Encyclopedia of Research Design

Action Research

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Action research differs from conventional research methods in three fundamental ways. First, its primary goal is social change. Second, members of the study sample accept responsibility for helping resolve issues that are the focus of the inquiry. Third, relationships between researcher and study participants are more complex and less hierarchical. Most often, action research is viewed as a process of linking theory and practice in which scholar-practitioners explore a social situation by posing a question, collecting data, and testing a hypothesis through several cycles of action. The most common purpose of action research is to guide practitioners as they seek to uncover answers to complex problems in disciplines such as education, health sciences, sociology, or anthropology. Action research is typically underpinned by ideals of social justice and an ethical commitment to improve the quality of life in particular social settings. Accordingly, the goals of action research are as unique to each study as participants' contexts; both determine the type of data-gathering methods that will be used. Because action research can embrace natural *and* social science methods of scholarship, its use is not limited to either positivist or heuristic approaches. It is, as John Dewey pointed out, an *attitude* of inquiry rather than a single research methodology.

This entry presents a brief history of action research, describes several critical elements of action research, and offers cases for and against the use of action research.

Historical Development

Although not officially credited with authoring the term *action research*, Dewey proposed five phases of inquiry that parallel several of the most commonly used action research processes, including curiosity, intellectualization, hypothesizing, reasoning, and testing hypotheses through action. This recursive process in scientific investigation is essential to most contemporary action research models. The work of Kurt Lewin is often considered seminal in establishing the credibility of action research. In anthropology, William Foote Whyte conducted early inquiry using an action research process similar to Lewin's. In health sciences, Reginald Revans renamed the process *action learning* while observing a process of social action among nurses and coal miners in the United Kingdom. In the area of emancipatory education, Paulo Freire is acknowledged as one

of the first to undertake action research characterized by participant engagement in sociopolitical activities.

The hub of the action research movement shifted from North America to the United Kingdom in the late 1960s. Lawrence Stenhouse was instrumental in revitalizing its use among health care practitioners. John Elliott championed a form of educational action research in which the researcher-as-participant **[p. 5 ↓]** takes increased responsibility for individual and collective changes in teaching practice and school improvement. Subsequently, the 1980s were witness to a surge of action research activity centered in Australia. Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis authored *Becoming Critical*, and Kemmis and Robin McTaggart's *The Action Research Planner* informed much educational inquiry. Carl Glickman is often credited with a renewed North American interest in action research in the early 1990s. He advocated action research as a way to examine and implement principles of democratic governance; this interest coincided with an increasing North American appetite for postmodern methodologies such as personal inquiry and biographical narrative.

Characteristics

Reflection

Focused reflection is a key element of most action research models. One activity essential to reflection is referred to as *metacognition*, or thinking about thinking. Researchers ruminate on the research process even as they are performing the very tasks that have generated the problem and, during their work, derive solutions from an examination of data. Another aspect of reflection is circumspection, or learning-in-practice. Action research practitioners typically proceed through various types of reflection, including those that focus on technical proficiencies, theoretical assumptions, or moral or ethical issues. These stages are also described as learning *for* practice, learning *in* practice, and learning *from* practice. Learning for practice involves the inquiry-based activities of readiness, awareness, and training engaged in collaboratively by the researcher and participants. Learning in practice includes planning and

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implementing intervention strategies and gathering and making sense of relevant evidence. Learning from practice includes culminating activities and planning future research. Reflection is integral to the habits of thinking inherent in scientific explorations that trigger explicit action for change.

Iterancy

Most action research is cyclical and continuous. The spiraling activities of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting recur during an action research study. Iterancy, as a unique and critical characteristic, can be attributed to Lewin's early conceptualization of action research as involving hypothesizing, planning, fact-finding (reconnaissance), execution, and analysis (see Figure 1).

These iterations comprise internal and external repetition referred to as *learning loops*, during which participants engage in successive cycles of collecting and making sense of data until agreement is reached on appropriate action. The result is some form of human activity or tangible document that is immediately applicable in participants' daily lives and instrumental in informing subsequent cycles of inquiry.

Collaboration

Action research methods have evolved to include collaborative and negotiatory activities among various participants in the inquiry. Divisions between the roles of researchers and participants are frequently permeable; researchers are often defined as both full participants and external experts who engage in ongoing consultation with participants. Criteria for collaboration include evident structures for sharing power and voice; opportunities to construct common language and understanding among partners; an explicit code of ethics and principles; agreement regarding shared ownership of data; provisions for sustainable community involvement and action; and consideration of generative methods to assess the process's effectiveness.

The collaborative partnerships characteristic of action research serve several purposes. The first is to integrate into the research several tenets of evidence-based responsibility

rather than documentation-based accountability. Research undertaken for purposes of accountability and institutional justification often enforces an external locus of control. Conversely, responsibility-based research is characterized by job-embedded, sustained opportunities for participants' involvement in change; an emphasis on the demonstration of professional learning; and frequent, authentic recognition of practitioner growth.

Role of the Researcher

Action researchers may adopt a variety of roles to guide the extent and nature of their relationships **[p. 6 ↓]** with participants. In a *complete participant* role, the identity of the researcher is neither concealed nor disguised. The researchers' and participants' goals are synonymous; the importance of participants' voice heightens the necessity that issues of anonymity and confidentiality are the subject of ongoing negotiation. The *participant observer* role encourages the action researcher to negotiate levels of accessibility and membership in the participant group, a process that can limit interpretation of events and perceptions. However, results derived from this type of involvement may be granted a greater degree of authenticity if participants are provided the opportunity to review and revise perceptions through a member check of observations and anecdotal data. A third possible role in action research is the *observer participant*, in which the researcher does not attempt to experience the activities and events under observation but negotiates permission to make thorough and detailed notes in a fairly detached manner. A fourth role, less common to action research, is that of the *complete observer*, in which the researcher adopts passive involvement in activities or events, and a deliberate—often physical—barrier is placed between the researcher and the participant in order to minimize contamination. These categories only hint at the complexity of roles in action research. The learning by the participants and by the researcher is rarely mutually exclusive; moreover, in practice, action researchers are most often full participants.

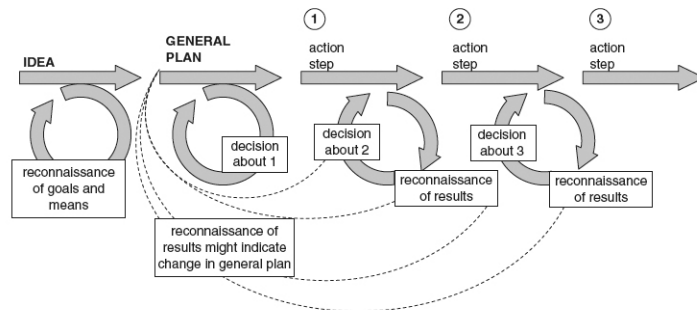*Figure 1 Lewin's Model of Action Research*

Figure 1   Lewin's Model of Action Research

Source: Lewin, K. (1946). Action research and minority problems. *Journal of Social Issues, 2,* 34–46.

Intertwined purpose and the permeability of roles between the researcher and the participant are frequently elements of action research studies with agendas of emancipation and social justice. Although this process is typically one in which the external researcher is expected and required to provide some degree of expertise or advice, participants—sometimes referred to as internal researchers—are encouraged to make sense of, and apply, a wide variety of professional learning that can be translated into ethical action. Studies such as these contribute to understanding the human condition, incorporate lived experience, give public voice to experience, and expand perspectives of participant and researcher alike.

A Case for and against Action Research

Ontological and epistemological divisions between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research abound, particularly in debates about the credibility of action research studies. On one hand, quantitative research is criticized for drawing conclusions that are often pragmatically irrelevant; employing **[p. 7 ↓]** methods that are overly mechanistic, impersonal, and socially insensitive; compartmentalizing, and thereby minimizing, through hypothetico-deductive schemes, the complex, multidimensional nature of human experiences; encouraging research as an isolationist and detached activity void of, and impervious to, interdependence and collaboration; and forwarding claims of objectivity that are simply not fulfilled.

On the other hand, qualitative aspects of action research are seen as quintessentially unreliable forms of inquiry because the number of uncontrolled contextual variables offers little certainty of causation. Interpretive methodologies such as narration and autobiography can yield data that are unverifiable and potentially deceptive. Certain forms of researcher involvement have been noted for their potential to unduly influence data, while some critiques contend that Hawthorne or halo effects—rather than authentic social reality—are responsible for the findings of naturalist studies.

Increased participation in action research in the latter part of the 20th century paralleled a growing demand for more pragmatic research in all fields of social science. For some humanities practitioners, traditional research was becoming irrelevant, and their social concerns and challenges were not being adequately addressed in the findings of positivist studies. They found in action research a method that allowed them to move further into other research paradigms or to commit to research that was clearly bimethodological. Increased opportunities in social policy development meant that practitioners could play a more important role in conducting the type of research that would lead to clearer understanding of social science phenomena. Further sociopolitical impetus for increased use of action research derived from the politicizing effects of the accountability movement and from an increasing solidarity in humanities professions in response to growing public scrutiny.

The emergence of action research illustrates a shift in focus from the dominance of statistical tests of hypotheses within positivist paradigms toward empirical observations, case studies, and critical interpretive accounts. Research protocols of this type are supported by several contentions, including the following:

Reliability and Validity

The term *bias* is a historically unfriendly pejorative frequently directed at action research. As much as possible, the absence of bias constitutes conditions in which reliability and validity can increase. Most vulnerable to charges of bias are action research inquiries with a low saturation point (i.e., a small *N*), limited interrater reliability, and unclear data triangulation. Positivist studies make attempts to control external variables that may bias data; interpretivist studies contend that it is erroneous to

assume that it is possible to do *any* research—particularly human science research—that is uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies and that bias can occur in the laboratory as well as in the classroom. While value-free inquiry may not exist in any research, the critical issue may not be one of credibility but, rather, one of recognizing divergent ways of answering questions associated with purpose and intent. Action research can meet determinants of reliability and validity if primary contextual variables remain consistent and if researchers are as disciplined as possible in gathering, analyzing, and interpreting the evidence of their study; in using triangulation strategies; and in the purposeful use of participation validation. Ultimately, action researchers must reflect rigorously and consistently on the places and ways that values insert themselves into studies and on how researcher tensions and contradictions can be consistently and systematically examined.

Generalizability

Is any claim of replication possible in studies involving human researchers and participants? **[p. 8 ↓]** Perhaps even more relevant to the premises and intentions that underlie action research is the question, Is this *desirable* in contributing to our understanding of the social world? Most action researchers are less concerned with the traditional goal of generalizability than with capturing the richness of unique human experience and meaning. Capturing this richness is often accomplished by reframing determinants of generalization and avoiding randomly selected examples of human experience as the basis for conclusions or extrapolations. Each instance of social interaction, if thickly described, represents a slice of the social world in the classroom, the corporate office, the medical clinic, or the community center. A certain level of generalizability of action research results may be possible in the following circumstances:

Ethical Considerations

One profound moral issue that action researchers, like other scientists, cannot evade is the use they make of knowledge that has been generated during inquiry. For this

fundamental ethical reason, the premises of any study—but particularly those of action research—must be transparent. Moreover, they must attend to a wider range of questions regarding intent and purpose than simply those of validity and reliability. These questions might include considerations such as the following:

A defensible understanding of what constitutes knowledge and of the accuracy with which it is portrayed must be able to withstand reasonable scrutiny from different perspectives. Given the complexities of human nature, complete understanding is unlikely to result from the use of a single research methodology. Ethical action researchers will make public the stance and lenses they choose for studying a particular event. With transparent intent, it is possible to honor the unique, but not inseparable, domains inhabited by social and natural, thereby accommodating appreciation for the value of multiple perspectives of the human experience.

Making Judgment on Action Research

Action research is a relatively new addition to the repertoire of scientific methodologies, but its application and impact are expanding. Increasingly sophisticated models of action research continue to evolve as researchers strive to more effectively capture and describe the complexity and diversity of social phenomena.

Perhaps as important as categorizing action research into methodological compartments is the necessity for the researcher to bring to the study full self-awareness and disclosure of the personal and political voices that will come to bear on results and action. The action researcher must reflect on and make transparent, prior to the study, the paradoxes and problematics that will guide the inquiry and, ultimately, must do everything that is fair and reasonable to ensure that action research meets requirements of rigorous scientific study. Once research purpose and researcher intent are explicit, several alternative criteria can be used to ensure that action research is sound research. These criteria include the following types, as noted by David Scott and Robin Usher:

Aparadigmatic criteria, which judge natural and social sciences by the same strategies of data **[p. 9 ↓]** collection and which apply the same determinants of reliability and validity

Diparadigmatic criteria, which judge social phenomena research in a manner that is dichotomous to natural science events and which apply determinants of reliability and validity that are exclusive to social science

Multiparadigmatic criteria, which judge research of the social world through a wide variety of strategies, each of which employs unique postmodern determinants of social science

Uniparadigmatic criteria, which judge the natural and social world in ways that are redefined and reconceptualized to align more appropriately with a growing quantity and complexity of knowledge

In the final analysis, action research is favored by its proponents because it

Action research is more than reflective practice. It is a complex process that may include either qualitative or quantitative methodologies, one that has researcher and participant learning at its center. Although, in practice, action research may not often result in high levels of critical analysis, it succeeds most frequently in providing participants with intellectual experiences that are illuminative rather than prescriptive and empowering rather than coercive.

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See also

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