

## NEW CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT ACTION RESEARCH

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**ABSTRACT:** *THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES THE NATURE OF ACTION RESEARCH PRACTICE.*

*ACTION RESEARCH IS DESCRIBED IN TERMS OF FOUR CHARACTERISTIC DIMENSIONS - WORTHWHILE PRACTICAL PURPOSES, DEMOCRACY AND PARTICIPATION, MANY WAYS OF KNOWING, AND EMERGENT DEVELOPMENTAL FORM - THAT PRESENT A BROAD RANGE OF CRITERIA BEYOND THOSE OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH PARADIGM AGAINST WHICH QUALITY RESEARCH MIGHT BE JUDGED. IT IS ARGUED THAT ACTION RESEARCH IS CHARACTERISTICALLY FULL OF CHOICES, AND THE ARGUMENT IS MADE THAT QUALITY IN INQUIRY COMES FROM AWARENESS OF AND TRANSPARENCY ABOUT THE CHOICES AVAILABLE AT EACH STAGE OF THE INQUIRY.*

*ACTION RESEARCH HAS A COMPLEX HISTORY BECAUSE IT IS NOT A SINGLE ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE BUT AN APPROACH TO RESEARCH THAT HAS EMERGED OVER TIME FROM A BROAD RANGE OF FIELDS.*

**KEYWORDS:** *ACTION RESEARCH; PARTICIPATION; VALIDITY; QUALITY.*

### INTRODUCTION

The term action research has become increasingly used by organizational researchers to describe and justify their activities. Yet despite a long history which originates, at the latest, with Lewin[1]’s application of experimental logic and social psychological theory to practical social problems (1946), it is simultaneously evident (Elden & Chisholm[2], 1993; Dickens & Watkins, 1999; Reason & Bradbury, 2001) that the meanings attached to the term, the sources of inspiration deployed and the practices it sanctions are so diverse that there appears to be no unifying theory.

Different views of action research abound within the literature. For instance, many influential commentators have emphasized how action research integrates theory and practice through ‘systematic self-reflective scientific inquiry by practitioners to improve practice’ (McKernan, 1996: 5)[3], where tacit criteria of organizational ‘health’ are deployed (Schein[4], 1987, 1997), whilst ‘the pure applied distinction that characterizes much of organizational research’ is dissolved (Coghlan & Brannick[5], 2001: 8).

Although some commentators have framed action research as ‘appreciative inquiry’ that builds upon organizational successes rather than ameliorating problems (Cooperrider & Srivastva[6], 1987), what is usually seen as distinctive about action research is an iterative cycle of problem identification, diagnosis, planning, intervention and evaluation

of the results of action in order to learn and to plan subsequent interventions (Checkland[7], 1991; Dickens & Watkins[8], 1999). According to some, these iterations must focus upon processual issues by developing an interpretative understanding of members’ ‘theories-in-use’, as opposed to ‘espoused theories’, to help reduce defensive routines and thereby contribute to single and double loop learning so as to reconfigure organizational decision-making (Argyris, 1985[9]; Argyris, 1993[10]; Grubbs[11], 2001). In contrast, Aguinis[12] (1993) argues that pivotal to the action research cycle is deductive causal analysis: a process of hypothesis building, testing and modification within organizational contexts so as to solve problems with reference to clearly defined goals and observable outcomes.

The action research literature continues to grow.

The Handbook of action research (Reason & Bradbury[13], 2001) was an important publishing event for action researchers. It reinstated quality as a concern and ‘action research’ as the umbrella term for participatory and action-oriented approaches.

Action Research is both a polyvalent and controversial concept. It is polyvalent in that it accommodates many different theoretical approaches along with a diversity of socio-cultural and political motivations. It is controversial because it is perceived by many in the professional and academic research communities as not adhering to the methodical standards that regulate scientific research. It thus risks being marginalized when it comes to the allocation of funds, or the acceptance of action research reports.

### **WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH ?**

Action research is a form of research that is based on the effects of direct participation of researchers with a participative society in order to improve the quality of the studied community.

Given the diverse nature of action research as an approach, the present article relies on the following working definition:

Action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 1)[14]

The main objective of the action research is positive social change, being one of the few methods that is based on participation, reflection and empowerment of the groups which are seeking to improve their social situation.

The principles of action research are: participation and collaboration, empowerment, knowledge and social change (Kaye Seymour-Rolls & Ian Hughes, 1995)[15]

McKernan[16] considers that action research as a method of research is "clearly and convincingly" originated in the scientific method.

Action research is now envisaged not as a short-term intervention driven by a single researcher but as a “continuous and participative learning process to create sustainable learning capacities and give participants the option of increasing control over their own situation” (Greenwood and Levin 1998:18)[17].

It has become a widespread process for investigating and changing not only the social and political condition for communities but also the context for work and learning anywhere. The progressive educational philosophy and pragmatism of Dewey (1938)[18], the promotion of democratic decision making, and the idea that social research can be directly connected to social reconstruction stimulated teachers to carry out educational action research . In organizations, businesses, and individual classrooms, action research used to improve the processes and results of interactions between teachers/facilitators/managers and learners/staff. It has also come to be used by groups of practitioners in any field of endeavor to improve individual practice in some common area of concern to that group. action research may begin with a problem, a hypothesis, an issue, a concern, or a conflict. Action research (AR) is about action for change and improvement by a group. But it is also about research. This includes collecting data to inform the group about the context for present practice; generating theory about, in, and from the area of practice; connecting that emergent theory to previous theories in that field; and disseminating that theory so that others may benefit from it. Without research, action research becomes merely action to solve problems perceived by the group.

A new definition of action research is the following[19]:

A form of collective, self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality, coherence, satisfactoriness or justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as the understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out.

### **THE ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Action research involves the identification of a problem or situation, which requires improvement, followed by a process of enquiry and a planned intervention for change and evaluation. This may then lead to further research, another change orientated intervention, and evaluation, thus instituting a cyclical process. The action research process is further characterized by: research with groups rather than an individual project; having an educative value for those involved; and being founded on a research relationship in which those involved are part of the change process. Ideally the process involves the continuous feedback of research results to all parties. It must take account of the differences in values and power of those involved in the research, and that recognize participants are concurrently solving a problem and generating new knowledge.

The research project, while framed by the action research strategy, included various elements of a multi-method study, incorporating a small quantitative investigation and qualitative interviewing within a collaborative action/change process. The value of the research was seen in terms of both content (the research findings) and process (the participatory nature of the approach and the resulting applicability of research methods to day to day practice).

Regarding the action research methodology, Danny Burns[20] points out that „Systemic action research is a process through which communities and organisations can adapt and respond purposefully to their constantly changing environments. It supports participative solutions to entrenched problems, and enables us to work with uncertainty”. Likewise, R.L. Flood asserts that, ”It is through systemic thinking that we know of the unknowable. It is with action research that we learn and may act meaningfully within the unknowable”.

We may conclude that systematic action research enables conceiving and achieving genuine strategies to successfully address the complexities and uncertainties of the real world. Furthermore, action research starts from the principle that „the best modality to understand something lies in the attempt to change it”.

The concept of systemic integral action-research (SIAR) , developed relatively recently by the Canadian professor Andre Morin, in practice joins the systemic approach and action research applied to a social system, yet prioritizing the human being, as the first to be held responsible for its acts towards its own positive change. SIAR is a participative and cooperative approach. It enables the researcher-actor to be responsible for the richness of its subjectivity in a dialog with the others in the team’s subjectivities, community, organization, society, etc. Out of these interplays a joint agreement emerges, enriched by inter-subjectivity, inter-culturalism and/or pluri-disciplinarity. Even the title of Morin’s book *Cheminer ensemble dans la réalité complexe- La recherche-action intégrale et systémique (RAIS)* synthesizes almost metaphorically the concept, making it intuitive and immediately perceptive,

The case method can be used for theory testing or development and is particularly appropriate for explorative studies in emerging fields and ill-understood empirical contexts (Yin, 2003). Case research, when conducted to a high standard of rigor, provides a way to objectively examine phenomena and identify specific challenges (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Thus, it will be based on the findings of the case research that the action research will be used to bring into action the mandates emerging from the case research.

One variant of case research is the ethnographic method, which aims to gain an in-depth understanding of a culture, in order to perceive the specificity and the authenticity of that culture.

Winter[21] argues the relevance of theory in action research on four levels. First, action researchers use, develop, or build on theory in the process of doing action research. Second, the theory in use in action research projects is shaped by the research process, the research topic, and the reflections of the different professions involved. Third, explicit theories are used to speculate on the hypothetical meanings of what the people involved perceive. Fourth, theory may be shaped by politics of an emancipatory or empowering nature.

## CONCLUSIONS

The continuing development of action research methodology could include consideration of these ideas:

- the role of critical conversations;
- flexible research aims and objectives;
- the reciprocity created between the parallel processes of research and practice;
- maintaining enthusiasm;
- the supportive organizational context; and
- acknowledgement and attention to the processes of learning created through the diffusion’ of the research.

The results of action research are better than other conventional research methods, since it involves local stakeholders, so combining knowledge resulted from research with knowledge of the directly involved parties.

The role of action research in coalitions of organizations is to illuminate as many theories as possible to help interpret as broad a range of situations as possible from as many diverse perspectives as possible. The development of theory by an action research group is a resource that provides a platform for new action based on the group experience.

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