action learning can be viewed as an antidote to the limitations of knowledge based on expert opinion and authority

Revans discussed the Titanic disaster with his father. A favourite anecdote of Revans was of the time when, as a teenager, he asked his father what he had learned from the Titanic affair. His father reflected for several days and then replied that he had learned the difference between cleverness and wisdom. The distinction between cleverness and wisdom remained important to Revans and he continued to refer to it in his later years (Revans, 1988, Barker, 1998). It was important to him that action learning should offer an opportunity for the learner to acquire wisdom as well as knowledge of an organisation and how to tackle its problems.

What did Revans think and feel about his father? The best evidence that we have on this is provided by the obituary that Reg Revans wrote about his father for the Royal Institute of Naval Architects in 1937. When a person writes an obituary for another person it is reasonable to suppose that they focus on those aspects which they admire, respect and regard as most worth remembering. In the obituary, Reg wrote that his father valued knowledge for its practical consequences: "In the interpretation of theory, his outlook was predominately practical and his authority was always exercised in the direction of relating theories to practical considerations."

In his introduction to his chapter 'Action Learning and the Nature of Knowledge' in Revans (1982) he wrote that "Knowledge that cannot be used is not knowledge at all, …" (Revans, 1982: XI). The idea of the pursuit of knowledge 'for its own sake' cut little ice with the father and his son. It is not difficult to believe that action learning is underpinned by the philosophy of pragmatism, certainly that is where the epistemology of action learning seems to be located. It is not surprising that Revans admired the philosopher of pragmatism, John Dewey, and often quoted his words.

In the obituary for his father, Revans also shows respect for his father's technical knowledge and skills but expressed even greater admiration for his father's concern that technical capability should serve a larger purpose. He wrote of his father: "His outstanding characteristics were his ability to take broad views, his constant concern to keep purely technical considerations in their proper relation to wider issues, …"

The other 'outstanding characteristic' that Reg Revans saw in his father was his "profound belief that regulations – even those for which he had been largely responsible for framing – were made for man, and not man for the regulations." In other words, he saw institutions existing to serve human beings rather than human beings existing to serve institutions. It would seem then that the pragmatism referred to above was located within a humanistic context. Technical issues are significant but only within a wider humanistic framework. The ethos of action learning highlights the proximate goal of tackling some problem (or opportunity) but recognising its wider context(s). This resonates with the distinction he drew between cleverness and wisdom.

Siblings   He had an older brother, Bert, who became an engineer in the Navy, an adopted sister, Mary, who became a nurse and a younger brother, John, who became a doctor (Revans, 1987; BMJ, 1988). His family were thus inclined towards hands-on occupations in which tackling practical problems played an important part.

In Britain in the early 20th century, the distinction between non-manual employment and manual employment was much clearer than it is now. The upper reaches of the society were, for the most part, made up of those who did not do manual work. The lower divisions of the social hierarchy were made up, for the most part, of those who worked with their hands. Their work was manual i.e. hands-on. That Revans's siblings (and mother) chose occupations that involved hands-on work suggests strongly that the separation between headwork and handwork was not respected in Revans' household. This is a potential source of Revans' later recognition of the value of first-hand knowledge because hands-on experience is, for the most part, the source of first-hand knowledge.

Tables 1 and 2 summarise the values and guiding beliefs of action learning that can be distilled from the early life of Reg Revans.

Table 1: Which *values* of action learning are discernable within the early family life of Reg Revans?

Values *Action learning places positive value on:*	*Illustration of the values within Revans later life and writings*	*Examples within Revans early life*
Prosocial action	In the *ABC of Action Learning*, Revans (1983) quotes the Buddha: "To do a little good is better than to write difficult books." (Revans, 1983: 6)	He observed his mother's volunteering in hospitals, including organising 'cleaning parties'
Values-based behaviour	In the *ABC of Action Learning*, Revans (1983) quotes Shaw: "It is not enough to know what is good; you must also be able to do it." (Revans, 1983: 6)	This can be illustrated by his mother's example in volunteering for cleaning duties in local hospitals.
Deeds valued more than words	In the *ABC of Action Learning*, Revans (1983) writes: "there is an observable difference between consulting past reports of the Olympic Games to decide that one may need to clear two metres forty to win the next high jump, on the one hand, and, on the other actually sailing over that height before the crowd in the stadium". (Revans, 1983: 13)	He observed that his mother acted on the values she espoused through her actions as a volunteer, cleaning in local hospitals.
Humanism	In the obituary of his father,	Revans father provided a

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	Reg Revans wrote that one of his father's outstanding characteristics was his father's "profound belief that regulations – even those for which he had been largely responsible for framing – were made for man, and not man for the regulations."	good example of someone with a humanistic approach to life including work.
Useful knowledge	In the *ABC of Action Learning*, Revans (1983) quotes John MacMurray: "All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action," (Revans, 1983: 6)	Revans applauded the fact that his father valued knowledge for its use-value (see obituary of Thomas Revans)
First-hand knowledge	Revans' proposal for a staff college in the mining industry where miners could learn from each other by sharing their first-hand knowledge.	He was impressed that his father took evidence from sailors with first-hand knowledge for the enquiry into the Titanic disaster
Hands-on experience	Action learning adopted a experiential approach to the acquisition of knowledge	The examples of his siblings choosing hands-on occupations of engineer nurse and doctor respectively.

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Table 2: Which *beliefs* of action learning are discernable within the early family life of Reg Revans?

Guiding Beliefs	*Illustration of the guiding beliefs within Revans later life and writings*	*Examples within Revans early family life*
Action produces knowledge	In the *ABC of Action Learning*, Revans quotes Sophocles: "One must learn by doing the thing: for though you think you know it you have no certainty, until you try." (Revans, 1983: 6.) "…responsible action is, in itself, an effective learning process" (Revans, 1983: 629.) "There can be no learning without action, and no action with learning" (Revans, 1983: 2.)	Revans was a very active young person (with active parents) and cannot have failed to notice, therefore, that action results in knowledge at least about the situation(s) in which the action takes place (- partly through what we now know as feedback)
There is a significant difference between 'cleverness' and 'wisdom'	As an old man, Reg Revans was still telling people that this is what his father learned from the Titanic disaster enquiry which is evidence that it was of continuing significance to Revans himself.	This distinction, made by his father as his main lesson from the Titanic disaster, made a lasting impact on Reg as a young man.
Significant knowledge can be found at the bottom of hierarchies as well as at the top. Position and status are not good guides to where useful knowledge can be found.	In his proposal for a staff college of miners he advocated that miners learn from each other rather than from experts without first-hand experience of mining and its conditions.	He observed that his father, who he admired, took evidence from lowly seamen during the enquiry into the Titanic disaster.
Actions and reflection on actions can be a source of *self*-knowledge	"Action learning particularly obliges subjects to become aware of their own value systems, by demanding that the real problems tackled carry some risk of personal failure." (Revans, 1983: 627.) "… in having to draw upon one's commitment one is forced to enquire into what one really believes, as distinct from what one may claim to believe." (Revans, 1983, 631.)	As a very active young person it is reasonable to believe that he observed that his own experience produced gains in self-knowledge.
The only genuine knowledge is useful knowledge	In his introduction to his chapter 'Action Learning and the Nature of Knowledge' in Revans (1982) he wrote uncompromisingly that "Knowledge that cannot be used is not knowledge at all," ," (Revans, 1982: XI)	Revans father provided a good example of someone who valued knowledge for its practical consequences and this impressed him enough to record it in his obituary of his father.

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Context is an important dimension of knowledge	The 'fresh questions' prized by action learning can often be found in the relations between a problem and its context.	In the obituary of his father, Reg Revans wrote admiringly of his father that one of his outstanding characteristics was "his ability to take broad views, his constant concern to keep purely technical considerations in their proper relation to wider issues, …"
Management education, and Western education more generally, pays insufficient attention to the role of values	In his later years Revans saw the biggest problem of management as "a failure, common to Western education, of men to grasp the importance of a managerial value system…" (Quoted in Boshyk, 2011: 82)	He mother provided an example of someone who was clear about her values and was therefore able to act on them.

Discussion

In the course of this paper so far, various issues have been raised that warrant further discussion. These include the nature of the ethos of action learning and its essential characteristics, the definition of action learning, the practical value of acquiring self-knowledge and the difference between cleverness and wisdom. In this section we address each of these issues.

Ethos of action learning

It is sensible to distinguish between the ethos of action learning and the practice(s) of action learning for at least two reasons. First, there are now many forms and practices of action learning (Marsick et al, 1999, Pedler et al, 2005, Brook, et al, 2012)) but what makes them recognisable as action learning is that they all embody the same ethos i.e. the ethos of action learning. Second, it is the ethos of action learning that breathes life into the practice of action learning. That is why we have focused on the ethos of action learning in this paper.

In so doing, however, we discovered that the term 'ethos' is less well-defined than we had previously thought; sometimes it is used metaphysically, even mystically, as the *spirit* of something and other times it is used to mean a collection of elements including attitudes, beliefs, values, dispositions, special characteristics etc. So we started this enquiry by seeking a clearer conception of what is meant by the term 'ethos'. We looked at the changing use of ethos from its roots in antiquity to contemporary usage.

Origin of the word 'ethos' In ancient Greece 'ethos' derived from the term for 'habitat', giving it the same root as 'habit' which is a reflection of character. In ancient Greece also, 'ethos' came to be used in slightly more specialised senses in different fields. For example, in Greek drama 'ethos' referred to the inherent character of the individual played by an actor and in Greek rhetoric it was one of three modes of persuasion, the others being 'logic' and 'pathos'. Ethos persuaded through virtue and wisdom and moral competence.   The word 'ethics' has the same Greek root as ethos, which helps to explain why there is an ethical aspect to the term 'ethos'.

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Recovered usage   The modern usage of 'ethos' seems to date from the middle of the 19th century (1851) when it was revived by Palgrave as 'moral character, nature, disposition, habit, custom'[1]. Since the mid-19th century it has been employed in different disciplinary contexts and different fields have developed their own particular more nuanced usage of the term. Thus, for example, in sociology it can refer to the 'fundamental spiritual characteristics of a culture'; in art it can refer to the 'inherent quality of a work which produces, or is fitted to produce, a high moral impression, noble, dignified and universal'.

Current usage   We reviewed a range of current dictionary definitions and concluded that today ethos most commonly refers to the <u>essential character resulting from the guiding beliefs and ideals or values that underpin that character</u>. In more colloquial parlance, to understand the ethos of something is to recognise where 'it's coming from'. In order to understand where something is coming from, it is necessary to know the guiding beliefs and core values it embodies and it is helpful to know its history i.e. where it has been.

In summary, after reviewing the meaning of 'ethos', past and present, we concluded that the guiding beliefs and values are the essential characteristics of action learning. That is why our focus in this paper is on the guiding beliefs and values of action learning.

The terms 'beliefs' and 'values' need to be differentiated as they are sometimes used in ways that overlap their meanings. To 'believe in something' can mean to attach value to it, which clearly overlaps the meaning of 'value'. To avoid this overlap, in this paper we use 'believe' to refer to statements of propositional knowledge i.e. to believe that something is true. The distinction is between the terms 'belief in' and 'belief that'. We confine ourselves to the latter usage. In other words, we are restricting ourselves to the cognitive domain of belief.

By contrast, when we use the term 'values' we refer to that which is valued, supported and approved. So when we refer to the values of action learning we are referring to that to which most of the action learning community attach value.

Defining action learning

The action learning community seems to be split on the issue of whether or not Revans provided an authoritative definition of action learning. On the one hand there are those like Pedler and Abbott (2013) who assert that he did not but only defined it in terms of what it is not (Revans, 1983). On the other hand, there are those like Botham who assert that he did (Botham et al, 2010).

The action learning community also seems split on a related question of whether there *should* be a clear definition of action learning. It is easy to assemble a case for both sides. Here are three reasons why it would be good to have a clear and authoritative definition of action learning:
 1. The absence of a clear and authoritative definition can lead to all sorts of odd practices in the name of action learning. Thus, for example, Cunningham argues for an unambiguous definition of action learning on the grounds that *"If any tired old course puts a bit of project work in it and calls itself 'action learning',*

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[1] According the Merriam-Webster dictionary the first known use in modern times was in 1842 but no further details are given.

*and if we don't challenge this, we are colluding with unacceptable practice."
(Cunningham, 1996: 42.)*

2. The absence of a clear definition of action learning makes it less accessible to people who are new to action learning and that may have slowed its growth.
3. Its lack of a clear definition has protected action learning from critical scrutiny and that has (1) increased power in the action learning community within the hands of the action learning cognoscenti, who are, ironically, the authorities in this field, (2) impeded research into action learning and (3) thereby obstructed its development and improvement.

And here are three reasons why a clear and authoritative definition would be bad for action learning:

1. It reduces the likelihood that action learning could end up as just another fashionable management development fad and suffer the destiny of other management fads. One has only to look at fate of quality circles, not entirely unrelated to action learning, to appreciate that this concern is not fanciful.

2. It privileges expert authority, knowledge drawn from the past and downgrades first-hand experience. This is not what action learning stands for; in fact, it is precisely what action learning stands against.

3. Such a definition of action learning is likely to be limiting in terms of experimentation and the consequent emergence of new forms of action learning. Thus, for example, Easterby-Smith responded to Cunningham's statement above with the following: "The labels we use are based on agreed meanings; they are always subject to challenge and redefinition. No-one has the right to impose meaning on others – this is a liberal and relativist position that I hold with some passion! Attempts to restrict the usage of terms such as self-managed learning and action learning are dangerous because they inhibit experimentation and learning; they privilege the ideas of the past and downgrade experience." (Easterby-Smith, 1996)

Those who assert that Revans did not provide a clear and authoritative definition of action learning tend to be members of the group of people believe that this is a good thing. Pedler, for example, believes that the Revans did not provide an authoritative definition of action learning and approves of that. "What action learning is in practice is not to be limited. The very idea requires that it be continually re-inventing itself; each application a new accomplishment, a fresh performance. This generative element continues to vivify the concept." (Pedler, 1997: 54)

Another question on which there has been dissent within the action learning community is whether action learning is a 'practice' or an 'ethos'. The former position is basically that without the practice of action learning there is no action learning and hence the practice of action learning is therefore of its essence. The latter position is that the practice of action learning is only the outward manifestation of something deeper, that there can be different forms and practices of action learning depending on its context but the deeper meaning of action learning, its ethos, is constant.

In this paper we have argued that action learning is both a practice *and* an ethos. We have argued that there can be variations in the practice of action learning at any time and they can change over time. However, it is also true that there is an ethos of action learning and we have tried to make the concept of the ethos of action learning more

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tangible by operationalising it in terms of its guiding beliefs and values. We have sought to identify those specific beliefs and values that are detectable in the early family life of Reg Revans as the originator of action learning.

The implication of this position for the debate on the definition of action learning is that Revans did not provide a definition of the *practice* of action learning, which is variable and context-dependent. Moreover, it is undesirable to try to provide a clear and authoritative definition of the *practice* of action learning as that would stifle its development. However, it is possible to clarify what is meant by action learning's ethos, by carefully identifying its guiding beliefs and values.

Those who see the ethos of action learning as being separate from the practice of action learning cannot avoid the responsibility of providing a clear account of that ethos or, at least, seeking to clarify it. That is what we have sought to do in this paper. We have argued for the definition of the ethos of action learning in terms its guiding beliefs and values and that means we need to help identify those beliefs and values. We see this paper as a contribution to that task and that Tables 1 and 2 which summarise the values and guiding beliefs of action learning that can be distilled from the early life of Reg Revans, provide a checklist of guiding beliefs and values that comprise part of the ethos of action learning that new forms and practices can be tested against.

What's the practical use of self-knowledge?

Revans held a pragmatic and utilitarian conception of knowledge. For him, the only genuine knowledge was useful knowledge. He also placed considerable value on *self*-knowledge, and saw action learning as a way of acquiring it. From this, we can infer that he saw self-knowledge as useful and instrumental.

Of what use is self-knowledge from a pragmatic and utilitarian perspective? We can think of three ways that the acquisition confers *practical* value. First, we are each the instruments of our agency in this world, so the more we know about that instrument the more effective we can be in the world. The more we are aware of our strengths, our weaknesses and our values the greater the likelihood of realising what we value and adding value to the world. In this context, it is notable that Revans quoted from John MacMurray's *The Self as Agent* (1957) in the *ABC of Action Learning*.

Second, as a trained scientist it would have been particularly clear to Revans that knowledge is power (Henry, 2017). This became increasingly apparent during the course of the 20th century, especially during the two world wars. Greater knowledge of the self therefore gives greater power over the self. It supports self-regulation.

Third, the most useful knowledge is knowledge that is transferable from the context in which it was acquired to other contexts of a person's life. From this perspective, self-knowledge is the most transferable knowledge of all. Additional self-knowledge is useful to action learning participants as leaders or managers (or in any form of professional employment), in their other roles as (parent, partner, citizen and so on) and, most generally, as a human being.

Some people may believe that we have already have access to self-knowledge though introspection, self-observation etc. Social psychologists disagree. *Strangers to*

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Ourselves by Tim Wilson (2004) lays out the evidence. By taking on the challenge of tackling a problem that is significant, risky and difficult, an action learning participant has the means of gaining knowledge about their own strengths, weaknesses, values and beliefs.

Cleverness and wisdom

When Revans asked his father what he had learned from the Titanic disaster and enquiry his father reflected for several days and then replied that he had learned the difference between cleverness and wisdom. This reply was so significant to Revans that he continued to recount it in his later years (Revans, 1988, 1994). This raises questions about what Revans found so significant about the difference between cleverness and wisdom and how that could have influenced action learning as it developed decades later.

Revans was clear to differentiate puzzles from problems as the basis for participation in action learning. To solve a difficult puzzle may require much cleverness but need not require much wisdom. By contrast, tackling the sort of problems, often 'wicked' problems, that work best for action learning often require more wisdom than cleverness.

According to dictionaries, cleverness refers to intelligence, quickness and mental agility. It can also refer to manual dexterity. And synonyms for 'clever' include ingenious, quick-witted, smart and adroit. By contrast, wisdom refers to discernment and judgement of what is true or right. It can also refer to experience and knowledge together with the power to apply them critically or practically and with common sense. Synonyms for wisdom include judgement, prudence, sagacity and understanding.

Wisdom is both wider and deeper than cleverness. It is wider because it takes into account the context(s) of a problem and its broader consequences. It is deeper because it takes into account the values of the person with the problem. Cleverness need not engage a person's core values but that is unlikely to be true of wisdom. So wisdom involves insight as well as intelligence.

Tackling the sort of problem that engages one's values is likely to produce knowledge about those values, even if it is only greater clarity about what those values are. Wisdom answers 'why' questions as well as 'how' questions. Tackling an issue that requires only cleverness may require no recognition of one's values.

There is also a significant ethical dimension of wisdom that is absent from cleverness. Wisdom is associated with right living i.e. doing the right thing. It is a contradiction to describe an action that is unethical or immoral as a wise action. Perhaps this is why wisdom has spiritual connotations which makes it of much more interest to many religions than cleverness which, by contrast, may be cunning, scheming or smart.

Finally, a clever solution may not necessarily be a practical solution. A solution to a problem might be clever in a theoretical or technical sense but not necessarily applicable to the real world. By contrast, wisdom, never loses contact with the real world or common sense.

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By insisting that participants in action learning tackle problems rather than puzzles Revans raised the likelihood that they would gain wisdom and self-knowledge as well as knowledge about their work and their organisations.

Conclusion

In this paper we have searched the early family life of Reg Revans for values and guiding beliefs that found their way into action as it had emerged by the early 1980s. The following table summarises the results:

Values *Action learning places positive value on:*	*Guiding Beliefs*
Prosocial action	Action produces knowledge
Values-based behaviour	There is a significant difference between 'cleverness' and 'wisdom'
Deeds valued more than words	Significant knowledge can be found at the bottom of hierarchies as well as at the top. Position and status are not good guides to where useful knowledge can be found.
Humanistic	Actions and reflection on actions can be a source of *self*-knowledge
Useful knowledge	The only genuine knowledge is useful knowledge
First-hand knowledge	Context is an important dimension of knowledge
Hands-on experience	Management education, and Western education more generally, pays insufficient attention to the role of values

We have also reached the following conclusions. First, the rather woolly term 'ethos of action learning' can be given more precision by defining it in terms of guiding beliefs and values. Second, it is neither possible nor desirable to define the *practice* of action learning but it is both possible and desirable to define the ethos of action learning in terms of its guiding beliefs and values. Third, the acquisition of additional self-knowledge is useful, practical and, arguably, the most transferable of knowledge in terms of its practical consequences. Fourth, tackling puzzles may require much cleverness but not much wisdom whereas tackling more ill-defined and risky problems can produce greater wisdom.

What are the implications of all this? There are obvious implications for the debates on whether action learning is a practice or an ethos and on the definition of action learning. In addition, the findings and conclusions have implications for clarifying the meaning of the ethos of action learning. Certain guiding beliefs and values can be traced back to Revans' early family life. These are the ones with the deepest roots so they are likely to be of particular value in testing the claims of new practices to be called action learning.

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Revans laid emphasis on the role of 'fresh questions' in action learning. For us, a fresh question is a potentially fruitful question asked of action learning participants that they have not already asked themselves. Most academic papers end with a question or questions arising from the enquiry and often phrased as 'suggestions for further research'. These are potentially fruitful questions that would not have emerged without the enquiry. We see a close relationship between these questions and the concept of a 'fresh question'. What fresh questions do we have at the end of the enquiry reported in this paper? Here are three:

1. How are the guiding beliefs and values of action learning as discussed in this paper related to the guiding beliefs and values of the participants in an action learning programme? This raises further questions such as, can action learning work for potential participants who don't share its beliefs and values? Does action learning teach its participants its values in much the same immersive way that a programme of scientific study teaches its values (such as scepticism, the value of empiricism and the desirability of the accumulation of new knowledge of the natural world)?

2. How did the wider context(s) of Britain in the inter-war period affect the development of the ethos of action learning? It was a period during which the status of scientific knowledge was rising, there was a growing belief in progress, particularly material progress[2], there was growing interest in progressive education, the social hierarchy was being challenged, democracy was extended, there was acceleration in the pace of change in Britain which was becoming more noticeable and so forth. This was the context in which Revans' thinking was developing in the 1920s and 1930s. How did these contextual changes impact on the thinking that led to action learning?

3. We have some knowledge of two other strands of Revans' early life: his education and the Quaker faith of his parents. What contribution did each these strands also make to the ethos of action learning?

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[2] See for example, Keynes essay, *Economic Prospects for our Grandchildren* which was first presented in 1928 as a talk to several small societies, including the Political Economy Club at Cambridge (where Revans was a post-graduate student). It appeared in literary form in two instalments in the *Nation and Athenaeum,* 11 and 18 October 1930.

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‘Origins of the ethos of action learning’ *(ALRPManuscript ID CALR-2018-0037)*

Responses to comments from reviewers

<u>*Reviewer 2*</u>
Reviewer 2's comments to the author

Comment	*Response*
This is an interesting paper, which is aligned with the scope of the Journal and so is of interest to readers. It extends knowledge of action learning, in particular its ethos and early origins.	Thank you
A good justification for the paper is provided with the authors clearly setting out the purpose of the paper, and its boundaries. Focusing on the early life of Revans (up to age 21) the paper makes a contribution by providing additional insight about how Revans' values and beliefs were form and how these in turn influenced the development of an action learning ethos.	Thank you
The paper provides an enhanced understanding of the ethos and origins of action learning previously not elaborated on in the literature.	Thank you
The findings are interesting, particularly the linkage of Revans values and beliefs, developed in early life, to action learning as set it out in Revans' ABC of Action Learning. The table provided is very useful.	Thank you
The research question, clearly stated early in the paper is answered by the findings and discussion.	Thank you
Some suggestions. Some elaboration on how inferences and interpretations were made would strengthened the methods sections and allow the reader understand how the authors came to the particular beliefs and values as stated in the findings. How was sense made? Was any particular approach used? What are your reflections on the approach.	We have reworded the method section to be explicit about the relationship between the use of secondary sources, and our sense making. Specifically we now state: "This article is empirical in that it is grounded in what we believe to be true about Revans' based on established sources. We examine what is known about Revans' early life but with a focus on looking for implicit values and beliefs. It is therefore an exercise in sense-making and, consequently, much of the article relies on inference and interpretation of the known facts."
It would help the flow of the paper if the findings and discussion sections flowed into	Thank you for this suggestion. We are keen to make the paper flow, but also mindful of

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each better. This would help clarify for the reader how the discussion follows on from the findings.	the need to keep the paper clearly structured. Specifically, we feel it is more reader-friendly to keep the discussion section separate so there is no danger of confusing what we found with our own thoughts about the findings.
An interesting area to explore/comment on (either here or in another paper)is that unlike his siblings Revans did not choose a practical career though the practical careers of his siblings appear to have contributed to the ethos of Action Learning.	Thank you for highlighting this interesting aspect of the family. As a scientist, Revans chose the Cavendish Laboratory for his PhD and the Cavendish Laboratory was the home of *experimental* physics. It was therefore looked down on by some *theoretical* physicists, despite its array of Nobel prize-winning stars. Revans was proud of that experimental tradition and he saw theory-testing rather than theory-building as the key to good science. All new research students "had to go through the obligatory carpentry course to make them self-reliant in the building of their experimental equipment." (Boshyk, Barker and Dilworth, 2010, p. 61). Perhaps as a consequence, Revans pursued furniture-making as a hands-on hobby for most of his life. We intend to produce another paper on the influence of the Cavendish on the ethos (guiding beliefs and values) when we will address this issue more fully.
A question posed early on in the paper regarding improving the forms of and practice of action learning (page 2) would be an interesting one to explore in the context of the findings – if not in discussion section perhaps in a later paper.	Thank you for this suggestion, we are cautious about adding a substantial new section to an already long article, but believe that Tables 1 and 2 provide a checklist of the guiding beliefs and values that comprise part of the ethos of action learning, and that new forms and practices can be tested against that checklist. We have added to our discussion about defining action learning the following: *We have argued for the definition of the ethos of action learning in terms its guiding beliefs and values and that means we need to help identify those beliefs and values. We see this paper as a contribution to that task and that Tables 1 and 2 provide a checklist of guiding beliefs and values that comprise part of the ethos of action learning that new forms and practices can be tested against.*

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Stylistically, you might considered combining some paragraphs together which are quite short.	We have combined shorter paragraphs to produce longer ones, where this works with the flow of ideas.
There are a few errors which I am sure will be caught through final proof-reading.	We have picked up a few typos and, hopefully, if any remain they will be picked up in the final-proof-reading.

Reviewer 1

Reviewer 1's comments to the author

Comment	*Response*
An interesting paper that considers an underdeveloped and niche part of our knowledge in relation to the history and development of Action Learning (AL).	Thank you
In order to improve this paper, I would like the author to consider the following points: 1. The introduction is a little fragmented and lacks a sense of flow. The author should articulate the perceived gap in our knowledge, outlining why that gap should to be addressed and how this paper intends to do that. This will determine the actual point of the paper and what precisely contribution to knowledge it provides. As there are a lot of differing elements to this paper, arguably too many, this should serve to bring them all together and act as useful orientation for the reader.	According to reviewer 2, the paper "extends knowledge of action learning, in particular its ethos and early origins. A good justification for the paper is provided with the authors clearly setting out the purpose of the paper, and its boundaries. Focusing on the early life of Revans (up to age 21) the paper makes a contribution by providing additional insight about how Revans' values and beliefs were form and how these in turn influenced the development of an action learning ethos. The paper provides an enhanced understanding of the ethos and origins of action learning previously not elaborated on in the literature." We think this is an accurate summary of the gap in the literature, how the paper addresses it, recognises the point of the paper and the precise contribution to knowledge that it provides. Some short paragraphs have been combined, which may reduce the feeling of a fragmented flow.
2. Following on from the point raised above. I would suggest that the breadth of this paper may be a problem and there are more than one paper in here. This is borne out by the changes to the focus that are declared throughout the paper: • The abstract discusses the contribution to understanding the ethos of action learning by exploring Revans early	Thank you for highlighting the scope of the paper. While we feel the focus remains on the ethos of action learning throughout, we have added a point to the discussion to clarify how Tables 1 and 2 provide a checklist of the guiding beliefs and values that comprise part of the ethos of action learning. We also added clarification here

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| influence
• Pg2 states that the purpose is an exploration of the roots of AL is to acquire knowledge to improve the forms and the practice of AL within each of those forms
• Further on page 2 the paper talks about helping assess whether new forms and new practices really do count as AL
• Pg11 the author states the focus in this paper is on the guiding beliefs and values of AL

It would be useful to decide on the actual focus and maintain that throughout the body of the work. | that new forms and practices can be tested against that checklist.

Elsewhere we feel the aim of the paper is to make a contribution to understanding the ethos of action learning. That is the aim of the paper and its focus and remains so throughout. Revans placed a high value on the usefulness of new knowledge so we are explicit about the potential usefulness of such a contribution. One use is to help us improve the forms and practice of action learning. Another use is in helping us assess whether new forms and new practices really do count as AL. On page 11 we say that the focus of the paper is on the guiding beliefs and values of AL because we have defined the ethos of action learning as its guiding beliefs and values. We provide a detailed rationale for this definition as the first issue discussed in the Discussion section of the paper under the sub-heading 'Ethos of action learning'. The paper thus remains focused on the ethos of action learning throughout.

We hope the explicit linking back to the tables (1&") makes this clearer. |
| 3. Not entirely clear I understand what is meant by the article been empirical and been grounded in what the authors believe to be true about Revans early life…can this be developed to aid understanding. | We have reworded the method section to be explicit about the relationship between the use of secondary sources, and our sense making. Specifically we now state:

"This article is empirical in that it is grounded in what we believe to be true about Revans' based on established sources. We examine what is known about Revans' early life but with a focus on looking for implicit values and beliefs. It is therefore an exercise in sense-making and, consequently, much of the article relies on inference and interpretation of the known facts." |
| 4. The narrative discusses different practices of action learning, ideally there needs to be some clarity here as to how we understand the authors understand action learning and what they mean by different practices, referred to as 'all sorts of odd practices' (pg12). It would be useful to outline fairly early in the paper so as readers with a limited understanding of this area can fully | Thank you for identifying the need for clarity in our definition of action learning. As far as we are concerned, the first fully-fledged version of action learning appeared as the *ABC of Action Learning* available initially in 1978 (later published by Chartwell-Bratt in 1983). This embodied the ethos of AL to which we refer in the paper. On page 4 we |

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appreciate the importance of Revans role and how action learning has developed since his early work.	state "In this paper we focus on the ethos of action learning at the start of the 1980s.
	On the first page of the paper we now write "The practice of Revans' action learning developed during the years between the early 1950s with the first experiments in action learning in the coal industry and the early 1980s when action learning had become recognised within mainstream management development. Since that time the practice of action learning has continued to develop in a number of directions, including, 'self-managed', 'auto', 'on-line', 'business-driven' and 'critical' (Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook, 2005). These are practices that have developed since the early 1980s that are forms of action learning recognised as such by the action learning community. We hope this makes the point more clearly.
	Later, on page 12 we now write: "The absence of a clear and authoritative definition can lead to all sorts of odd practices in the name of action learning. Thus, for example, Cunningham argues for an unambiguous definition of action learning on the grounds that "*If any tired old course puts a bit of project work in it and calls itself 'action learning', and if we don't challenge this, we are colluding with unacceptable practice.*" (Cunningham, 1996)
	We think Cunningham's example is a good illustration of a practice that would not be recognised as action learning by all in the action learning community.
5. In the sections on authoritative definitions of AL on Pg 12, the authors make some arguable unsubstantiated comments that need further development, examples include: Good to have clear definition • Point .1 Odd practices • Point. 3 protecting AL from critical scrutiny • Bad to have a clear definition Bad to have clear definition • Point 1 Downgrades first-hand experience	Thank you for identifying the need for us to substantiate these points: *Odd practice* We have addressed the 'odd practice' point in response to the reviewer's previous comments (above). *Protecting AL for critical scrutiny* It seems self-evident to us that the absence of a clear definition of something protects it from critical scrutiny because how can something be scrutinised if there is no agreement about what it actually is? *Downgrades first-hand experience* An

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	authoritative definition of action learning privileges the expert authority of whoever makes the definition. Insofar as it privileges such authority it inhibits experimentation and downgrades experience. This point was expressed well in the words of Easterby-Smith which we quote a few lines later: "The labels we use are based on agreed meanings; they are always subject to challenge and redefinition. No-one has the right to impose meaning on others – this is a liberal and relativist position that I hold with some passion! Attempts to restrict the usage of terms such as self-managed learning and action learning are dangerous because they inhibit experimentation and learning; they privilege the ideas of the past and downgrade experience." (Easterby-Smith, 1996)
6. It would be helpful to include some clearer understanding of what method was used here what is meant by 'interrogated' the material…is this a reference to content analysis or thematic analysis?.	We have reworded the method section to be explicit about the relationship between the interrogation (close reading) of secondary sources, and our sense making. Specifically we now state: "This article is empirical in that it is grounded in what we believe to be true about Revans' based on established sources. We examine what is known about Revans' early life but with a focus on looking for implicit values and beliefs. It is therefore an exercise in sense-making and, consequently, much of the article relies on inference and interpretation of the known facts."
7. A question of style…should tables 1 & 2 (pg7) be included as appendices to preserve the flow of the narrative?	For us tables 1 and 2 together are a central part of the paper and should not be relegated to an appendix. Reviewer 2 would seem to agree with us: "The findings are interesting, particularly the linkage of Revans values and beliefs, developed in early life, to action learning as set it out in Revans' ABC of Action Learning. The table provided is very useful." We have made the central value of tables 1 and 2 more explicit by referring to them explicitly in the discussion.
8. Please include page numbers on verbatim quotes	Thank you for highlighting this necessity. We have added page numbers to verbatim quotes throughout. Though quotes from Revans' obituary of his farther are only

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	attributed to (The Institution of Naval Architects, 1937).

References

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