Action Research for Management Research

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Action research has become increasingly prominent among management researchers as an espoused paradigm used to justify the validity of a range of research outputs. In this paper we introduce and discuss 12 contentions which, we argue, justify an action research project as quality research. The contentions are presented through a discussion of a number of important issues: generality and theory generation, the type of theory development appropriate to action research, the pragmatic focus of action research, designing action research and validity of action research.

Introduction

Action research misused

In common with other forms of qualitative research (Gummesson, 1991; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), action research has become increasingly prominent among management researchers as an espoused paradigm used to justify the validity of a range of research outputs. The term is sometimes used rather loosely to cover a variety of approaches. Whatever the precise interpretation of the phrase ‘action research’, the common theme to which most users of it would subscribe is that the research output results from an involvement with members of an organization over a matter which is of genuine concern to them.

Such interventions are necessarily ‘one-offs’ and the paradigm has frequently been criticized for its lack of repeatability, and, hence, lack of rigour. These criticisms are countered by the argument that the involvement with practitioners over things which actually matter to them provides a richness of insight which could not be gained in other ways (Rowan and Reason, 1981; Whyte, 1991). Though this is a valid and important argument, what is less clear is the range of approaches over which its validity lies. Taken to its extreme, for example, the argument could be interpreted to imply that any management consultancy project could be considered to be action research. Though it is difficult to see how such an interpretation could be sustained, case studies and technical developments are often reported as though this were the case.

It is not our purpose in this paper to explore the reasons why the action research paradigm is being misused in this way. However, it is worth highlighting a few of the more obvious ones.

Many business school academics value their consultancy both as a way of informing and legitimizing their teaching and as a source of extra cash. There is thus a danger that consultancy done for these reasons, rather than as part of a deliberate design for research, may become their major source of research output. While consultancy settings may be a valuable source of ‘real’ data, unless these are entered with a more sophisticated view of action research there is a danger that
sloppy research will result. The 'action research' label is often used as a way of excusing sloppy research.

Not all academics are necessarily driven by the consultancy motivation however. Many are involved in projects with outside organizations set up and funded by the organizations as research projects, but aiming to address specifically a problem or issue which is of concern to the organization. Under these circumstances it is questionable how many 'researchers' stop to ask whether the project has wider research implications and how the project should be tackled in order to ensure that these are addressed.

There is a great deal of pressure towards this behaviour. Firstly, in an era where research grants count so vitally on both the individual and institutional curriculum vitae, it may not pay researchers to turn down opportunities of this kind. Secondly, the sponsoring organization cannot necessarily be expected to be concerned with general research and would often be concerned, quite naturally, with ensuring that it gets value for money for the specific project. Thirdly, in some management disciplines the preponderance of what are seen (rightly or wrongly) as over-theoretical (and hence non-practical) papers has led to a call – perhaps sparked by practitioners rather than academics – for publication of more case studies describing specific problem-solving situations. Fourthly, in some disciplines there is a great deal of pressure on researchers to be directly involved in 'real world' situations in order to demonstrate the applicability of what they say (ESRC, 1993). Finally, while methodological issues may be central concerns to those in the management disciplines most closely allied to mainstream social science, it seems reasonable to suppose that there are areas of management research where researchers are hardly aware of the existence of a methodological debate let alone of the issues in it or of ways of addressing them in practice.

A further source of confusion may stem from outside the academic community; that is, from professional consultants and practising managers themselves. Though many of these just 'get on with the job', a small number take time to reflect on and publish what they are doing. That these are often valuable contributions to the field of management is not in question. But given the everyday concerns of consultants and managers, it would be unreasonable to expect them to be motivated by the criteria which must be applied to judging high-quality research outcomes.

The forementioned reasons are among the pressures against consultancy leading to poor action research. Despite these reasons it is our view that good quality research can emanate from these same situations if attention is paid to ensuring that this happens.

Aguinis (1993) argues that action research has much in common with traditional scientific method. Our own view, however, is that good action research will be good science though not in a way which depends necessarily on meeting all the tenets of traditional scientific method. But this requires a clear understanding of what is needed to achieve 'good quality research' in this type of setting. In this paper, therefore, we seek to identify and address some of the important issues in characterizing action research. In doing this we are drawing on reflections about our own experiences of undertaking action research in practice, as well as the work of other authors.

The issues that we address are generality and theory generation, the type of theory development appropriate for action research, the pragmatic focus of action research, designing action research, and the validity of action research. Through addressing these issues we set out 12 contentions which are intended to suggest some of the standards to which action research might aspire. The issues are addressed in two sections: the first on the characteristics of action research outcomes – suggesting six contentions; and the second on the characteristics of action research processes – suggesting six further contentions. While we still set out our characteristics within the context of other research settings, it is important to note that this paper is seeking to attend to the issues in action research to inform the management of organizations.

Action research for management research in context

Before addressing these issues it is appropriate to provide some context by taking a brief historical view of the development of action research and related approaches. The notion of action research is generally considered to have been first identified by Lewin in the 1940s (Lewin, 1946, 1947) (although it is worth noting that Ketterer et al.
(1980) mention Collier's research on American Indians (Collier, 1945) as an early example of action research. Lewin (1946) argued that research for social practice needs to take an integrated approach across social science disciplines, should be concerned with

'two rather different types of questions, namely the study of general laws ... and the diagnosis of a specific situation' (p. 36),

and thus with the integration of the concrete and the abstract. His approach was to design hypothesis testing experiments into workshops which he had asked to run for delegates who were concerned to design, for example, ways of tackling race relations issues. He emphasized that the research data (in his case, concerned with understanding the kinds of change the workshops had produced) would be complex and difficult to keep hold of. The need to design methods for recording ill-structured data was therefore seen as important, as was a focus on the relationship between perception and action – an interpretivist approach to research.

This emphasis on hypothesis testing is still prevalent among some groups of action researchers (see, for example, the special issue of the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science – Alderfer, 1993). However, as the approach has gained credence, the early notions have been used, extended or recreated by others. This process has led to a variety of action-oriented methods being developed.

For example, in the last 15 years or so, a network of scholars has developed whose main concern is with the use of some of the principles of action research as a method for developing effective professional practice. The focus of this form of action research is the individual practitioner rather than the organization. Individuals thus undertake research on their own personal practice, in their own practical context, and seek to use the research for their own personal benefit. This kind of action research is a form of self-development.

This use of action research has sometimes arisen in the context of education research. Indeed, the work of Corey (1953) on improving school practices is one early example of action research. It is used by those who are concerned with

'how to live one's values more fully in the workplace in a way which protects integrity, freedom, justice and democracy, (and) how to find new qualitative research forms of accounting for oneself within particular social contexts, (and) how to account for the processes of personal understanding' (this was the explicit aim of the 3rd World Congress on Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management, 1994).

Thus, for example,

'academics research their own practice as teachers, managers and researchers ... action research is a systematic form of enquiry undertaken by practitioners into their attempts to improve the quality of their own practice.' (Whitehead, 1994, p. 138, our emphasis)

This focus on the researcher as investigator, subject and consumer can be seen as an extension of the work of Argyris and Schon (1974) related to 'double loop' and 'deutero' learning and its role in developing a 'reflective practitioner' (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Argyris, 1982). Similarly Torbert (1976, 1991), building on what Argyris and Schon prefer to call 'action science', talks of 'action inquiry' as

'consciousness in the midst of action.' (1974, p. 221)

The term 'action learning' is perhaps the most common currency presently used to describe this kind of approach (Revans, 1977, 1978, 1982). In a similar fashion, at the organizational rather than individual level, some action researchers use the terms action research and organization development as if they were synonymous and seem to imply that action research is solely about creating organizational change (Alderfer, 1993).

Another extension of action research is an approach called 'participatory action research'. The key distinguishing feature of this approach is the combination of (i) the central principle of 'participatory' or 'collaborative' research – the notion that some members of the organization being studied should actively participate in the research process rather than just be the subjects of it – with (ii) the central principle of action research – that there should be an intent to take action (Whyte, 1991). This suggests a two-way relationship; the researcher becomes involved in and contributes to the practitioner's world, and the practitioner becomes involved in and contributes directly to the form of the research output.
The congruence of action-oriented approaches

Throughout the history of these action-oriented approaches to research and learning, whichever tradition has been followed, there has been a consistent defensiveness on the part of researchers attached to it. In 1972 Clark argued that the distinctive features tend to be neglected and slighted, albeit unintentionally, and much academic commentary is little more than criticism. However, in the late 70s and early 80s a number of attempts were made to argue positively not just that action research was valid, but that in a number of respects it was better than the alternatives. Notably a book by Reason and Rowan (1981) sought to bring together writers from all of the traditions mentioned earlier and argue for the legitimacy of a ‘new paradigm’ of research based on co-operative and collaborative research. It is worthy of note that the view that action research will be collaborative is a point of agreement among most writers on the topic (see Peters and Robinson, 1984, p. 118), although we do not accept that action research must be collaborative.

In the US a paper by Susman and Evered (1978) had sought to legitimize action research within the context of a system of research accreditation in North American academia which has been, and some would argue still is, driven by positivism. In North America and Europe all of these ‘action’-oriented approaches to research are still finding difficulty in acceptance on the grounds that they are not science. Argyris and Schon (1991) argue that there is

‘a fundamental choice that hinges on a dilemma of rigour or relevance’ (p. 85)

as if the researcher chooses between scientific and action research. In this paper we argue that good action research must, and can, meet both of these requirements.

In defence of its scientific merits it is, perhaps, significant that it is now commonplace for those engaged in all the related endeavours of action learning, action science, action research and participatory action research to be concerned with the validity of research data (Arguinis, 1993). Thus there is a concern to collect more subtle and significant data than those which are easily accessed through traditional research methods. For example, in action science Argyris and Schon (1991, p. 86) argue for placing emphasis on the

‘spontaneous, tacit theories-in-use ... especially whenever feelings of embarrassment or threat come into play.’

They argue that without an awareness of the impact of these dimensions it is not possible to be certain of the status of data.

Because many of the issues of concern to all action-oriented researchers are common, this paper draws from all of the traditions in order to exemplify action research for management research.

The characteristics of action research outcomes

Generality and theory generation

Many authors on action research stress the importance of the work being useful to the client. For example, Reason (1988) quotes Torbert as arguing that action research must be:

‘useful to the practitioner at the moment of action rather than a reflective science about action’, (our emphasis)

and Elden and Levin (1991) argue that action research should be a way of empowering participants. While these two outcomes are related – because empowering demands use at the moment of action – empowering goes significantly further. Other authors stress that the development of ‘local theory’ – theory which applies in the specific context of the research – is a central feature of the approach (Elden, 1979).

While we would not wish to argue with any of these views – and indeed shall return to them later – our first contention is that:

(i) action research must have some implications beyond those required for action or generation of knowledge in the domain of the project. It must be possible to envisage talking about the theories developed in relation to other situations. Thus it must be clear that the results could inform other contexts, at least in the sense of suggesting areas for consideration.
This means that outcomes must be couched in general rather than situation-specific terms. Thus,

‘the name you choose [for a category] ... must be a more abstract concept than the one it denotes.’
(Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 67)

There is, of course, the danger that abstractness is meaningless, generates more unnecessary jargon and obscures the power of the research. The ability of the researcher to characterize or conceptualize the particular experience in ways which make the research meaningful to others is crucial. This usually means that the reported research must be translated into circumstances that can be envisaged by others and it is this that promotes excitement in others about how to understand situations they expect to find themselves in. It is the characterization and conceptualization of experiences which amount to the theory which falls out of action research.

This leads to our second contention, that:

(ii) as well as being usable in everyday life action research demands an explicit concern with theory. This theory will be formed from the characterization or conceptualization of the particular experience in ways which are intended to be meaningful to others.

This may appear to suggest a dichotomy between research and intervention aims (Friedlander and Brown, 1974). There is, however, no reason why the two need to be seen as mutually exclusive. It is possible to fulfill the requirements for the client and at the same time consider the more general implications, though it should be recognized that addressing these dual aims often means that more effort has to be put into achieving research results than would be the case with more conventional research paradigms. Research output can often be the direct converse of what is required for a client, where situation-specific terminology may be the key to gaining ownership of the results.

The research output will also tend to be different from the immediate concerns of professional consultants even though the latter may have an interest in generally transferable aspects of their interventions. Our third contention relies on exploring this point further.

Professional consultants are sometimes engaged by immediate and incremental development of practice – ‘how will I do better, work more effectively and efficiently, on my next project?’ Among other things, they will be interested in a transfer of tools, techniques, models and methods from the specific situation to another. This demands the need to generalize from the specific, but this is most likely to be an incremental transfer from one specific context to another specific context. By contrast, observations about the specific situation will, for the researcher, raise broader questions that are of interest to a wider community working in a wider variety of contexts and will raise issues of linkage to broader statements made by others.

Similarly the two groups address themselves to different primary audiences. The ‘consultant as researcher’ seeks to move forward through a sort of ‘tweaking’ across to other practitioners and so to their own practice, whereas the ‘researcher as consultant’ seeks to talk to other researchers, and so to other consultants. Notably both reflect a practical orientation and both are focusing on the generality of the ideas expressed (that is, they are extending them beyond the setting in which they were designed) but they are meeting different needs and satisfying different audiences. There is a distinction here between concern with direct practice and a concern to develop theory to underlie practice. Lewin’s much quoted,

‘there’s nothing so practical as a good theory’

should perhaps become the action researcher’s motto.

This is not to deny the importance of the development of tools, techniques, models, or methods. These are often an excellent outcome of action research because they can be a very clear, but implicit, expression of theory. But action research demands that research output explains the link between the specific experience of the intervention and the design of the tool – it is this explanation which is a part of theory generation. Thus:

(iii) if the generality drawn out of action research is to be expressed through the design of tools, techniques, models and method, then this, alone, is not enough – the basis for their design must be explicit and shown to be related to the theory.
The type of theory development appropriate for action research

What kind of theory then is an appropriate output of action research? By its very nature, action research does not lend itself to repeatable experimentation; each intervention will be different from the last. Over time, it is possible to try out theories over and over again, but each context will be slightly different, so each time it will be necessary to adjust the interpretation of the theory to the circumstances. Action research, is therefore not a good vehicle for rigorous and detailed theory testing (at least in the traditional sense).

On the other hand, interventions in organizations provide ideal opportunities for experimentation in the sense that they provide opportunities to try out complex theoretical frameworks that cannot be pulled apart for controlled evaluation of individual theories. This is important in management research where it is often the systemic nature of a uniquely interlocking set of theories from many disciplines that makes the body of theory powerful and useful. Action research is, therefore, importantly concerned with such systemic relationships, rather than with single theories – the aim is to understand conceptual and theoretical frameworks where each theory must be understood in the context of other related theories.

These settings can also provide rich data about what people do and say – and what theories are used and usable – when faced with a genuine need to take action. These settings are thus likely to provide both new and often unexpected insights. They are settings that are much more amenable to theory generation than theory testing.

This is not to imply that theory that results from action research is always entirely new. The areas in which action researchers choose to work will often be influenced by their interest in the kinds of theory that already exist (or do not exist) in the area. Furthermore, action researchers can be expected to use existing theory – their own and/or others – to inform their consultancy practice. So each intervention provides an opportunity to retest the theory and to develop it further (Diesing, 1972). Thus:

(iv) action research will generate emergent theory, in which the theory develops from a synthesis of that which emerges from the data and that which emerges from the use in practice of the body of theory which informed the intervention and research intent.

And:

(v) theory building, as a result of action research, will be incremental, moving from the particular to the general in small steps.

The value of action research can therefore be seen to be in developing and elaborating theory from practice. Developing ‘grounded theory’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) is one of many examples of emergent theory building.

This contrasts with Lewin’s argument for hypotheses to be empirically testable. The very richness of the insights which action research should produce and the relative complexity of the theoretical frameworks suggest that it will usually be difficult – even logically impossible – to design experimental situations in which we could be clear about confirmation or disconfirmation (Sandford, 1981; Eden, 1994).

The pragmatic focus of action research

Most of the often referred to writers on action research demand that it be pragmatic. This is not a criterion which distinguishes action research from consultancy, but one which justifies the use and value of action research rather than other forms of research. Practicality of output is not a necessary condition for action research but is likely to be aimed for in any particular case.

If the practicality criterion is taken seriously, this might be interpreted as suggesting that prescriptive theory is more appropriate than descriptive theory. This is a false dichotomy. Descriptive theory can, and does, seriously influence the actions of the consumer of the research because it highlights the important factors that they should be concerned about. For example descriptive insights about why things go wrong are suggestive of actions that might be taken to avoid problems in similar situations. By implication, descriptive theory also draws attention away from those aspects of the situation that are not included in the description. Thus, because any description excludes as well as includes it is by implication prescribing one way of accounting for a situation.
rather than another (Allison, 1971). But if descriptive theory is to be the output of action research it is important that its practical implications be recognized even if these are presented implicitly. This means recognizing that the language used to frame the theory will seriously influence the future thinking and actions of the consumer of the research. Thus our sixth contention is that:

(vi) what is important for action research is not a (false) dichotomy between prescription and description, but a recognition that description will be prescription (even if implicitly so). Thus the presenters of action research should be clear about what they expect the consumer to take from it and present with a form and style appropriate to this aim.

**The characteristics of action research processes**

*Designing action research*

In order to be effective in the sort of action research we are contending, it is clearly important to be credible as a consultant, and so a researcher needs to pay a great deal of attention to developing a competent consultancy style and process. However, while consultancy skills are an important part of the action research toolkit, they do not, in themselves, justify the activity as research. Much more fundamental is the need to be aware of *what must be included in the process of consulting to achieve the research aims*. This, of course, implies being aware of the research aims themselves.

This is not intended to imply that the researcher should have a precise idea of the nature of the research outcome of any intervention at the start. Indeed, since action research will almost always be inductive theory building research, the really valuable insights are those that *emerge* from the consultancy process in ways that cannot be foreseen. Whilst it is legitimate for an action researcher to enter a consultancy interaction with no expectation about what the research output will be, it is crucial that an appropriate degree of reflection by the consultant is built into the process, and that the process includes some means of holding on to that reflection. Thus we are arguing, as our seventh contention, that for good quality action research:

(vii) a high degree of method and orderliness is required in reflecting about, and holding on to, the emerging research content of each episode of involvement in the organization.

Action research therefore demands a high degree of self-awareness in knitting together the role of the consultant with that of researcher. The researcher must recognize that he or she not only has the roles of researcher and consultant, but also is a subject (usually one of many) of the research itself. It is also important to consider the role that the client or other participants play in the generation of theory. There are many different levels at which they may be involved, ranging from ‘pure subjects’ whose aim is to get the benefits of the consultancy but have no involvement with the research to ‘full collaborating partners’ in the research (Rowan, 1981). Exactly how the roles of the action researcher and the practitioners are played out at any level of involvement can vary, but needs to be thought about.

Designed into any action research programme should be a consciousness of the roles to be played by the researcher and the participants and a process of reflection and/or data collection which is a separate – though often connected – activity from the consultancy itself. At the least, this demands that extensive amounts of time away from the consultancy setting and the ‘hands-on’ problems be devoted to reflecting about process and/or content in relation to research issues. The exact nature of the process is relatively immaterial – though we may debate the validity of any particular one; what is crucial is that the process exists explicitly. Furthermore, and our eighth contention,

(viii) for action research, the process of exploration (rather than collection) of the data, in the detecting of emergent theories, must be either, replicable, or demonstrable through argument or analysis.

Thus the outcome of data exploration cannot be defended by the role of intuitive understanding alone – any intuition must be informed by a *method of exploration*. In essence this means that
compared to 'everyman' as researcher, professional researchers need to be professional.

The validity of action research

We have argued that action research does not lend itself to repeatable experimentation, indeed its distinctive role is played when experiments are inappropriate. Hence the results of action research lie open to criticism if their validity is judged solely by the traditional criteria of positivist science. Under these circumstances we would agree with Susman and Evered (1978) that it is likely to fail.

Action researchers therefore need to be keenly aware of the key issues in the validity of action research and aware that a designed action research process must address these. In this section, we consider what we see as the most important of these.

First and foremost, we consider:

(ix) adhering to the eight contentions already described is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the validity of action research.

Without the inclusion of these an intervention cannot be considered as research at all. These contentions may thus be thought of as concerned with the internal validity of the research as research. By contrast, the remaining topics that we discuss are concerned with external validity. That is, they are concerned with the degree to which the results may both be justified as representative of the situation in which they were generated and have claims to generality.

Our second topic concerns the need to be aware that much of action research's validity comes from the theory developed not simply being 'grounded in the data' in Glaser and Strauss's (1967) sense, but being 'grounded in action'. One of the most persuasive reasons for using action research is to counter the unreliability of research where subjects do not have to commit to real action and to creating a future which they will inhabit (Eden, 1994). In addition, the role of the past, of history, and of the significance of established patterns of social relationships (Vickers, 1983; Eden, 1989) in determining organizational behaviour cannot be overestimated. Data, and hence theories, about both past and future aspects that influence changing a situation are much more likely to emerge from a research process which is geared to action than from more traditional approaches because it is possible to track what participants actually say and do in circumstances that really matter to them, as compared with what they might say hypothetically. In Argyris and Schon's (1974) terms, an action research setting increases the chances of getting at participants' 'theory in use' rather than their 'espoused theory'. The change process provides a forum in which the articulation of complex or hidden factors is likely to emerge and an incentive to participants for spending time in articulating.

However, in the action research setting there will be forces pushing against, as well as in favour of, the articulation of theories in use. Most obviously, it is important to recognize that the intervention will result in organizational change and, will challenge the status quo. Inevitably some people will feel they will be disadvantaged by the proposed changes and it is unlikely that the consultant will gain full trust from all parties (Argyris and Schon, 1991). The politics of organizational change are thus a force acting against getting fully reliable data from all concerned. Counterbalancing this, however, is the notion that the best way of learning about an organization is by attempting to change it. The very process of change is likely to reveal factors which would not have been unearthed in a stable environment. The process of change forces a dialectic – a contrast – which helps articulation. For example, Fineeman's (1983) research on unemployed executives probably provided more useful data about employment than it did about unemployment – it was the dialectical experience of unemployment which enabled an understanding and so articulation about the role employment played in the lives of the research subjects.

In summary, we are arguing that while there may be some forces acting against getting reliable data through action research, the method is likely to produce insights which cannot be gleaned in any other way. This means – as with any kind of research – that it is important to consider explicitly where the kinds of weaknesses and strengths discussed earlier are likely to occur. Along with others (Rapoport, 1970; Foster, 1972) we do not see action research as being in competition with other approaches to doing research, as if one or other was best. Rather it offers a distinctive
approach which is admirably suited to specific settings and to specific aims. The ability that action research has for linking theory with practice makes the outcome of action research potentially relevant, readable and persuasive to a practitioner as well as an academic audience. This means that:

(x) in order to justify the use of action research rather than other approaches, the reflection and data collection process – and hence the emergent theories – should be focused on the aspects that cannot be captured easily by other approaches. This, in turn, suggests that having knowledge about, and skills to apply, method and analysis procedures for collecting and exploring rich data is essential.

In the course of the preceding discussion, we have highlighted some concerns about getting at particular ‘truths’ of situations, rather than ‘the truth’. Argyris et al. (1985) also emphasize the difficulty of ensuring that the theories identified by the research process are thoroughly developed. Our third topic therefore focuses on triangulation.

Triangulation of research data is always important in understanding uncertainty in interpretation or measurement. Triangulation is a useful analogy because it suggests the process that surveyors use to check a sequence of measurements from one point to another by surveying back to the point of departure by a different route. Similarly when a ship plots its position it takes bearings on three points to create a ‘cocked hat’ or triangle which gives three perspectives on the position and also, a measure of uncertainty.

Action research needs to check outcomes in a similar way. In part, this is an argument for a multi-method approach to research; Denzin (1978a, 1978b) provides a comprehensive argument for the use of multiple studies where each study acts as a cross-check on others, and so the process of developing reliable conclusions is enhanced. Denzin also argues for triangulation to be applied in five aspects of the research: methodological, data, investigator, theoretical and multiple triangulation.

Triangulation to check the validity of data is as important in action research as other forms of research. However, action research also provides a uniquely different interpretation of the concept of triangulation. Exceptionally, action research provides an opportunity to seek out triangulation between (i) observation of events and social processes, (ii) the accounts each participant offers, and (iii) the changes in these accounts and interpretation of events as time passes (Haré and Secord, 1976). From these three perspectives the data are not necessarily expected to triangulate (agree). Indeed, we may be more surprised if they did agree than if they did not given the deliberate attempts at discovering multiple views. This procedure

‘underlines the possibilities of multiple, competing perspectives on how organisations are and might be.’ (Jones, 1987)

However, a lack of triangulation is an effective dialectic for the generation of new concepts. The focus is therefore on

‘what could be rather than what is.’ (Elden and Chisholm, 1993)

Thus triangulation has a different significance for action research compared with using triangulation only as a cross-checking method. Similarly, action research provides the opportunity for cyclical data collection through exploiting more continuous and varied opportunities than is occasioned by more controlled research. The chaos and the changing pace and focus of action research can be used as a virtue. Thus:

(xi) in action research, the opportunities for triangulation that do not offer themselves with other methods should be exploited fully and reported, but used as a dialectical device which powerfully facilitates the incremental development of theory.

The previous two topics have been largely about external validity in the specific project context. The fourth topic focuses on the problems of generalizing beyond that. It concerns the need to understand and project the role of history, context and process in deriving research outcomes (Pettigrew, 1985, 1990). Given that action research generally deals with a one-off case study (and hence incurs all the issues inherent in case study research (Yin, 1984)),

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(i) action research must have some implications beyond those required for action or generation of knowledge in the domain of the project. It must be possible to envisage talking about the theories developed in relation to other situations. Thus it must be clear that the results could inform other contexts, at least in the sense of suggesting areas for consideration.

(ii) as well as being usable in everyday life action research demands an explicit concern with theory. This theory will be formed from the characterization or conceptualization of the particular experience in ways which are intended to be meaningful to others.

(iii) if the generality drawn out of action research is to be expressed through the design of tools, techniques, models and method then this, alone, is not enough — the basis for their design must be explicit and shown to be related to the theory.

(iv) action research will generate emergent theory, in which the theory develops from a synthesis of that which emerges from the data and that which emerges from the use in practice of the body of theory which informed the intervention and research intent.

(v) theory building, as a result of action research, will be incremental, moving from the particular to the general in small steps.

(vi) what is important for action research is not a (false) dichotomy between prescription and description, but a recognition that description will be prescription (even if implicitly so). Thus the presenters of action research should be clear about what they expect the consumer to take from it and present with a form and style appropriate to this aim.

(vii) a high degree of method and orderliness is required in reflecting about, and holding on to, the emerging research content of each episode of involvement in the organization.

(viii) for action research, the process of exploration (rather than collection) of the data, in the detecting of emergent theories, must be either, replicable, or demonstrable through argument or analysis.

(ix) adhering to the eight contentions above is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the validity of action research.

(x) in order to justify the use of action research rather than other approaches, the reflection and data collection process — and hence the emergent theories — should be focused on the aspects that cannot be captured easily by other approaches. This, in turn, suggests that having the knowledge about, and skills to apply, method and analysis procedures for collecting and exploring rich data is essential.

(xi) in action research, the opportunities for triangulation that do not offer themselves with other methods should be exploited fully and reported, but used as a dialectical device which powerfully facilitates the incremental development of theory.

(xii) the history and context for the intervention must be taken as critical to the interpretation of the likely range of validity and applicability of the results.

Identification of the crucial variables that determine the particularity of the context is non-trivial and it is likely that individuals with different experiences and aims would focus in different areas. Discovering history and its relevance is, in any case, more problematic than Pettigrew implies. History and context are differently defined by different actors in the situation and by different observers — historians have always recognized the contribution of bias, selectivity and interpretation. Nevertheless, even given these difficulties, a concern to understand the role of context, and the different interpretations of it, is a most important requirement of action research. Indeed, working with the selective nature of different accounts of how a history of the organization, of the individuals and their relationships with one another, and of the wider context, within which the research took place is as important as paying attention to their role.

**Comment**

The standards that we have set for action research to be considered as research (pulled together in Figure 1) are undoubtedly hard to achieve. Understanding the methodological issues involved in action research in practice is difficult and must be expected to take time and experience — action research is an imprecise, uncertain and sometimes unstable activity compared with that of many other approaches to research. Enacting the standards in practice demands holistic attention to all the issues. Given the complexity and pressure of the real world action research setting, this provides a major challenge. Indeed, it is probably an unachievable challenge, though this should neither deter researchers from trying to achieve the standards nor, worse perhaps, from using action research at all. However, what is more important is having a sense of the standards that make for good action research and evaluating the research in relation to them.

Action research is also challenging for two further reasons: (i) the uncertainty and lack of control creates anxiety for anyone other than

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Figure 1. The 12 contentions
confident and experienced researchers; and (ii) doing action in action research demands experience and understanding of methods for consultancy and intervention. This second challenge suggests the need to face up to conceptual issues about the nature of problems in organizations and the concomitant demands for change, the nature of a client-centred activity, the issues involved in building and sustaining a consultant-client relationship, and so the nature of power and politics in the context of intervention.

As an aside, the above suggests that action research is likely to be a problematic research methodology for doctoral students. In addition, our experience at the universities of Strathclyde and Bath in the UK suggests that research students can be debilitated by the demands made by those supervisors who have more experience of intervention than they give themselves credit for. Moreover, these supervisors significantly have, through their own research experience, a much more sophisticated understanding of the methodological issues of doing action research than they are aware they have – an understanding that comes from rehearsing and re-rehearsing the concepts as a methodological framework. Thus an ‘apprenticeship’ model for learning how to do action research is probably essential. This means that team research where a member of the team is an experienced action researcher should be promoted.

References


ACTION RESEARCH LECTURE 2014

This session will introduce the tradition and basic principles of Action Research. After a short review of the history and basic assumptions of the approach, we will compare some of the research designs utilised within this tradition. We will then consider the differences between AR and traditional research and between AR and process consulting. The session will conclude with a reflection on whether Action Research is 'real' research.

Questions for the case studies:

1. What are the objectives of the projects described in the case studies and who determined them?
2. What were the main phases or steps of the project(s)? Is there a common pattern emerging?
3. What was the researchers’ role?
4. Can these projects be considered research?

Readings


Further readings


Human Relations, Special issue on Action Research, 1993, 46(1).

Management Learning, Special issue on action methodologies 1999, 30(2).

Journals: Action research; Action research and Systemic Practice; Educational Action Research; Intl Journal of Action Research; Action Learning: Research and Practice;
Action Research: Rethinking Lewin
Linda Dickens and Karen Watkins
Management Learning 1999; 30; 127
DOI: 10.1177/1350507699302002

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://mlq.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/30/2/127
Action Research: Rethinking Lewin

Abstract  Fifty years after Kurt Lewin invented the idea of action research, action research remains an umbrella term for a host of activities intended to foster change on the group, organizational, and even societal levels. This article explores both historical and contemporary definitions of action research and describes the process and goals of action research. Located in the tradition of Lewin, organizational action research involves cross-functional teams who address deep-rooted organizational issues through recurring cycles of action and reflection. A case example of an action research project involving two teams in a high technology corporation depicts the process in action.

Action research aims to build communities of people committed to enlightening themselves about the relationship between circumstance, action, and the consequence of their own situation, and emancipating themselves from the institutional and personal constraints which limit their power to live their own legitimate ... values (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988: 23)

After fifty years of development, action research remains an umbrella term for a shower of activities intended to foster change on the group, organizational, and even societal levels. While most action research practitioners would agree that they are attending to institutional or personal constraints, they vary in their emphasis on different elements of the action research process to address those constraints. Participatory action researchers focus on participation and empowerment. Teacher action researchers rely on data to transform individual behaviour. Organizational action researchers focus on research and data driven decision-making. There is, in fact, no definitive approach to action research, which is part of its strength but also part of its problem. Action research has not evolved into a unified theory, but has resulted, instead, in disparate definitions and characterizations (Peters and Robinson, 1984).

This article explores both historical and contemporary definitions, development, and goals of action research while acknowledging the differences among various action research approaches. Case examples are offered to depict the process in
action. Finally, we consider the case of the manufacturing manager and propose possible approaches to intervention based on the action research framework.

Development and Definitions of Action Research

Kurt Lewin developed the action research model in the mid-1940s to respond to problems he perceived in social action (Kemmis, in Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). Conducting research in a time of great social challenges brought about by World War II, Lewin worked toward achieving democratic inquiry within the social sciences. He believed that social problems should serve as the impetus for public inquiry within democratic communities. The war, writes Kemmis (1988), ‘galvanised views about democratic decision-making processes and participation in those processes by those affected by the decisions’ (p. 5). As Lewin conceived it, action research necessitates group decision and commitment to improvement.

Noting the chasm between social action and social theory (Peters and Robinson, 1984) and the lack of collaboration between practitioners and researchers, Lewin called for social scientists to bridge the gap and combine theory building with research on practical problems (Cunningham, 1993). Without collaboration, practitioners engaged in uninformed action; researchers developed theory without application; and neither group produced consistently successful results. By using the methodology of action research, practitioners could research their own actions with the intent of making them more effective while at the same time working within and toward theories of social action. The marriage between theory and action could produce informed, improved behaviour and encourage social change (Oja and Smulyan, 1989). Action researchers, then, generate context-bound, values-based knowledge and solutions from their public inquiries into system problems.

Lewin conceived of action research as a cycling back and forth between ever deepening surveillance of the problem situation (within the persons, the organization, the system) and a series of research-informed action experiments. His original formulation of action research ‘consisted in analysis, fact-finding, conceptualisation, planning, execution, more fact-finding or evaluation; and then a repetition of this whole circle of activities; indeed a spiral of such circles’ (Sanford, 1970: 4; Lewin, 1946). Although Lewin first formulated the definition, he left scant work to describe and expand his early definitions. Argyris, Putnam, and Smith (1987) note that Lewin ‘never wrote a systematic statement of his views on action research’ (p. 8). In fact he wrote only 22 pages that addressed the topic (Peters and Robinson, 1984). Perhaps because Lewin was unable to fully conceive his theory of action research before his death in 1947, he left the field open for other similarly-minded researchers to elaborate upon, and at times reinterpret, his definition. Several subsequent definitions of action research illustrate how others have changed the definition to emphasize different aspects of the process.

According to Cunningham (1993), action research ‘is a term for describing a spectrum of activities that focus on research, planning, theorising, learning and development. It describes a continuous process of research and learning in the researcher’s long-term relationship with a problem’ (p. 4). In his view, the action research approach is broken down into a series of units that are interrelated. Cunningham’s definition suggests that the methodology encompasses a wide
breadth of activities rather than one specific format. Although he reports that the process includes learning and development, he does not state explicitly whether or how action research leads to action or change and neglects mention of action research as a group process.

Sanford (in Reason and Rowan, 1981) describes action research as a process of analysis, fact-finding, conceptualization, planning, execution, and then more fact-finding or evaluation, all followed by a repetition of the same pattern. While Sanford’s definition conveys Lewin’s iterative process of action research, it ignores the issue of changing the environment under study. The term ‘execution’ has an element of action to it, yet does not adequately address the transformative change that Lewin intended. It implies, instead, an act or performance, with the action brought upon the subject, rather than the subject as an active member of the process. The definition fails to mention the importance of the participants in the action research process and how they act as members of the change environment.

Argyris places action science clearly in the Lewinian action research tradition and emphasizes the features from Lewin’s approach that are most consistent with action science in his definition of action research:

‘Action research takes its cues—its questions, puzzles, and problems—from the perceptions of practitioners within particular, local practice contexts. It builds descriptions and theories within the practice context itself, and tests them through intervention experiments—that is, through experiments that bear the double burden of testing hypotheses and effecting some (putatively) desirable change in the situation. (Argyris and Schon, 1991: 86)

In this definition, the interventions are an experimental manipulation, and problem-solving is the goal. Contribution to knowledge is in the area of research on intervention. Participants learn a mode of public, democratic reflection (the action science technology) and participate in solving self-diagnosed problems.

Elden and Chisholm (1993) identify emerging varieties of action research and label action research as originally conceived by Lewin as the classical model of action research. Heller (1976) argues that those who would differentiate their work from the classical, Lewin-influenced model may in fact misunderstand Lewin. For example, Lewin focused on classical experiments over social action, but at the same time sought to understand, through this research, the deeper causes that threatened democracy, itself a social action thrust. Elden and Chisholm (1993) believe that action research is focused at increasing systems’ adaptive capacity, ability to innovate, and competence in self-design. Quoting Brown, they note that action research from the Northern school tends to be focused on reform, particularly organizational reform, while action research from the Southern school is more focused on social change, and that these differing purposes have everything to do with differences in approach. Heller (1976) notes that the distinguishing feature among these methodologies may be the choice of intervention approach. The model here best fits the classical model and the emphasis on organizational development or an organizational reform agenda.

Social scientists can apply these various definitions and the action research methods to multiple situations and within practically limitless settings. Cohen and Manion (1980) explain that they can be used to spur action; to address personal functioning, human relations and morale; focus on job analysis; guide organizational
change, planning and policy making; create innovation; solve problems; or develop theoretical knowledge. We note that—when implemented with close adherence to Lewin’s principles of democratic participation and social action, and cycling between analysing a situation and reconceptualizing or reframing that situation or problem—action research has significant potential to create space for organizational learning.

*Response to the Traditional Scientific Paradigm*

Gestaltist in origin (Foster, 1972), Lewin’s arguments for action research stemmed from the limitations of studying social problems in a controlled, laboratory environment. He proposed that principles of traditional science be used to address social problems (Aguinis, 1993). Rather than study a single variable within a complex system, Lewin preferred to consider the entire system in its natural environment (the gestalt). He argued that scientists could research social phenomena ‘not by transforming them into quantifiable units of physical actions and reactions, but by studying the intersubjectively valid sets of meanings, norms, and values that are the immediate determinants of behaviour’ (Peters and Robinson, 1984: 115). Lewin brought together all the elements of science that had been separated rigidly in order to study social phenomena that could not be understood by using any one of those dispersed elements (Sanford, in Reason and Rowen, 1981).

Lewin believed that experimentation was an important part of any change effort. Action research was built upon the traditional scientific paradigm of experimental manipulation and observation of effects (Clark, 1976). A change is made, and the results are studied in order to inform future change efforts. Similar to traditional science, action research yields a set of general laws expressed in ‘if/so’ propositions (Peters and Robinson, 1984). Yet, beyond that, the methodologies diverge. Whereas the traditional scientific paradigm reduces human phenomena to variables that can be used to predict future behaviour, the alternative paradigm, of which action research is a part, describes what happens holistically in naturally-occurring settings (Perry and Zuber-Skerritt, 1994). Unlike traditional science, action research does not attempt to set tight limits and controls on the experimental situation. The action researcher approaches the subject, whether people or institution, in its natural state (Trist, 1976).

Both action research and traditional science share the goal of creating knowledge. The action research participants begin with little knowledge in a specific situation and work collaboratively to observe, understand, and ultimately change the situation, while also reflecting on their own actions. The situation and environmental conditions lead the direction of the research. Traditional science, on the other hand, begins with substantial knowledge about hypothetical relationships, seeking to ‘discover new facts, verify old facts, and to analyse their sequences, causal explanations, and the natural laws governing the data gathered’ (Cunningham, 1993). It is exact in its measurement of cause and effect.

Another difference between traditional and action research lies in their approaches to action. While the former collects or establishes information for the purpose of learning and usually ends with the point of discovery, the latter intends to use any information to guide new behaviour. Traditional science does not attempt to offer solutions to problems (Cohen and Manion, 1980). Chein, Cook and Harding (1948)
contend that action researchers differ from scientists in that they must not only make discoveries, but must also ensure that those discoveries are properly applied. Action researchers attempt to make scientific discoveries while also solving practical problems. Aguinas (1993) notes that, nevertheless, the separation between action research and science is greater than ever.

Participants in action research programmes expect to be treated not as objects or even subjects, but as co-researchers engaged in ‘empowering participation’ and in ‘co-generative dialogue’ between ‘insiders and outsiders’ (Elden and Levin, 1991). In action research, truth is in the process of inquiry itself. Was it reflexive and dialectical? Was it ethical, democratic, and collaborative? Did participants learn new research skills, attain greater self-understanding, or achieve greater self-determination? Did it solve significant practice problems or did it contribute to our knowledge about what will not solve these problems? Were problems solved in a manner that enhanced the overall learning capacity of the individuals or the system?

These are the types of questions that guide action research. They are unlike those that guide most research. On the other hand, they speak to the essence of management and organizational learning.

Critiques of Action Research

Action research has been criticized as either producing research with little action or action with little research (Foster, 1972); weak when merely a form of problem-solving and strong when also emancipatory (Peters and Robinson, 1984; Kemmis, in Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988); lacking the rigor of true scientific research (Cohen and Manion, 1980); and lacking in internal and external control (Merriam and Simpson, 1984), hence of limited use in contributing to the body of knowledge. Marris and Rein (in Cohen and Manion, 1980) argue that the principles of action and research are so different as to be mutually exclusive, so that to link them together is to create a fundamental internal conflict.

Many action research studies appear to abort at the stage of diagnosis of a problem or at the implementation of a single solution or strategy, irrespective of whether it resolves the problem. Individuals seeking to solve problems in complex, real-time settings find that the problems change under their feet, often before the more in-depth iterative search for solutions suggested by action research has achieved meaningful results.

These critiques hinge on whether or not action research must contribute to knowledge in the same manner as other forms of social science research and whether or not action research must end in a resolution of a problem in order to be valid (Watkins and Brooks, in Brooks and Watkins, 1994). There is little doubt from the works reviewed in this article, as well as from the case studies of action research projects, that these critiques are more academic than practical concerns of most action researchers.

Essential Goals of Action Research

The expectation to both make and apply discoveries reflects the two essential aims of action research: to improve and to involve. The goal of improvement is directed toward three areas: practice, the understanding of the practice by its practitioners,
and the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Brown et al., 1982). Indeed, action research is more effective when participants engage in self-reflection while they are critically reflecting on the objective problem (Brown et al., 1982). Researchers can meet the goal of improvement by taking strategic action and then examining these actions against their original hypotheses. The validity of the theory is judged by a simple criterion: whether it leads to improvement and change within the context. It must both solve a practical problem and generate knowledge.

The goal of involvement is no less important than improvement. The Lewinian approach states that participants in the environment or project are best suited to collaborate and develop hypotheses since they are grounded in the context. They know the subtle characteristics that might influence the implementation of any plan. Additionally, involvement encourages members’ psychological ownership of facts; it allows for economical data collection; and teaches methods which can be used later for further development (Lippitt, 1979). In addition to owning the problem, the action researchers may acquire the skills necessary for continuous learning and problem-solving so that what is learned in the action research process is actually implemented.

Involvement speaks to the need for collaboration that Lewin considered vital to research. It is one critical element that distinguishes action research from other forms of social research (Peters and Robinson, 1984). The collaboration, according to Peters and Robinson, ‘must take place within a mutually acceptable ethical framework governing the collection, use and release of data’ (p. 118).

The interdependence of improvement and involvement addresses Lewin’s concern about the schism between theorists and practitioners. Action research can produce strong links among knowledge about learning, personal knowledge, and the commitment to further strategic action (Brown et al., 1982).

The Process of Action Research

As noted, action research consists of a team of practitioners, and possibly theorists, who cycle through a spiral of steps including planning, action, and evaluating the result of action, continually monitoring the activity of each step in order to adjust as needed (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). The cyclical nature of action research recognizes the need for action plans to be flexible and responsive to the environment. Kemmis and McTaggart note that ‘Lewin’s deliberate overlapping of action and reflection was designed to allow changes in plans for action as people learned from their own experience’ (p. 8).

The action research team begins the cycle by identifying a problem in their particular context. Often, the outside facilitator is needed to unfreeze the group dynamics so that participants can proceed to make changes. After identifying the problem within its community, the action research team works within that context to collect pertinent data. Data sources might include interviewing other people in the environment, completing measurements, conducting surveys, or gathering any other information that the researchers consider informative. By collecting data around a problem and then feeding it back to the organization, researchers identify the need for change, and the direction that that change might take (Watkins, 1991).
Following the guideline of involvement, all team members participate in the data collection phase.

After collecting the data, action research team members analyse it and then generate possible solutions to the identified problem. In addition, the team must make meaning of the data and introduce that meaning to the organization. The feedback to the community may act as an intervention itself, or the action researchers may implement more structured actions that create changes within the system. The interventions can be considered experimental, as the action research team members next test the effects of the changes they have implemented by collecting more data, evaluating the results, and reformulating thoughts or redefining the problem in the system.

The action researchers continue moving through this cycle until they have exhausted the problem that they identified initially. Possibly, completing one cycle adequately addresses the problem; more likely, however, the team might go through several iterations of problem identification and solving before the problem is both correctly identified and fully addressed. Figure 1 presents Lewin’s model of action research—phases that he originally depicted as a spiral.

**Figure 1** Lewin’s action research model

![Lewin's action research model diagram]

**Models of Action Research**

Action researchers can draw upon many models to guide their research. Cunninghamham (1993) notes:

The difficulty with any definition of action research is that the term can be used to summarise many activities which have the ‘veneer’ of research and action. Two researchers attempting to solve the same problem could inevitably reach different conclusions and still meet the criteria of action research within some paradigm or another. (p. 25)

Different researchers using the action research method may disagree in their approach, while agreeing on fundamental philosophies or goals. The participants in any action research undertaking ultimately choose—either consciously or unconsciously—the particular route that directs the research.
Most action researchers agree that action research consists of cycles of planning, acting, reflecting or evaluating, and then taking further action. Because various forms of action research exist, practitioners may choose one or several methodologies to inform their action. Consequently, it may be difficult to identify a ‘pure’ action researcher, that is, someone who follows only one particular methodology.

In addition to choosing from different methodologies, action researchers may differ in what they choose to emphasize in the action research cycle. Some emphasize experimentation, others show more concern with feedback, planning, or learning and theory building (Cunningham, 1993). Further, researchers may vary the duration of each cycle (Brown et al., 1982) depending on their particular purposes.

The professional expert model of action research (Whyte, 1991b) is based on the premise that a professional researcher contracts with an organization to ‘study a situation and a set of problems, to determine what the facts are, and to recommend a course of action’ (p. 9). The professional expert leads the research effort in this situation, with relatively little direction or involvement provided by organizational members. Although this model can provide answers to problematic organizational questions, it does less to stimulate learning on the part of organizational actors. Members may not gain full comprehension or ownership of their problems and underlying values and, thus, may remain unable to address them adequately without continued outside consultation or intervention.

McTaggart (1991) differentiates between action research and participatory action research—the focus of Park’s article in this special issue—which he suggests is more emancipatory than much of the action research undertaken. Participatory action research presupposes a commitment that all participants actually do research for themselves. Likewise, Kemmis (1988) stipulates that participants in the environment under investigation should be involved in every stage of the action research cycle; participatory action research theorists, on the other hand, suggest that some social scientists who undertake action research projects define ‘involvement’ so broadly that participants actually engage minimally in the project. Participatory action research, then, serves as an extension of Lewin’s original formulation, which focuses more upon involvement than participation. Action research is truly participatory when members of the particular context design and conduct the research and reflect on its nature (McTaggart, 1991). The participants engage in research that changes first themselves and then their environment.

In summary, the literature offers a variety of applications of action research. While this allows practitioners to choose an approach that meets specific needs, it also makes difficult a common understanding. The existence of several explicit models of action research interferes with the development of a consistent and unified theory of action research. Few authors agree on a definition of action research; they may include certain elements of Lewin’s theory while de-emphasizing, or altogether ignoring, others. Most theorists agree on the collaborative nature of action research, yet fail to critically examine how individuals collaborate or, indeed, engage in action research. Some may acknowledge the ability of action research to improve social action, yet neglect the internal values and theories that define improvement and guide that action. The literature provides limited information on internal action research team processes, focusing instead on the intervention and its consequences. Cases are written from an expert point of view, while the perceptions of team
members usually are neglected. Finally, the literature fails to clarify the interdependence of action and research. In the section which follows, we illustrate the classical model of research through a case study of two contrasting action research teams in a high technology company.

Lewin’s Model in Action, Part I: The Case of Two Action Research Projects

Southwest Technologies (ST), a multinational, high technology company, began an action research project in conjunction with the University of the Southwest (the University) in order to study quality issues within two divisions, Stripe and Star. The more specific purpose of the venture was to establish corporate action research teams to identify and address social systems-related barriers to the implementation of the divisions’ total quality management programmes and to help facilitate the move toward self-directed work teams (Dickens, 1998). The ‘action’ task would enable ST to move toward a more democratic work culture; the ‘research’ task would contribute knowledge to the field of quality management in the workforce.

Stripe and Star were situated in separate buildings on the same corporate campus in the Southwest. Faculty from the local university approached the site manager to propose the formation of action research teams. Table 1 below depicts the actions taken by each team over the course of one year as they relate to the action research process described above.

While using Lewin’s spiral as a basic framework, Table 1 provides much greater detail about what action research actually demands from participants. It conveys the iterative nature of action research, emphasizing that it requires both parallel and serial stages of activity (Davis and Valfer, in Clark, 1976). The table also illustrates that teams may need to re-cycle through steps that received inadequate attention or that were not resolved. Areas in which each team appeared to struggle, continuing to attempt action around a problematic step without achieving resolution, become apparent in this chronology.

Even this level of detail, however, fails to capture the tensions, revisions and experimentation inherent in the process. Action research is not a methodology that can be implemented in discrete, orderly steps, as much of the theoretical literature suggests. Rather, it can go forward, backward, and all directions at once. Both teams became paralysed or helpless. In this instance, the Stripe team got bogged down trying to identify a project that met with management approval and we see the cycling again and again through planning and reflection with little or no action. On the other hand, the Star team moves methodically through goal setting to action but is then arrested in the middle of the process when they present their preliminary findings to management. At this point, both management and the team decide that the team does not have authority to address the problems identified. What becomes clear in these chronicles is that each step reveals new information and new demands that have the potential to affect the outcome of the action research process.

Lewin’s Model in Action, Part II: The Case of the Manufacturing Manager

The case addressed by each of the articles in this special issue provides an opportunity to illustrate how action research might be used to intervene on a
Table 1  The action research project at Southwest Technologies

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<tr>
<th>Stripe action research team</th>
<th>Star people effectiveness team</th>
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<td><strong>Planning</strong></td>
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<td>• forming the team</td>
<td>• outlining goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>• learning action research</td>
<td>• forming the team</td>
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<tr>
<td>• selecting an area for research</td>
<td>• studying empowerment</td>
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<tr>
<td>• agreeing on action</td>
<td>• adopting action research</td>
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<tr>
<td>• exploring the purpose of the team</td>
<td>• seeking authority</td>
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<td>• facing conflict</td>
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<td>• confronting issues of membership and leadership</td>
<td>• organizing and analysing the data</td>
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<td>• discussing team objectives</td>
<td>• coping with change</td>
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<tr>
<td>• discussing team processes</td>
<td>• reconsidering our authority</td>
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<td>• organizing the data</td>
<td>• organizing our feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>• reporting to managers</td>
<td>• reconsidering our authority and purpose</td>
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<td>• analysing the data</td>
<td>• preparing for the QST presentation</td>
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<td><strong>Planning</strong></td>
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<td>• seeking authority</td>
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<td>• sharing our experiences</td>
<td>• organizing and analysing the data</td>
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<td><strong>Acting</strong></td>
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<td>• creating individual projects</td>
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<td>• collecting the data</td>
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problematic organizational situation. Here, we see an interaction during a meeting between team members and management that leaves the participants dissatisfied with one another and with the outcome of the meeting.

The case of the manufacturing manager suggests several weaknesses and constraints
within the team’s functioning, as observed from the lens of action research. If action research intends to produce social change and practical solutions in a democratic forum, then we must ask how we can democratize this group. We look at ways to involve participants and improve the situation in a way that balances research and action.

How then would action researchers respond to the case? One possibility is to explore the issue of sanction—the necessary endorsements and permissions to act which are essential to action research. Does the team indeed have organizational sanction to proceed? If it once did, does it still? What is the nature of the sanction that the team has—what can it do, for how long, to whom? One paradox evident in this case is that a team may have the stated authority to act and still not feel an internal capacity to act. That is, they may experience a mandate without also experiencing empowerment to fulfill that mandate.

Another key observation is the role of management in sanctioning the project. As Goodman and Clark (in Clark, 1976) contend, ‘It is very difficult both to collect good data and to employ the data usefully without the broad support of the client system’ (pp. 174–5). Foster (in Clark, 1976), Clark (1976), Greenwood, Whyte and Harkavy (1993) and Seashore and Bowers (1963) all report that continued sanction is imperative to the enactment of the action research process. While the teams intended to be self-sufficient, they could not proceed without management approval. This case demonstrates again the critique that many action research teams yield research with little action.

We are intrigued by the juxtaposition of sanction and sanctuary—perhaps there is a way that a team that has not been sanctioned to take action also lacks sanctuary or safety. Certainly the thoughts of the team leader suggest this when he thinks, ‘You keep cutting us off at the knees’. An action researcher might explore learned helplessness and empowerment issues with the team members and the manager within the context of sanction.

We have said that the two goals of action research are to involve and to improve. Team members must consider their own involvement, as well as the degree of collaboration with their manager. How can they involve the manager in a dialogue to identify a mutually acceptable improvement objective and then continue to involve him or her in subsequent iterations of the action research process? If involvement leads to psychological ownership, then what does the manager need in order to take ownership of the organization’s project? Who is part of the system that must be involved? If this stakeholder has not been a part of the process, who else may also need to be involved in order for the team to have the necessary endorsements to proceed?

Based on the thought, ‘Whew, he finally came to our meeting. He’s been invited to every session’, group members might identify the manager’s lack of involvement as a serious constraint. The response to this identified problem, then, is to create ways for the manager to be involved. In this case, simply inviting him to meetings has not been sufficient. Team members have the opportunity to reflect on their own efforts at involvement to date and must own up to the fact that they have been ineffective partners in the project. Group reflection might lead participants to acknowledge that they have failed at involvement and to generate new options. They must not only look at ways to involve the manager, but also at ways to involve themselves in involving the manager. Team members could request a commitment from the manager to attend specific meetings; they could, themselves, commit to briefing the manager thoroughly—through electronic mail, memos, phone calls, or short
meetings—on a regular basis. They could solicit from the manager his own ideas about the best way to involve him.

Action research requires that a group have a specific goal. Cunningham (1993) notes that a problem that is too general cannot be tested. It is possible in this case that ‘identifying ways that each of us can help eliminate non-value-added work in our area’ is too general a goal upon which to act. The case does not delineate action steps surrounding non-value-added work (NVAW). At this point in the team’s existence, team members are compelled to reconsider their goal. This meeting gives them the opportunity to co-create with the manager a goal that meets his needs as well as theirs and to collaborate on actions they might pursue. When the manager tells the group that the goal of eliminating non-value-added work is not a good idea, he may show little respect for the thought and research that the team members have dedicated to their task; but it also illustrates that the manager does not ‘own’ the goal of eliminating NVAW. Most importantly, the team has the opportunity to question whether or not the goal of eliminating NVAW will indeed make a significant improvement in the organization.

The team’s plan to develop individual projects intimates that they might not be able or willing to work with each other. When team members decided to develop individual projects, they may have colluded to inhibit teamwork and collaboration. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) argue that ‘action research is not individualistic. To lapse into individualism is to destroy the critical dynamic of the group’ (p. 15). Smith and Berg (1988) state that ‘in order to be a group, a collection of individuals must integrate the large array of individual differences that the members represent’ (p. 90). Yet in this case, we see more indications of individualism than teamwork, more distrust than trust.

Action research intends to foster learning about one’s self and one’s environment. In this case, however, we actually see no evidence of learning. As the case is written, it appears that the team has done little besides decide to act on NVAW in the previous six months. Have team members, in fact, learned anything in the six months that they have been together? If they have, they could use this meeting as an opportunity to share their new knowledge with their manager. If they have not, then they need to acknowledge this and make a decision to disband or to reframe their approach.

In conclusion, this case offers many possibilities for action research interventions. Most notably, team members and the manager can increase their efforts at involvement and secure organizational sanction for their activities. The members might be more specific in their goal definition and ensure that everyone ‘owns’ the goal. After the team members begin doing these things to improve their group, they can return their attention to improving their organizational environment—selecting a problem, collecting data, studying the data, experimenting, providing feedback, implementing changes, and continuing this cycle until they have accomplished their project. The case well illustrates the interdependence of group or involvement strategies with the improvement aims of action research.

**Conclusion**

Lewin’s approach to action research, the classical model, conceived of a process whereby we would attain deeper and deeper understanding of a phenomenon
through cycles of fact-finding or research and of taking action to implement what was learned in the research. Taking action is itself an experimental treatment on an organization or a community and can be studied to see whether or not the system or problem is transformed. Each of the variants discussed in this special issue has its roots in this Lewinian model. Participatory research has embraced the social change theme that underlies much of Lewin’s work. Action learning focuses on transformation through individual and collective reframing of the problem—what Lewin called reconceptualization. Action science looks deeply into individual actions for their reflection of the underlying social perspective—whether more authoritarian or democratic in Lewin’s terms—and through fact finding (Argyris’ directly observable data) works to make explicit these tacit social perspectives and thereby to transform them (reconceptualization). Developmental action inquiry focuses on the readiness or developmental level of the individual or system to take action, to make a change. Collaborative inquiry emphasizes the power of asking questions and of collaboration. While these approaches no longer emphasize the hypothesis testing in the positivist tradition found in Lewin’s work, there is nevertheless a thread that connects back to Lewin. Somehow we think he would have applauded the evolution and reinterpretation of his ideas evident in these pages.

References


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PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD: THE CASE OF THE BHOOMI SENA MOVEMENT

Most of the major assumptions of participatory research, as practiced by historical materialists, are illustrated in the case study below. This case also captures the significance of participatory research for community development and social change.

Introduction

In the Thana district of India, there is a strip of forest land in which members of an indigenous group live. They are known as the “adivasis,” a generic term used to describe the aborigines of India. The adivasis, who have preserved their culture, are one of the most oppressed groups in Indian society, with a long history of deprivation and humiliation. Consequently, they have mobilized, organizing a grassroots movement called Bhoomi Sena (Land Army). Members of this organization defend the rights and work to meet the needs of the people, and to combat injustices and exploitation originating in various sectors of society.

Historical context giving rise to the Bhoomi Sena movement

The adivasis owned their own belt of land in India's Thana district and controlled their means of production up to one hundred years ago. Then, with the development of urban centers in the south, a market was created for the grain, timber, and grass produced in the Thana district. Due to the increasing value of these products, ownership of the entire area passed into the hands of a new landlord class whose members were also moneylenders, grass traders, and forest contractors, and who began to exploit the adivasis in a variety of ways. When the adivasis lost their land, they lost control over their means of production and became virtual slaves, forced to labor on the landlords' estates. They served as bonded labor against debts and were charged extremely high rents and interest on consumption loans. Beginning in the late 1930s, several relief organizations moved into the area to provide temporary relief. From 1945 to 1947, the adivasis spontaneously revolted against the landlords and their private armies. They were successful, bringing serfdom, forced labor, low salaries, high rents, and other exploitative situations to an end.

Laws were passed to protect the rights of the adivasis. When the conflict was settled, the adivasis reverted to their former passive state because, though they had implemented a number of spontaneous actions, they were not politically aware or organized. This left the door open for future exploitation by new classes.

As a result of the 1945-1947 incidents, many landlords sold their land, primarily to members of three groups: large and medium farmers, their former watchmen and foremen, and small traders in the villages who were members of the middle class and who saw an opportunity for profitable investments. The adivasis got virtually no land, and conditions reverted to those existing prior to the revolt, the only difference being that now there were new laws which remained, for the most part, on paper.

The more numerous Marathas caste, farmers who worked their own land, displaced the

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educated Brahmins in centers of political power in spite of the fact that the latter were members of a higher caste made up of feudal lords who did not work their own lands. The Marathas lobbied for “land for the tiller” and, in 1957, tenancy was abolished in the state. The adivasis benefitted, as non-producing classes were weakened vis-à-vis the mid-level castes, receiving an estimated 40% of the land with the stipulation that it was not to be sold to non-ādivasis. However, this new situation did very little for the adivasis as they did not have the capital or the inputs to work the land they now owned. Thus, they were forced to borrow for production and consumption, and gradually they lost their land, returning once again to their laborer status so that by 1970 their situation was almost identical to that of the mid-1940s.

By the 1970s, classes in the region included the feudal landlords, who no longer owned land but held power and influence; moneylenders and traders, a non-producer mercantile class whose members owned some land; large and medium farmers who often employed adivasis; poor peasants who were almost exclusively adivasis and who couldn't produce enough on their land to sustain their families and thus had to work as laborers; and adivasis who had lost their land and their freedom and were working as bonded laborers once again. Domination of the adivasis by the ruling elite of the area was complete.

The evolution of Bhoomi Sena

Bhoomi Sena emerged out of a nationwide land movement that took place in the late 1960s, initiated by leftist parties in India. The Praja Socialist Party organized peaceful civil disobedience to protest an unjust law on August 9, 1970 in Palghar, on 2,000 acres of land belonging to a trust. Approximately 150 people, among them some adivasis, took over the land and were arrested and sentenced to fifteen days in jail. In prison, the workers discussed the future of their cause, deciding that after being released, there would be no more attempts to regain land. But Kaluram, a young adivasi leader, and his adivasi colleagues disagreed, arguing that the land belonged to the adivasis. They decided to continue the struggle alone.

When they were freed, Kaluram and his colleagues shared their thoughts with adivasis in different villages. With active collaboration from villagers, they collected information about the illegal usurpation of land by landowners. This process of investigation created a general awareness of the problem in several villages. Kaluram and his colleagues then founded the Bhoomi Sena, with a membership of eight hundred adivasis.

The first action planned by Bhoomi Sena was the appropriation of crops from land taken from the adivasis. Ten villages around Vadhan were targeted. Under Kaluram's leadership, some eight hundred adivasis invaded a rich landlord's fields, harvesting the crop and carrying it away. This same action was carried out in several other fields. The landlords, taken by surprise, did not retaliate initially. In subsequent occupations, they called the police. Members of Bhoomi Sena announced that they were taking the law into their own hands and harvesting crops from their own land. The police took Kaluram to the station for questioning, but did nothing against others involved in the harvest.

Crop seizures continued and many adivasis acted spontaneously, taking crops from their own occupied lands. As a result of complaints in the Maharashtra Assembly from members of the Socialist party, an officer and court were sent to the town of Manor to settle the issue. Eight hundred cases pending on land ownership were settled in three days, 799 of them in favor of the adivasis, and several thousand acres were recovered from landlords. Crop seizures spread.

When Bhoomi Sena members harvested crops, they became the collective owners, threshing it and storing it in grain banks. Sometimes persons selected to guard the crop stole it and Kaluram and Bhoomi Sena were blamed, in part, for appointing the wrong people to guard the crop.
As the planting season approached, some adivasis gave their land back to the landlords to cultivate, or borrowed agricultural inputs from the landlords at exorbitant interest rates. People began to forget their previous year's struggle.

During this low period, Kaluram decided to ask for help from some socialist friends, under whose paternalistic intervention the movement suffered. To help the adivasi movement, a social worker, SW, went to Vadhan. SW believed that increased agricultural production was the way to achieve development. Thus, he proposed a number of development projects and the formation of a Farmers' Association under his and Kaluram's leadership. After four years and many failed projects, SW had to leave the region, accused of misappropriation of funds. Kaluram apologized for the many mistakes of the organization, assuming his share of the responsibility, in a public meeting attended by representatives of thirty villages.

In the four-year period from 1972 to 1975, Bhoomi Sena had all but disappeared, replaced by the Farmers' Association. But its power and potential were still alive in a few original cadres who had dropped out of the Farmers' Association. These individuals urged Kaluram to leave that organization as well, and to mobilize the people again.

Early in 1975, members of the group built a hut where they held meetings to revive Bhoomi Sena and to resist the initiatives of the Farmers' Association whose staff treated people as "objects" of development. Members of the revived Bhoomi Sena worked in three areas, principally: a) harvesting crops on adivasi lands usurped by landlords; b) bringing law suits against landlords who had illegally taken adivasi lands; and c) fighting abuses by landlords. Several incidents and actions in the villages led to the gradual rebirth of the movement.

The events in the town of Phitagaon were a small beginning. A village landlord had illegally appropriated the land of eight poor adivasis who left town out of fear. Members of Bhoomi Sena confronted the landlord, both in court and outside, and succeeded in recovering half the land he had usurped.

In the town of Purves, an adivasi farmer was beaten by a government official. When Bhoomi Sena organized a mass demonstration against him, the official panicked, apologized, and was transferred to another town.

A whole series of incidents occurred during this period, including one in the town of Jankop which was critical for Bhoomi Sena. The village was virtually controlled by one family which owned most of the land. Many adivasi families had left, fearing forced labor and beatings. The land of an old woman had been illegally taken by the landlord, and though the legitimate owner won in court, she had been unable to recover her land. In November 1975, she called on Kaluram to help her get the land back. Kaluram went to Jankop to mobilize the people, but they were terrified. Then the woman challenged the manhood of the young people at a meeting and the mood changed. The people in the village, led by young adivasis, decided to harvest the woman's crop the next day. When the adivasis entered the woman's field, they encountered strong resistance from the landlord's personal armed guards. The situation turned into a battle which the adivasis won, overcoming their fear and recovering the elderly woman's land.

After this incident, the adivasis of Jankop were harassed by landlords in the neighboring town of Palghar where they went for work, marketing, and so on. The adivasis fought back by a) declaring the freedom of bonded laborers of the landlord in Jankop, b) quitting their jobs as domestics in the Jankop landlord's house in Palghar, and c) boycotting work in his fields in Jankop. The landlord was forced to bring labor from other villages, paying two or three times the low salary paid to the adivasis in Jankop.

By the end of 1975, after a number of successful actions like these, Bhoomi Sena came to life again as area residents' view of the movement changed. The leadership, or vanguard, group of Bhoomi Sena, in continuous contact with those involved in local struggles, decided that the
movement was ready for actions on a broader scale. Their approach, more systematic this time, included a) learning from their struggles, b) sharing these experiences more widely, and c) emphasizing more research on the socio-economic situation. It had become apparent, both to the leadership and to the adivasis, that similar problems existed in different villages, the result of the same social reality. Villagers could not fight their problems in isolation. A level of shared awareness and unity was necessary to tackle these in a more organized fashion. By way of response to this need, camps were created for collective reflection. These served as forums for sharing experiences and reflection on oppressive situations, in order to take collective decisions for further actions. In preparation for the first camp meeting, the cadres went around their own villages, talking to people and eliciting their perceptions of problems. They organized the information and thoughts gathered, and systematized the experience to be shared in the camp.

In February 1976, the first reflection camp was held, with twenty-five youths, representing ten villages, present for the three-day event. The meeting began with accounts of the history of people's struggles in the area, resulting in the emergence of Bhoomi Sena. Then the group heard about and discussed the struggles going on in Jankop and Purves. They also examined the situation faced by landless laborers and small farmers, individually narrating and collectively discussing their own experiences. The camp helped to raise their consciousness, to increase their awareness of their social reality, to strengthen their sense of solidarity, and to stimulate actions against the oppressors in their own villages.

Soon after, a second camp was held, with fifty people participating. In this case, no one went around the villages to listen to the people; they were told, instead, what the problems were, based on the first camp. People listened, but were not satisfied with the process. An important lesson was learned by members of Bhoomi Sena: involving the people in gathering information for discussion and analysis was essential if the people were to take further actions in their villages.

When those participating in the camps returned to their villages, they held discussions on the issues raised. They realized that the villages were dominated by landlords and that the oppressed had to unite in order to stop exploitation. Class consciousness thus began to emerge.

In some villages, residents felt that local organizations were necessary to complement Bhoomi Sena's activities. Youth leagues were formed to serve the needs of the poor. They were organized in many villages; some were successful and some were not. Two major issues were addressed by these organizations: the existence of bonded labor and the payment of minimum wages. A survey taken in the village of Bagzari, for example, indicated that ten bonded laborers lived there. Members of the youth league informed the local official, but he took no action. So the league decided to take action. They informed the village head man that the bonded laborers were now free, in accord with the law, and that the issue should be made public; they further demanded that representatives of thirty villages were to attend the meeting. Prior to the event, eight facilitators from the Bhoomi Sena leadership spent approximately three weeks going to each of these village to discuss problems with the people and to inform them about the work of Bhoomi Sena. In this way, the word spread. From two to three hundred adivasis were present at most of the village meetings. Participants decided that each village would send two to three representatives to the camp.

Twenty-four villages were represented by fifty delegates at the camp. On the first day, Bhoomi Sena's leadership gave an account of the organization, its history, successes and failures. On the second, delegates from each village spoke, talking about their lives and the exploitation they had experienced. It became apparent that problems fell into a number of categories. Some key problems were common to all and some were not. As a result, those present were able to develop a shared sense of reality as experienced by residents from all twenty-four villages.

The problems selected for analysis were: 1) the causes of residents' poverty, 2) relations
between the sawkar and the government, 3) the fact that small farmers and laborers shared common problems, 4) the nature of youth leagues and how they could help solve problems, and 5) the role assumed by government vis-à-vis the villagers.

Through analysis of these issues, it became clear that society in the area was divided into four main classes: landless laborers, small farmers who also worked as laborers, medium size farmers who did not work as laborers, and landlords who owned a lot of land and engaged in money-lending and trading activities. Participants concluded that the landlords were the oppressors, exploiting members of the other three constituencies.

Those present offered examples of the ways in which they were exploited. Babu, a small farmer, had borrowed 280 kilos of rice from a landlord as a consumption loan. Total annual production on his two-acre farm came to 1,760 kilos. Out of that, he paid 1,120 kilos back to the landlord within six months at a 400% interest rate. He was left with 640 kilos to feed his family until the next season. Because this was not enough, he would be forced to go back to the landlord and ask for another consumption loan.

Kalu was a bonded laborer who had borrowed 650 rupees six years before. In return, from a minimum wage of three rupees a day, he was paid one, i.e., 4,380 rupees had been withheld over the previous six years.

Through stories like these, the adivasis were able to identify their common enemy and the mechanisms used to exploit them. It was also apparent that the government, in light of the way it reacted in adivasi landlord cases, was on the side of the latter. From many different accounts, a complete picture of the situation emerged.

During the last day of the camp, decisions were made about actions to be taken to solve immediate problems. The most critical of these was the lack of jobs in the month of May. In an eight-day period, participants conducted a survey of the number of people requiring jobs, and the kinds of work that might be created under the government's Guaranteed Employment Scheme. A group of thirty representatives from Bhoomi Sena gave this information to local officials and requested that they act on the issue. Since nothing was done, Bhoomi Sena organized a demonstration as a result of which officials were moved to begin working. About twenty youth leagues were formed in order, initially, to assure that officials created the needed jobs. Thus, by identifying, sharing, and analyzing problems, villagers were able to select and implement actions in a collective fashion.

The minimum wage struggle continued. Members of Bhoomi Sena came into conflict with a political party supported by the landlords. This party intimidated adivasis and attempted an attack on Kaluram. Bhoomi Sena's leadership met with the people and analyzed the cause of the harassment, i.e., the minimum wage issue. A few days later, a mass demonstration was organized, with 6,000 people participating. The struggle in new areas led to the formation of new youth leagues in different villages. These local organizations also dealt with education and other social and economic issues.

Members of Bhoomi Sena relied constantly, in youth leagues and camps, on collective reflection, encouraging villagers to analyze their reality in order to take actions to change it. This analysis, both objective and collective, aided in the identification of forces facilitating or hindering social change.
Action research: Explaining the diversity
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Action research: Explaining the diversity

Catherine Cassell and Phil Johnson

ABSTRACT For nearly 70 years scholars have been discussing the characteristics of action research and it is apparent that there is an increasingly wide range of forms that action research takes in practice. Here we argue that such diversity is not haphazard and that we must be cautious about developing all-embracing standards to differentiate the 'good' from the 'bad'. Rather this diversity is inspired by different philosophical stances, which usually remain tacit in published accounts thereby fuelling ambiguity and controversy about what action research should entail in practice and as to its 'scientific' status. The aim of this article is to explain the apparent diversity of action research in the organization studies domain, by clarifying how variable philosophical assumptions systematically lead to the constitution of distinctive forms of action research with their attendant conceptions of social science. This diversity is illustrated, with examples from the relevant literature, in terms of variation in: the aims of action research; its conception of social science; the role of the action researcher and their relations with members; the validity criteria deployed and the internal tensions that arise.

KEYWORDS action research ● epistemology ● methodology ● ontology

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’s application of experimental logic
and social psychological theory to practical social problems (1946), it is simultaneously evident (Elden & Chisholm, 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. Indeed this diversity may be increasing with the recent appropriation of postmodernist discourse by some organizational researchers (Barry, 1997; Cullen, 1998; Treleaven, 2001).

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), where tacit criteria of organizational ‘health’ are deployed (Schein, 1987, 1997), whilst ‘the pure applied distinction that characterizes much of organizational research’ is dissolved (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001: 8). Although some commentators have framed action research as ‘appreciative inquiry’ that builds upon organizational successes rather than ameliorating problems (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 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, 1991; Dickens & Watkins, 1999). According to some, these iterations must focus upon procesual 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 et al., 1985; Argyris & Schon, 1989; Argyris, 1993; Grubbs, 2001). In contrast, Aguinis (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.

So whether the theoretical imperative is verstehen (interpretive understanding) or erklaren (causal explanation), many scholars agree that action research must be implemented through the involvement of external researchers ‘with members over . . . a matter which is of genuine concern to them’ (Eden & Huxham, 1996: 75), ‘within a mutually acceptable ethical framework’ (Rapoport, 1970: 499). However others see that the relationship between researchers and organizational participants must be dialogical (e.g. Sandberg, 1985) so as to open communicative space and bring ‘people together around shared topical concerns, problems and issues . . . in a way that will permit people to achieve mutual understanding and
consensus about what to do’ (Kemmis, 2001: 100, emphasis in the original). The aim of such dialogue is to ‘promote a critical consciousness which exhibits itself in political as well as practical action to promote change’ (Grundy, 1987: 154).

Others seem rather sceptical about this force for emancipation. For instance, Cullen (1998) uses a Foucauldian perspective to argue that the action research model that has evolved within the Tavistock Institute has created a paradoxical stance regarding social control and social change. He suggests that on the one hand, action research utilizes what Foucault described as ‘dividing practices’ in that a new form of ‘examination’, administered through the consultant as the authority figure had been developed. Therefore, far from being liberationary, action research has been promoting more effective forms of organizational control. On the other hand, he argues that the main contribution of action research can be seen to ‘open up and facilitate spaces within which alternative social and organizational paradigms could be nurtured’ (Cullen, 1998: 1559).

In this article, we wish to clarify some of the evident ambiguity surrounding the label action research by explaining how this diversity comes about with reference to the competing conceptions of ‘science’ that inspire different forms of action research praxis. Indeed a number of authors have argued that action research has never really enjoyed the status it deserves. For instance, Sandford (1970) argued that no form of action research has been regarded as part of the mainstream social science tradition due to its multidisciplinary nature and the perception that action research can never be truly ‘scientific’. This claim has been supported by a variety of scholars (e.g. Susman & Evered, 1978; Argyris, 1980; Stone, 1982) who have proposed that action research is incompatible with the scientific norms established by positivist epistemology. Although that proposition that such a divide exists has been disputed (Aguisis, 1993), Elden and Chisholm (1993: 136) claim that the discrepancies with positivism have been exacerbated by the ‘emergent varieties of action research’. While some commentators argue that these departures from positivist norms should be welcomed because such norms are unsustainable (see Reason & Bradbury, 2001), others seem to want to encourage action researchers to translate positivist norms into ‘quality standards’ (e.g. Wilson, 2004).

Here we shall argue that the range of forms that action research takes is not haphazard and that we must be cautious about developing all-embracing standards to differentiate the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’, the ‘scientific’ from ‘pseudo-science’, and so on. Rather the emergent diversity is inspired by different philosophical stances, in the main driven by varying core assumptions about epistemology and ontology, which normatively inform
their practitioners in terms of aims and requirements. Yet the impact of such philosophical variation usually remains unnoticed in published accounts thereby fuelling ambiguity and controversy about what action research should entail in practice and as to its ‘scientific’ status.

Hence the aim of this article is to describe and explain the apparent diversity of action research in the management and organization studies domain, by reflexively clarifying how variable philosophical assumptions about ontology and epistemology systematically lead to distinctive forms of action research with their attendant normative and summative conceptions of social science. This diversity is illustrated, with examples from the relevant literature, in terms of variation in: the aims of action research; its conception of social science; the role of the action researcher and their relations with participants; the validity criteria deployed; and the internal tensions that can arise.

**Action research, diversity and philosophy**

As Reason and Bradbury (2001: xxiv) have noted, the action research ‘family’ includes a wide range of methodologies, grounded in different traditions, that express competing philosophical assumptions. A number of writers have sought to characterize aspects of that family, and indeed family life more generally, in different ways. For example, Raelin (1999) focuses on the different types of intervention strategies available by presenting a categorization of six different action strategies practised by organizational and management development practitioners: action research; participatory research; action learning; action science; developmental action inquiry; and co-operative inquiry. After providing a definition of each strategy, he presents a set of 14 criteria for differentiating across the various strategies. These criteria range from those focusing on the underpinnings (e.g. ‘philosophical base’ and ‘nature of discourse’) to those focused on the more practical elements (e.g. organizational ‘risk and assessment’). In contrast, Chandler and Torbert (2003) have produced a conceptual typology of 27 different ‘flavours’ of action research which are underpinned by three dimensions of voice, practice and time. Others have also produced less elaborate distinctions between different approaches. For example, Kelly’s (1985) distinction between approaches informed by ‘experimental social administration’ and those informed by the ‘teacher researcher model’ or Heller’s (2004) differentiation of ‘action research’ and ‘research action’ where he argued that within the family of action research there are ‘two fairly distinct and legitimate approaches’ (2004: 349).
By way of contrast to the above typologies, our purpose here is to analyse some of the various approaches to action research in detail and to explain their diversity in terms of variation in the action researcher’s underlying philosophical commitments. We then link these assumptions specifically to a consideration of the different types of assessment criteria that are appropriate for different action research practices, thereby producing a different account from those outlined above. Such an analysis of action research can enhance our understanding of this evident ambiguity by opening to reflexive examination the often unnoticed a priori conventions which organize action researchers’ endeavours, so as to indicate the conditions under which particular perspectives and practices are deemed appropriate or inappropriate.

An understanding of philosophy is important because although their idiom varies, a number of philosophers (e.g. Bhaskar, 1978; Trigg, 1980; Bernstein, 1983; Margolis, 1986; Norris, 1996) have noted how different understandings of science are constituted by different combinations of assumptions about ontology and epistemology. Each is expressed as a particular conception of the relationship between subject (the knower) and object (what is known). These philosophical assumptions underlie the categorization of action research which we use later in this article. For instance, many contemporary positivists assume that any social science researcher, provided that they follow the correct methodological procedures, which must derive from those used in the natural sciences, can neutrally collect data from an independent social reality so as to empirically test causal predictions deduced from a priori theory. However within this realist ontological and objectivist epistemological stance the commitment to methodological monism, by imposing an observer-derived logic (see Guba & Lincoln, 1994), has led to the neglect of the role of actors’ subjective perceptions in guiding their behaviour. Indeed within such a positivist stance, the accessing of actors’ subjective perspectives is often considered to be inappropriate because it is presumed that this cannot be done in a direct, objective, neutral manner and therefore is scientifically inadmissible (e.g. Abel, 1958). In contrast, there are those that consider verstehen to be objectively viable, and hence scientifically legitimate, through, for instance, ‘naturalistic’ interpretative inquiry. This is where the social researcher tries to enter ‘the worlds of native people . . . to render those worlds understandable from the standpoint of a theory that is grounded in the behaviours, languages, definitions, attitudes, and feelings of those studied’ (Denzin, 1970: 166).

So here, according to some commentators (e.g. Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), it is possible to detect an initial point of philosophical departure in social science research. Inductive access to, and analysis of actors’ culturally derived interpretive logics is legitimizes as a means of explanation of
observed behaviour. Moreover there is preservation of a positivist view of
the privileged role of the researcher who, it is assumed, can still access empiri-
cal data neutrally from an independent reality. It is the empirical focus of
that privileged role that changes. However, it is this very privilege that is
directly attacked by other philosophical manoeuvres.

In particular, various scholars have popularized the subjectivist
epistemological view that the ideal of a neutral detached observer is unreal-
istic: what counts as warranted knowledge, truth and reason are always
conditioned through the operation of inescapable socially constructed, and
hence transitive, modes of engagement (e.g. Habermas, 1972, 1974;
Foucault, 1977; Bhaskar, 1978). However where epistemological subjec-
tivists disagree is with regard to their stance upon the ontological status of
social reality. For instance, Habermas (1972, 1974) combines epistemologi-
cal subjectivism with ontological realism. Here social reality is assumed to
have an independent existence but we can never know this reality-as-it-is
because of the action of our socially derived modes of engagement which
allow us to make sense of our world(s). Human cognition shapes reality
through its imposition of a priori object constituting epistemological
categories which ‘determine the aspects under which reality is objectified and
thus can be made accessible to experience to begin with’ (1974: 8–9).

In contrast, other scholars have combined epistemological subjectivism
with ontological subjectivism. In this relativistic position, reality becomes a
self-referential and arbitrary output of discursive practices. For example,
Baudrillard (1983, 1993) argues that such hyper-realities have no indepen-
dent ontological status as they are divorced from extra-linguistic reference
points, in which there is nothing to see save simulations which appear to be
real. For Chia (1995, 1996), it follows that knowledge has no secure vantage
point outside the socio-linguistic processes which constitute our worlds, yet
there is a tendency to externalize and reify these social products so that our
discursively produced hyper-realities are mistaken for an independent,
unchangeable, external reality.

As we shall demonstrate in this article, the philosophical manoeuvres
and points of departure noted above have had a significant further impact
upon the forms that action research takes. Indeed these variable combina-
tions of philosophical assumptions that underpin different forms of action
research influence not just how action researchers conduct their research, but
also the appropriate criteria by which it should be evaluated. Therefore such
a metatheoretical analysis will enable us to consider variation in what is
meant by ‘good’ or ‘bad’ research, or ‘proper science’, by revealing the
implicit philosophical commitments which are being deployed in those
criteriological1 evaluations. A key outcome is a description and explanation
of methodological variation thereby potentially broadening the philosophical repertoire available whilst enhancing mutual and self-understanding.

Hence while we are trying to understand why such evident diversity has developed under the umbrella term ‘action research’, we are not implying that ‘anything goes’ in a relativistic sense. Rather we argue that different forms of action research are justified by the different philosophical commitments we have just outlined that simultaneously articulate specific criteriologies where anything does not go within a particular mode of engagement.

In order to facilitate this form of analysis and examine the different underlying assumptions behind various approaches to action research we will be using a categorization of five different approaches to action research practices. This categorization will be used as a heuristic device to enable the different assumptions underlying certain types of praxis to be outlined and critiqued. We have labelled these categories of action research praxis as: ‘experimental’; ‘inductive’; ‘participatory action research’; ‘participatory’; and ‘deconstructive’. We have chosen this particular form of categorization because it enables us to highlight how the different philosophical assumptions that we have just outlined underlie a range of action research practices. The categorization is not all inclusive, but we have categorized the most commonly found types of action research that abound. Subtle variations and continuities within each category will be explained so as to elaborate how variances in philosophical commitments serve to constitute and reconstitute different forms of action research. We recognize that this form of categorization may be contentious for a number of reasons. First, inevitably although it is firmly rooted in the distinctions between the philosophical traditions highlighted previously, it is illustrative of our own interpretations of those distinctions that may not necessarily be shared by others. Second, in producing a categorization system we then must allocate different types of action research to the categories in that system. Once again here we are making judgements regarding our own sensemaking of the work and contribution of other authors. Yet they themselves may prefer to see their work categorized in an alternative way. Third, the labels we use to describe the categories may not represent how others see the field and in themselves may be controversial. Although we recognize the contentious nature of our endeavour, our aim here is to examine the different philosophical assumptions that underlie each of the categories outlined, and to point out where the boundaries are blurred, and the implications of that blurring. However we should also consider our own role in producing this account of action research. This article emerged from the two authors’ own discussions of action research and the recognition that the differing ways in which we both defined the domain were underpinned by different philosophical positions which had not been sufficiently
reflected upon. Out of this dialogue, our own emergent philosophical stance has, of course, informed how we have constructed this account. This stance is articulated in our attempt to elucidate how a priori assumptions impact upon how action researchers themselves engage with organizations and their memberships. These aims in themselves articulate the epistemic commitments of critical theory by attempting to encourage critical interrogation of such engagements. Moreover, the epistemological hegemony of positivism is challenged, especially in terms of its inadvertent criteriological application to all action research practices. Therefore the aim of this article is to highlight the resultant complexity in attempting to derive general evaluation criteria from the field of action research, and we argue that this complexity derives from the variety of philosophical stances drawn upon. We will now examine each of the categories of action research practices in turn.

1. Experimental action research practices

The coining of the term ‘action research’ is traced by many back to the work of Kurt Lewin (Burnes, 2004). Lewin’s experimental approach was underpinned, as was most social psychology at that time, by positivist philosophical assumptions. Usually these philosophical assumptions are expressed through a commitment to Popperian falsificationism (Popper, 1959) which retains an objectivist epistemology, a realist ontology, and articulates methodological monism. In other words, positivists assume that any social science researcher, provided that they follow the correct methodological procedures which derive from those used in the natural sciences, can neutrally collect data from an independent social reality so as to empirically test causal predictions deduced from a priori theory. We have categorized approaches underlied by positivist commitments as ‘experimental action research practices’, because they follow the tradition of experimentation. Positivist epistemological and ontological commitments are vividly illustrated by Lewin’s original contribution to action research (1946). Here he emphasized how the most important aim of doing social science should be to practically contribute to the change and betterment of society and its institutions. For Lewin, ensuring such progress demanded some reorientation of social research so as to bridge the gap between what he called ‘general laws’ and the ‘diagnosis’ of specific social problems. The former dealt with:

... the relation between possible conditions and possible results. They are expressed in ‘if so’ propositions ... and can serve as guidance
under certain conditions. The knowledge of general laws can serve as
guidance for the achievement of certain objectives in certain
conditions.

(1946: 38)

However, Lewin also saw such general laws as being context-free and it was
not sufficient just to know them in order to act correctly, but also one must
know ‘the specific character of the situation at hand’. This character is deter-
mined by a scientific fact-finding called diagnosis (1946: 38). Fact-finding
occupied a pivotal position in Lewin’s ‘spiral of steps’ for undertaking action
research:

First it should evaluate the action. It shows whether what has been
achieved is above or below expectation. Secondly, it gives the planner
a chance to learn, that is, to gather new general insight . . . Thirdly,
this fact finding should serve as the basis for correctly planning the next
step. Finally it serves as a basis for modifying the ‘overall plan’.

(1946: 38)

Hence the emphasis is upon scientists intervening in real-life social situations
so as to ameliorate the practical problems of actors over a period of time in
a manner which emphasizes gradual learning and incremental change.
Despite Lewin’s own public commitment to democratic inquiry through the
participation of actors (see Heller, 1969), often this is de-emphasized or redi-
rected in this style of action research. As Schein observes (1995), here the
momentum and direction for change derives from the scientist’s agenda while
the involvement of actors or participants in the research process is prin-ci-
ually about facilitating the implementation of the desired organizational
change. Their responses are therefore only considered in that context.

So in many respects such intentions comfortably accommodate posi-
tivist commitments. Notions such as fact-finding entail the presupposition of
a theory neutral observational language which allows the action researcher
to objectively access the facts of an a priori reality. The enduring importance
of such commitments derives from positivism’s origins in the anti-authori-
tarian cultural changes embraced by the Enlightenment which deployed
empiricism to launch attacks upon metaphysical speculation and theocratic
revelation (see Gray, 1995) as subsequently expressed in Comte’s (1853)
desire to rid science of dogma through the examination of the ‘positively
given’. Similarly, Lewin’s concerns with progress through the settling of prac-
tical problems resonate with Enlightenment optimism: human reason would
triumph over ignorance and its application would allow the control of human affairs. Here reason is characterized as when a person:

\[
\ldots \text{who in perceiving the world takes in ‘bits’ of information from his or her surroundings, and then processes them in some fashion, in order to emerge with the ‘picture’ of the world he or she has; who then acts on the basis of this picture to fulfill his or her goals, through a ‘calculus’ of means and ends.}
\]

(Taylor, 1993: 319)

As Passmore suggests, the subsequent development of action research by Tavistock researchers:

brought together Lewin’s approach to action research with Bion’s (1946) theories of leaderless groups and Bertalanffy’s (1950) work on systems theory to create interventions in the workplace that strived to improve both organizational effectiveness and human dignity.

(2000: 38)

This tradition clearly expresses a commitment to erklären, where the overriding aim is to deductively access the causal relations that are presumed to be embedded in an a priori, cognitively accessible reality. For example, Lewin’s approach included a series of hypothesis-testing experiments designed into his workshops. As both Marrow (1969) and Argyris et al. (1985) suggest, Lewin’s greatest contribution was the idea of studying things through changing them and then seeing the effects of those changes so that the rigorous testing of hypotheses is not sacrificed, nor the relationship to practice lost. Thus, ‘Lewin was led by both data and theory, each feeding off each other’ (Marrow, 1969: 128) since actual practical outcomes can be evaluated and a modified hypothesis can be developed (Miller, 1995).

It is here that we can see some blurring with regard to the underlying epistemological assumptions behind such experimental approaches to action research. For instance, the methodological standard for erklären is the experiment and its ability to methodologically create, or simulate, conditions of closure which allow the empirical testing of hypotheses and enable internal validity. So for the experimenter, ‘scientific’ rigour amounts to: ensuring that every respondent had experienced the same experimental treatment within an experimental group; measuring variation in the dependent variable; and matching control and experimental groups so as to rule out the influence of extraneous variables through techniques such as randomization. However, Lewin’s holistic and naturalistic concern with what Argyris and Schon (1989)
call ‘intervention experiments’ in real-life situations militate against the full implementation of such ‘true’ experimental designs (Beer & Walton, 1987; Perry & Zuber-Skerritt, 1994; Gill & Johnson, 1997). Matching naturally occurring control and experimental groups, or the manipulation of treatments, etc., becomes problematic. Here a key methodological strategy is one of compensation by developing what amount to quasi-experimental designs. The latter appropriate the logic of the experiment for research in natural contexts (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Orpen, 1979; Aguinis, 1993) but in so doing confront problems arising from confounded extraneous variables which in effect constitute rival hypotheses to the one(s) under test and thereby threaten the internal validity of any findings by making cause and effect propositions tenuous.

The tensions created by the desire to apply experimental logic in ‘natural’ organizational contexts has led some to suggest that there is a choice between ‘science’ or action research (e.g. Stone, 1982; Brief & Dukerich, 1991) which, as Eden and Huxham (1996) have observed in the North American Academy, may mean that action research is rejected as ‘unscientific’. But this is only a dilemma if we are adopting the particular positivist epistemological and ontological assumptions that define ‘science’ in terms of erklaren.

2. Inductive action research practices

It is clear that there is a tension between holding positivist philosophical assumptions whilst conducting action research in organizational environments (DeTardo-Bora, 2004). This has led a number of action researchers to modify these assumptions by seeking to inductively access research participants’ cultures, in their natural contexts. Hence we have labelled this category as ‘inductive action research practices’. This usually occurs through verstehen and the deployment of qualitative methods of data collection (e.g. Cassell & Symon, 2004) to produce a form of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that guides subsequent interventions. A number of potential labels could be applied to those working in this domain, such as neo-empiricist, qualitative positivist, or interpretivist, for example (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Prasad & Prasad, 2002). However we have chosen the label ‘inductive’ here to highlight how theory in this particular approach is generated from the data and concerns the development of thick descriptions of the patterns of subjective meanings that organizational actors use to make sense of their worlds, rather than entailing the testing of hypotheses deduced from a priori theory that causally explains what has been observed by the action researcher.
Despite the differences that arise from this focus upon accessing actors’ subjective meanings, those working in this tradition still retain what many philosophers define as positivism’s key epistemic characteristic – the presupposition of a neutral observational language (see also Hammersley, 1992; Knights, 1992; Van Maanen, 1995; Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). In effect, positivism’s subject–object dualism is replaced by a subject–subject dualism (Johnson & Duberley, 2000), where ‘the third-person point of view’ (Schwandt, 1996: 62) privileges the consciousness of the action researcher who can, it is presumed, passively present inductively generated descriptions of other actors’ cultural experience without contamination. So for Strauss and Corbin (1990: 27) grounded theory is a method that ‘meets the criteria for doing “good science”: significance, theory-observation compatibility, generalizability, reproducibility, precision, rigour and verification’ (see also Lecompte & Goetz, 1982) whilst emphasizing the maintenance of ‘naturalism’ (Denzin, 1970) or ‘ecological validity’ (Cicourel, 1982).

In action research, this deviation from the experimental tradition results in the development of certain forms of inquiry which entail iterative processes of problem diagnosis, intervention and reflective learning by the researcher and participants (e.g. Cassell & Fitter, 1992). Perhaps the most well-known of these kind of approaches are those sometimes dubbed ‘action science’ (Argyris et al., 1985). Within this approach the emphasis is upon the researcher’s interpretive understanding of organizational participants’ practical reasoning as ‘theories-in-use’ that occupy organizational backstages and are hidden by the evasions constituted through ‘espoused theories’. As such these informal realities can only be accessed by the researcher’s deployment of what amount to ethnographic (Schein, 1987, 1999) or hermeneutic (Gummesson, 2000) insights based upon some form of participant observation (Gold, 1958). However, unlike traditional forms of ethnographic research, where the aim is to describe cultural forms without changing them (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), organizational change remains a key issue in this form of action research. Indeed, through the involvement of organizational participants, the aim is to reflexively engender single and double loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1989) where people can ‘surface and question their intuitive understandings . . . undertake on-the-spot experiments . . . [and] . . . engage in reflective conversations with their situation’ (Schon, 1983: 265). The action researcher retains a pivotal expert role, in providing advice about, and encouraging through processual interventions (Schein, 1987, 1999), the changes that necessarily need occur as an outcome of this interpretive, yet diagnostic, process. When outlining action science, Argyris and Schon describe the dilemma of ‘rigor or relevance’ (1989: 612) that the action scientist faces. The conflict which results from action scientists seeking
to understand tacit theories in use means that action scientists will always face a ‘basic and consequential conflict with normal social science’ (1989: 614). Clearly in this context what is perceived as ‘normal’ social science is equated with positivism.

Despite the focus on actors’ subjectivity and their interpretations of organizational situations, the criteria those working within this tradition choose to apply for assessing the value and validity of their work are often similar to those associated with experimental traditions. An example here comes from the work of Wilson (2004). Wilson argues that there are a number of weaknesses in action research studies that emerge from it neither being conducted, nor seen to be conducted, in a rigorous manner. The assertion is that the key challenge for the action researcher is to counteract the charge of anecdotalism. Wilson presents a series of action research case studies where the potential of decision support systems to improve market planning processes is explored. The explicit aim of the research is to enable managers and directors to be more effective in the marketing planning process, through examining the barriers to effective planning. The research element therefore evaluates the factors required for the successful use of the system. To ensure that the data can be triangulated, and hence their reliability be examined, Wilson has a variety of sources of data collection. Additionally, of key interest here is that the author argues that the potential weaknesses of action research in relation to rigour can be counteracted by the use of analytic induction. This method which involves the step-by-step consideration of cases, and the building and testing of propositions ‘adds to the internal validity of qualitative studies without reducing their strength in external validity’ (Wilson, 2004: 383). Therefore the quality criteria used here are derived from the experimental tradition.

In these inductive forms of action research, the positivist emphasis upon action research as something which is done to, and for, organizational participants becomes replaced by a view of action research as something which is done with people so as to access their hidden everyday culturally derived realities and thereby improve interpersonal and organizational effectiveness through engendering internal critique (see Putnam, 1999). At first sight this appears to entail movement away from the role of action researcher as detached expert to one of reflective participant in the everyday lives of those in the organization in order to access cultural phenomena. But, just as in what Prasad and Prasad have called ‘qualitative positivism’ (2002: 6), reflection here is about objectively developing and evaluating the researcher’s own inferences by an appeal to the ‘directly observable’, accessed through their participation in the organization (e.g. Torbert, 1999; Ross & Roberts, 1994) so that any account will correspond with organizational members’
own culturally derived subjectivities. As Chia (1996: 132) has observed in a rather different context, ‘the notion of interpretation . . . is used in the research process, but not “turned back” on the researchers . . . themselves’ (see also Van Maanen, 1995), thereby maintaining a positivist mandate: a philosophical stance which is maintained in our third form of action research.

3. Participatory action research

Participation is a multi-faceted term and covers an array of different practices inspired by competing philosophical assumptions. With changes in the meanings accorded to the term participation, alternative forms of action research arise and promote different sets of relationships between action researchers and organizational participants to those previously outlined. For instance, participatory forms of action research seem to imply that the people in the organization or community under investigation participate actively throughout the whole research process, from the initial design or problem diagnosis, to the adoption of action strategies (Whyte, 1991; Harrison & Leitch, 2000). Therefore the researcher’s role begins to move away from one of expert to that of enabler. However, Park (1999) suggests that a distinction has developed between ‘participatory action research’ and ‘participatory research’ where the former is associated with organizational or corporate settings where the researcher usually works in a consultancy role to corporate elites. The latter is more associated with addressing the perceived needs of a particular community in its entirety, as defined in their own terms (Park, 1999). As we shall explore there are significant philosophical disputes at play here which encourage these alternative approaches and engender their differences regarding the role played by, and significance attached to, democracy in action research praxis. In labelling our third category we have been informed by Park’s distinction between the two different approaches.

An example from the literature which is useful for establishing an initial point of departure comes from a report by Harrison and Leitch (2000) on an ongoing action research case study in a software company. The aim of their project is to use the Learning Company Framework (Pedlar et al., 1991) to initiate critical reflection within the company about learning processes and areas of improvement. The researchers administered the learning company instrument to the managing director and members of the senior management team to diagnose areas where learning could be facilitated. Additionally, on the advice of the senior management team, the views of a wider group of staff
working in project teams were then also collected. From the analysis and interpretation of the data an action agenda was devised which was then acted upon by the senior management team. The authors suggest that:

The participatory action research approach adopted in this case study begins the process of analytic dialogue with individuals within the company who have access to the feedback as a starting point for a process of self-development and self-awareness.

(2000: 115)

In this example what comes to the fore is that the members of staff who have the opportunity to participate in the diagnosis process and who were involved in the initial problem definition are limited to the organizational elites with whom the action researchers had a consulting relationship. In a sense hierarchy, and differences between the governed and government, is thereby reinforced presumably based upon the notion that knowledge and expertise are themselves hierarchically ordered within organizations and only the most knowledgeable individuals need to participate. In these respects, evaluation criteria relate to the extent the subjective realities of these ‘higher order’ participants are accessed, evaluated and developed in the light of their reflection upon their own perceived needs: a process in which the action researcher acts as facilitator. By default, the vast majority of organizational members are excluded from these processes save as sources of feedback upon ongoing practices. Although some involvement of ‘lower order’ participants may be necessary so as to facilitate the implementation of change, this majority of organizational members are implicitly construed as passive recipients, rather than active architects, of any organizational change. Of course, such a limited form of participation may be acceptable if one shares the tactic assumptions about meritocracy based upon a hierarchical ordering of organizational knowledge which seems to be embedded in such an approach and provides it with epistemological, and moral, legitimacy. Once those assumptions and their embedded positivistic philosophy are challenged, however, important questions around who gets to be a participant and how their participation is facilitated and expressed in organizational change come to the fore in action research practices.

4. Participatory research practices

The emphasis in participatory research on people’s participation in a democratic research process can be seen as underpinned by a particular set of
epistemological commitments which derive primarily from ‘critical theory’. Driven by philosophical commitments which suspect any claim to epistemic authority, critical theorists have called for the discursive democratization of social practices (e.g. Beck, 1992, 1996). Usually such demands resonate with Habermas’s various attacks upon positivist epistemology (1972, 1974, 1987, 1990) whose objectivist ‘illusions’ he dismisses by drawing attention to the socio-cultural factors that influence sensory experience. A key implication is the undermining of any claim that action research may be morally founded as a way of improving organizational effectiveness, efficiency or health, or justified and enabled by objective analyses of how things really are. Therefore critical theory questions the moral authority of action researchers, and of course any practice based upon the exclusive mobilization of higher order participants, to impose their will upon others. Rather critical theorists are concerned to engender critique of the status quo and simultaneously emancipate people from asymmetrical power relations, thereby enfranchising the usually marginalized, and promoting alternative forms of organization.

So for critical theorists human actors make sense of reality subjectively, through their negotiation of inter-subjective meanings. A direct consequence of this ontological and epistemological stance is critical theory’s concern with organizational change – not just in the form of a distinctive analysis and critique of current management theory and practice, but also in the form of a moral imperative to engender democratic social relations and thereby shift the balance of power to currently marginalized and disenfranchised groups (e.g. Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Gustavsen, 2001).

Participatory research expresses critical theory’s ontological and epistemological commitments, though there is considerable diversity in how these commitments are manifested. Park (1999) argues that participatory research is motivated by action, and that the force that lies behind that action is a vision of what ought to be (1999). He argues that:

Participatory research however, most clearly distinguishes itself from other forms of action-related research by the fact that it issues from the felt needs of the community. What motivates the initiation of participatory research is the needs of a community for ameliorating the living conditions of the people.

(1999: 143)

It follows that critical theory requires that those individuals and groups whose perspectives are ordinarily silenced in organizations must be given voice through action research. The demand is for members’ conscious
self-determination of social values and practices. Therefore identification and involvement of all potential communicants presumably must start with the mobilization of every stakeholder. While this in itself is highly problematic (Kemmis, 2001), the subsequent power relations between communicants could pose insurmountable problems. Following Marcuse (1965), the danger is that notionally democratic communication becomes a facade in which the more powerful deploy a rhetoric of democracy, or participation, to impose their own preferences upon, and silence or marginalize the less powerful. Moreover, an ‘emancipatory intent is no guarantee of an emancipatory outcome’ (Acker et al., 1991: 145). Therefore as Friere observes, democracy requires participation which requires the prior development of a critical consciousness, on the part of participants, that dismantles the current hegemony, through their recognition of their present oppression by their ‘introjection . . . of the cultural myths of the dominator’ (1972a: 59). For Friere, such a critical consciousness is only possible through an authentic dialogue with the educator/action researcher where both are ‘equally knowing subjects’ (1972b: 31).

Hence the requirement for emancipation through the development of a critical consciousness amongst participants requires the action researcher to adopt a stance ‘rooted in a commitment to the long-term, broad-based ideological struggle to transform structural inequalities’ (Lather, 1986: 269). This commitment also emerges from a recognition of the power that an individual researcher has to influence the status quo. As Lynch (1999) outlines:

> Academics create virtual realities, textual realities, ethnographic and statistical realities. These overhang and frame the lived existence of those who cannot name their own world; it is frequently in the context of these detached and remoter realities that public policy is often enacted.

(1999: 52)

In this context therefore, it is important that there is a ‘reciprocity’ (Lynch, 1999: 57) in the research relationship so that participants are enabled to both understand and change their situation (Lather, 1991). Such an approach clearly enables a form of empowerment in line with the tenets of critical theory.

There have been a wide variety of approaches which draw on the epistemological themes within critical theory of shifting power balances and engendering democratic relations. These epistemological themes within critical theory are expressed by action researchers within this tradition in different ways (e.g. Torbert, 1999). For instance the epistemological demand to mobilize stakeholders usually silenced by the status quo, is clearly
articulated by commitments to ‘co-operative inquiry’ (Heron, 1996; Reason, 1999). Reason (1999) suggests that those who advocate co-operative inquiry focus on two important purposes. The first is to ‘articulate and offer democratic and emancipatory approaches to inquiry’ (p. 207). This suggests that in line with the philosophical underpinnings of critical theory, those traditionally silenced in the academic research process gain a voice in all aspects of the research endeavour, ranging from designing the research questions, to planning eventual action strategies. The second purpose has a deliberate aim of critiquing the epistemology underlying positivist research. Reason suggests that:

our purpose is to contribute a complete revision of the western mindset – to add impetus to the movement away from a modernist worldview based on a positivist philosophy and value system dominated by crude notions of economic progress towards an emerging ‘postmodern’ worldview.

(1999: 208)

Hence the positivist view of the action researcher as a detached expert who exercises a legitimate role as architect of change is taken to be a process that disenfranchises the less powerful who have as much claim to epistemic authority as any other change agent. So from the perspective of critical theory most organization members are only too often reduced to the objects of organizational change – objects who are often seen by many commentators (e.g. Scase & Goffee, 1989; Greenwood & Hinnings, 1996; Agocs, 1997) as irrationally resistant to the changes demanded by experts because of their fear of the unknown, their lack of trust, their pursuit of self-interest and so on. In this manner, the prevailing change-management orthodoxy (e.g. Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Kotter, 1996) separates the subjects of change from the objects of change. Guided by models such as Lewin’s force field analysis, the latter have to be manipulated by the contingent deployment of the power resources available: coercion or persuasion or cultural doping and so on.

Participatory approaches to action research have been used in a number of communities or organizations with different groups, but are clearly less evident in the corporate world. The uses of action research in this tradition have been applied to the field of development (e.g. Bradbury, 2001); health (e.g. Stringer & Genat, 2004); community development (Senge & Scharmer, 2001); education (e.g. Glanz, 2003; O’Donoghue & Punch, 2003; McPherson & Nunes, 2004); conflict resolution (White, 2004), and criminology (DeTardo-Bora, 2004), to name but a few. A further tradition of emancipatory work is informed by feminist approaches (e.g. Mies, 1993; Martin, 1994).
An example in this feminist tradition comes from the work of Barrett (2001). Barrett describes her involvement as an action researcher in an early mothering project with a group of midwives. Informed by feminist principles such as consciousness-raising and empowerment, Barrett worked with a group of midwives with an initial brief of improving midwifery practice in their hospital. During an 18-month period, the participants in the Midwives’ Action Research Group (MARG), worked through five action research phases which Barrett suggests incorporated: planning; implementing; evaluating; revise-planning; and continuing or discontinuing. During each of these phases the key processes at work were those of reflection, learning, prioritizing and decision-making. Barrett explains how the project was fluid and that these phases and processes were interweaved and led to the creation of an early mothering group within the hospital, designed to help women help themselves and provide mutual support. Barrett describes how the midwives spent a lot of time discussing their own experiences and that this process in itself was significant: ‘MARG participants were empowering each other through their talking and listening’ (2001: 297, emphasis in original). She also describes how through their ordinary talk, ‘they gained insight into and challenged some taken-for-granted aspects of social and professional power impinging on their ability to provide sensitive midwifery care’ (2001: 300). Within this action research case the concern of critical theory with enfranchisement and empowerment can be seen. Both the role of the researcher and the researched are different from that within the other approaches previously outlined.

The epistemological assumptions outlined also imply a different approach to the development of theory than is associated with other approaches. As Lather (1991) argues, dialectical theory-building is more appropriate in this context than theoretical imposition. Heron (1981) suggests that the epistemological underpinnings of co-operative inquiry require a view that there is a ‘developing interdependence’ (1981: 31) through the research process of prepositional, practical and experiential knowledge.

As with critical theory generally, whilst these participative and emancipatory forms of action research combine a realist ontology with a subjectivist epistemology, they often do not indicate how this external ‘reality-in-itself’ which we can never know may also play a regulative role upon our democratically derived social constructions and interventions. For instance, a complementary means of undertaking action research that shares critical theory’s philosophical commitments, yet extends them, derives from the pragmatist notion that although our conceptualization and explanation of the world must always be open to question, our ability to undertake
practical actions that are successful and our ability to reflect upon and correct actions that seem unsuccessful, implies that we have feedback from an independent ‘reality’ which constrains and enables practices that would otherwise be inconceivable. In other words, praxis demands and enables processes of adjudication through the feedback that derives from the tolerance of that mind-independent reality (see e.g. Arbib & Hesse, 1986; Johnson & Duberley, 2000). By admitting to the significance of social construction, and how this also entails transactions between subject and object, pragmatists develop extra discursive criteria of truth that complement and supplement the critical theorists’ epistemological demand for democratic agreement (see Levin & Greenwood, 2001). These extra-discursive criteria are for Sayer (1992: 69) in the form of the ‘actual realization of expectations’ through interventions which enable contact with ‘the tolerance of reality’ (Collier, 1979) ‘to differentiate between more and less practically adequate beliefs’ (Sayer, 1992: 83, our emphasis).

Although Sayer writes primarily from a critical realist stance, there is an evident link here to Dewey’s anti-authoritarian pragmatism which defined truth as ‘processes of change so directed that they achieve their intended consummation’ (1929: iii) where knowledge was socially constructed to aid the ‘settling of problematic situations’ (p. iii). This philosophical heritage has led some action researchers to argue that action research itself becomes a vehicle for judging ideas in terms of their efficacy in actual application (see Gustavsen, 2001; Park, 2001) while retaining democratic consensus as pivotal epistemic standard regarding the social construction of the ideas in the first place (Levin & Greenwood, 2001).

Thus, under the aegis of critical theory, due to the problematic status of any epistemic authority, the role of the action researcher is fundamentally reconstructed to one of facilitating democratic agreement and the evolution of a critical consciousness amongst participants. In this the term participation takes on new meaning and becomes closely allied to emancipation. Indeed the intent is to engender, through reflection, new (socially constituted) self-understandings that are consensual and simultaneously expose the interests which produce and disseminate knowledge which was taken to be authoritative and hence unchallengeable. People could thereby begin to: understand existing practices as social constructions; become aware of their own role in production and reproduction of those practices; construe those practices as mutable; identify how they might intervene in the evolution of their organizations and society. The result is a challenge to traditional management prerogatives and the negotiation of alternative democratically agreed renditions of reality which create novel questions, inaugurate new problems and make new forms of organizational practice sensible and therefore possible.
(e.g. Fay, 1987; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001; Park, 2001). In doing so, organizational members reclaim alternative accounts of phenomena – socially constructed redefinitions which thereby become available to transformative interventions which can themselves be judged, during and after implementation, by the pragmatic criterion of ‘what works’ (see Gustavsen, 2001: 19).

5. Deconstructive action research practices

As we noted above, postmodernism has recently attracted the interest of many management researchers and a distinctive form of action research has begun to emerge. Despite this interest, any definitive characteristics of a postmodern stance remain notoriously nebulous, which makes this aspect of our categorization particularly problematic. Nevertheless, it is possible to establish a clear border with critical theory since postmodernists will often accuse critical theorists of ‘essentialism’.

Essentialism is seen to lie in critical theory’s guiding presupposition that structurally based oppression and exploitation lie hidden beneath appearances: an essentialism which is further articulated in its concern with enabling emancipation through democratization. Such presuppositions are dismissed by most postmodernists as unsustainable ‘grand’ or ‘meta’ narratives which arbitrarily ‘assume the validity of their own truth claims’ (Rosenau, 1992: xi) and which, in their depiction of the world, inadvertently replace the old voices of authority (e.g. managers) with a new hierarchy of truth which inscribes new power relations that negate their liberationary aims (see Humphries, 2000). Of course such radical scepticism is itself an expression of a distinctive epistemological and ontological argument.

Postmodernism is characterized by a profound scepticism regarding the idea that language can represent reality. Rather, through this ‘linguistic turn’ discourses are thought to construct the objects which populate our (hyper)realities rather than describe them. The result is that knowledge, truth and reality become linguistic entities constantly open to revision for we can rhetorically produce as many realities as there are modes of describing and explaining (see Baudrillard, 1983, 1993; Lyotard, 1984; Jeffcutt, 1994; Chia, 1995; Kilduff & Mehra, 1997). According to this stance knowledge is produced by particular language games or discourses which, via their own rules and structures, produce a plurality of localized understandings and practices which offer no epistemological basis for preferring one such manifestation over alternatives. Lyotard uses the term ‘agon’ (e.g. 1984: 16) to refer to the irresolvable contest between different communities’ language games and he argues that postmodernists must accept this diversity – a
postmodern science that ‘. . . refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable’ (1984: xxv). Here, some postmodernists further part company from critical theorists since their view that incommensurability is inevitable and irresolvable means that democratic consensus as an epistemic standard ‘has become an outmoded and suspect value’ (Lyotard, 1984: 66). Indeed it is a tolerance of the polyphonic (many voices) which is pivotal for the postmodernist since any discursive closure, whether grounded in democratic consensus or otherwise, implies the arbitrary dominance of a particular discourse which serves to silence alternative possible voices. Indeed as Gergen (2003: 51) suggests, democratic agreement can effectively ‘move toward the annihilation of alterior meanings’. It is only through deconstruction where diversity becomes possible as it enables us to:

resuscitate the subordinate terms, to elevate them, to amplify the silent voices in order to problematize the dominant understanding and rather than create a new hierarchy, re-construct a duality of awareness within conventional consciousness.

(Linstead, 1993: 69)

From this relativistic perspective no organizational change, democratically grounded or otherwise, can have any epistemological authority or ontological priority. Indeed any organizational change is only possible because of an ability to hegemonize via ‘a particular discursive formation a socially constructed version of reality’ (Hetrick & Boje, 1992: 55) which drives out alternatives. This has implications for action research since any organizational intervention implies the exercise of choice based upon some kind of evaluative criteria. As Newton observes, the problem for a postmodernist would be ‘in determining that basis, since this implies the end of endless reflexivity and a move towards the postmodernity abhorrent notion of closure’ (1996: 15). In other words, any form of action, or intervention, which form the creative basis of the various forms of action research we have so far explored, would seem anathema to those who choose to locate themselves in this perspective.

Nevertheless, it is possible that a postmodern stance may avoid Newton’s problem and be used to inform an action research focused on interventions that unsettle hegemonic discourses, and give voice to alternatives so as to encourage heteroglossia, rather than directing substantive organizational change. For instance, Barry (1997) outlines how ‘narrative therapy’ aims to help organization members understand how they have come to develop particular patterns of thought which unnecessarily constrain action. Hence by
careful reading and reflection of client stories the therapist tries to open space for the authoring of alternative stories which counter and unsettle hegemonic discourses. Barry implies such interventions may reopen discursive opportunities so that ‘if organization members can better understand how they construct themselves and their organization, they will be better able to address their problems’ (1997: 31). It is this deconstructive intent that informs some postmodern action research since discursive closure is avoided as any construct, including deconstructions, may be deconstructed ad infinitum as layers of meaning are removed thereby destabilizing any text (Linstead, 1993).

An example of such postmodern action research is provided by Treleaven’s (2001) account of a ‘collaborative inquiry’ that deconstructed the gender narratives at play in an Australian university. By integrating ‘the turn to action with the linguistic turn’ (p. 261), Treleaven used a collaborative inquiry group to facilitate 11 female co-participants’ reflexive deconstruction of critical incidents within their organizational experiences. Here co-participants reflected upon their patterns of meanings and reconstructed those meanings through the use of discourse analysis to foreground the taken-for-granted factors that shaped the language-in-use. This served to unsettle the dominant discourses and enabled the surfaceing of alternatives which allowed for the production of new subjectivities for women which thereby created the possibility of change within and beyond their university. For instance, this heteroglossia entailed some of the female participants taking ‘up new subjectivities while others diffused the power of binary opposites by adopting multiple subjectivities’ (p. 265). For Treleaven, the various discourses surfaced and at play, offered the formation of new subjectivities based upon the liberation of multiple new understandings of their social experience by participants. However, these discourses were often contradictory and hence could provide sites for both ambivalence and resistance. So an outcome of this postmodernist deconstructive intervention was not just to destabilize the hegemonic patriarchal discourse of gender but to ‘highlight unsettling actions and points of contradiction as strategic opportunities for change in the workplace’ (p. 266). In some formats then, this approach can be informed by commitments to emancipation and change.

In sum, under postmodern epistemological and ontological commitments action research can only be about unsettling the hegemonic by encouraging resistance and space for alternative narratives without advocating any preference. By ‘not finding answers to problems, but . . . [by] . . . problematizing answers’ (Cooper & Burrell, 1988: 107), postmodernist action research can help people think about their own and others’ thinking so as to question the familiar and taken-for-granted. Here multivocal authors are empowered through deconstruction to manipulate signifiers to create new
textual domains of transparency and thereby engender diversity rather than the discursive closure that critical theorists are seen to engender through their democratic and dialogical aims. As Kilduff and Mehra (1997) observe, anything goes save that the text must provoke pleasure, interest and excitement in terms of aesthetic appeal and rhetorical play. We must be careful however to recognize the diversity of approaches we have subsumed within this category. As with each of the other categories, there is considerable diversity included here.

Conclusions

Over the years, a variety of scholars have compared action research to what has been called the ‘scientific method’ and found it wanting in various ways and to varying degrees (e.g. Sandford, 1970; Susman & Evered, 1978; Argyris, 1980; Stone, 1982; Brief & Dukerich, 1991; Aguinis, 1993). The problem in this context is that ‘science’ is defined in terms of a particular constellation of knowledge constituting assumptions articulated by erklären: that is, positivist norms. We have argued here that in any research, assumptions about ontology and epistemology are unavoidable as all research is underpinned by some manifestation of these assumptions. However, even a cursory review of the philosophy of science would also show how any epistemological and ontological stance is always contentious: there is no incontestable scheme of ontological and epistemological standards which may be deployed to govern action research. Therefore it follows that those comparisons noted above are based upon a very partial view of ‘science’ that takes little account of alternative sets of knowledge constituting assumptions.

Hence trying to articulate a set of all embracing standards of quality criteria to apply to all action research seems a rather pointless mission. Nevertheless it is possible to identify how particular epistemological and ontological positions do legitimate: particular conceptions of ‘science’; particular research aims; engaging in particular research roles and relations with organizational members; and the application of particular validity criteria. This highlights the importance of evaluating any action research project from within the particular logic of justification articulated by its particular philosophical stance. By implication it also requires action researchers to reflexively articulate their particular ontological and epistemological commitments as a resource for such evaluations. This can be done when action researchers are in the process of presenting the outcomes of their research and can be part of the research account. The key issue here is that
when we are assessing the extent to which an action research account is of value, we apply the appropriate assessment criteria. It is, for example, inappropriate to find participatory research undertaken in the tradition of critical theory wanting because the lack of a control group makes the direction and impact of interventions problematic. Rather such action research should be assessed in terms of how consensus has been established amongst stakeholders and the extent to which practically adequate interventions have been implemented which have transformative potential. Simultaneously, it would be equally ludicrous to evaluate postmodern action research in terms of objectivity or correspondence as both are dismissed by postmodernists as rhetorical devices legitimated by the very regimes of truth the postmodernist seeks to overthrow through deconstructive practices and processes.

Each of the five different approaches to action research practice we have discussed has lurking within it particular tensions that may concern its practitioners. For instance those working within an experimental tradition have to cope with the competing demands that arise from their commitment to research in natural organizational settings yet seeking to build and test internally valid cause and effect models. With inductive approaches where the concern is to describe and feed back the views and understandings of organizational members, the question is how can one know if one has successfully captured those socially constructed versions of reality within the action researcher’s account.

For participatory approaches the key tension relates to who should be involved in the action research process and the difficulty of ensuring that what is taken as some form of consensus about aims and desired outcomes isn’t the distorted product of power relations. In dealing with the practical problems which arise here, one evident tension is that action researchers may impose their own voices and values on participants (see Quantz, 1992; Denzin, 1994) to the extent that their endeavours become manipulative and anti-dialogical by militating against participants’ self-determination (Taylor, 1993). In deconstructive approaches, rather than critique it would seem that the imperative is a mandatory non-judgemental rhetorical skill where authors playfully manipulate signifiers to create new textual domains of lucidity redolent with ‘poetic awe’ and ‘linguistic tension’ (Tsoukas, 1992: 345). But just as this aesthetic imperative can potentially relativize everyone’s narratives, what it ignores is the likelihood that claims to epistemic privilege by particular organizational groups will not suddenly disappear (Berg, 1989). The resultant tension may be that any (re)presentation of reality becomes a matter of taste where knowledge is commodified and reason is replaced by subtle forms of seduction where the more discursively aware use their narrative skills to manipulate organizational audiences into supporting particular change.
agendas, ensure discursive closure and snuff out resistance (see Barry & Elmes, 1997).

Despite the difficulties and drawbacks in producing a categorization system which we referred to earlier, we have highlighted the considerable diversity in action research approaches and practices. In sum, this article attempts to illustrate how the label action research embraces a diverse array of techniques and research practices which articulate competing philosophical assumptions whose formative influence can remain unnoticed. We have argued that this diversity is not haphazard, rather it is an outcome of the varying knowledge constituting assumptions which legitimize distinctive perspectives and action research agendas. So what implications does our account have for action researchers?

First, given this scenario we would argue that action researchers when engaging on projects could benefit by subjecting their philosophical assumptions to sustained reflection and evaluation through the consideration of possible alternatives. In selecting and justifying an approach, the implications of their informed choices for research practice can then be presented. Additionally, it is then possible to be explicit about the validity criteria by which to evaluate the approach in use. Clearly some action researchers are currently engaging in these issues (see Reason & Bradbury, 2001) and we hope that this article contributes to such reflexive processes.

Hence a second consequence of our analysis for action researchers emerges: the implications for those who scathingly dismiss action research by applying a universal set of positivistic validity criteria to a diverse array of praxis. In highlighting the different philosophical assumptions that underlie different approaches, we can also highlight the different criteria through which one can more appropriately evaluate different types of action research. So rather than being condemned to ‘the orphan’s role in social science’ (Stanford, 1970: 7) the diverse action research ‘families’ must only be evaluated from within their particular webs of knowledge-constituting assumptions.

Note

1 The term criteriology is used to refer to the issues inherent in assessing the quality of any given piece of research and the criteria that may be used therein. This has become a controversial area since conventional criteria, deriving from positivist philosophy, have been increasingly challenged and alternatives sought (see Seale, 1999). For instance, Bochner (2000) argues that the philosophical diversity evident in the social sciences suggests a need for considerable caution with regard to criteriology. This is because there is a tendency to misappropriate certain assessment criteria, constituted usually by positivist philosophical conventions, and universally apply them as if they were ‘culture-free’ (p. 267). In a similar vein, Schwandt (1996)
focuses upon how to redefine social inquiry, as a practical philosophy, with a post-
foundationalist epistemology. This project entails dialogue, critique and democracy,
which abandons any overarching criteria for distinguishing legitimate from not so
legitimate scientific knowledge.

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What is Action Research?

Introduction

Action research – which is also known as Participatory Action Research (PAR), community-based study, co-operative enquiry, action science and action learning – is an approach commonly used for improving conditions and practices in a range healthcare environments (Lingard et al., 2008; Whitehead et al., 2003). It involves healthcare practitioners conducting systematic enquiries in order to help them improve their own practices, which in turn can enhance their working environment and the working environments of those who are part of it – clients, patients, and users. The purpose of undertaking action research is to bring about change in specific contexts, as Parkin (2009) describes it. Through their observations and communications with other people, healthcare workers are continually making informal evaluations and judgements about what it is they do. The difference between this and carrying out an action research project is that during the process researchers will need to develop and use a range of skills
to achieve their aims, such as careful planning, sharpened observation and listening, evaluation, and critical reflection.

Meyer (2000) maintains that action research’s strength lies in its focus on generating solutions to practical problems and its ability to empower practitioners, by getting them to engage with research and the subsequent development or implementation activities. Meyer states that practitioners can choose to research their own practice or an outside researcher can be engaged to help to identify any problems, seek and implement practical solutions, and systematically monitor and reflect on the process and outcomes of change. Whitehead et al. (2003) point out that the place of action research in health promotion programmes is an important and yet relatively unacknowledged and understated activity and suggest that this state of affairs denies many health promotion researchers a valuable resource for managing effective changes in practice.

Most of the reported action research studies in healthcare will have been carried out in collaborative teams. The community of enquiry may have consisted of members within a general practice or hospital ward, general practitioners working with medical school tutors, or members within a healthcare clinic. The users of healthcare services can often be included in an action research study; as such they are not researched on as is the case in much of traditional research. This may also involve several healthcare practitioners working together within a geographical area. Multidisciplinary teams can often be involved (for example, medical workers working with social work teams). Action research projects may also be initiated and carried out by members of one or two institutions and quite often an external facilitator (from a local university, for example) may be included. All the participating researchers will ideally have to be involved in the process of data collection, data analysis, planning and implementing action, and validating evidence and critical reflection, before applying the findings to improve their own practice or the effectiveness of the system within which they work.

**Purposes of conducting action research**

In the context of this book, we can say that action research supports practitioners in seeking out ways in which they can provide an enhanced quality of healthcare. With this purpose in mind, the following features of the action research approach are worthy of consideration (Koshy, 2010: 1):

- Action research is a method used for improving practice. It involves action, evaluation, and critical reflection and – based on the evidence gathered – changes in practice are then implemented.
WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

• Action research is participative and collaborative; it is undertaken by individuals with a common purpose.
• It is situation-based and context specific.
• It develops reflection based on interpretations made by the participants.
• Knowledge is created through action and at the point of application.
• Action research can involve problem solving, if the solution to the problem leads to the improvement of practice.
• In action research findings will emerge as action develops, but these are not conclusive or absolute.

Later in this chapter we shall explore the various definitions of action research.

Hughes (2008) presents a convincing argument for carrying out action research in healthcare settings. Quoting the declaration of the World Health Organization (1946) that 'health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity', Hughes stresses that our health as individuals and communities depends on environmental factors, the quality of our relationships, and our beliefs and attitudes as well as bio-medical factors, and therefore in order to understand our health we must see ourselves as inter-dependent with human and non-human elements in the system we participate in. Hughes adds that the holistic way of understanding health, by looking at the whole person in context, is congruent with the participative paradigm of action research. The following extract coming from an action researcher (included by Reason and Bradbury in the introduction to their Handbook of Action Research) sums up the key notion of action research being a useful approach for healthcare professionals:

For me it is really a quest for life, to understand life and to create what I call living knowledge – knowledge which is valid for the people with whom I work and for myself. (Marja Liisa Swantz, in Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 1)

So what is this living knowledge? As Reason and Bradbury (2001: 2) explain, the primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives. They maintain that action research is about working towards practical outcomes and that it is also about ‘creating new forms of understanding, since action without reflection and understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless’ and that the participatory nature of action research ‘makes it only possible with, for and by persons and communities, ideally involving all stakeholders both in the questioning and sense making that informs the research, and in the action which is its focus’. Meyer (2000) describes action research as a process that involves people and social
situations that have the ultimate aim of changing an existing situation for the better.

In the following sections of this chapter we will trace the development of action research as a methodology over the past few decades and then consider the different perspectives and models provided by experts in the field. Different models and definitions of action research are explored and an attempt is made to identify the unique features of action research that should make it an attractive mode of research for healthcare practitioners. Examples of action research projects undertaken by healthcare practitioners in a range of situations are provided later in this chapter.

The development of action research: a brief background

Whether the reader is a novice or is progressing with an action research project, it would be useful to be aware of how action research has developed as a method for carrying out research over the past few decades. The work of Kurt Lewin (1946), who researched extensively on social issues, is often described as a major landmark in the development of action research as a methodology. Lewin’s work was followed by that of Stephen Corey and others in the USA, who applied this methodology for researching into educational issues. In Britain, according to Hopkins (2002), the origins of action research can be traced back to the Schools Council’s Humanities Curriculum Project (1967–72) with its emphasis on an experimental curriculum and the re-conceptualisation of curriculum development. The most well known proponent of action research in the UK has been Lawrence Stenhouse, whose seminal (1975) work *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development* added to the appeal of action research for studying the theory and practice of teaching and the curriculum. In turn, educational action researchers including Elliott (1991) have influenced action researchers in healthcare settings.

What is involved in action research?

Research is about generating knowledge. Action research creates knowledge based on enquiries conducted within specific and often practical contexts. As articulated earlier, the purpose of action research is to learn through action that then leads on to personal or professional development. Action research is participatory in nature, which led
Kemmis and McTaggart (2000: 595) to describe it as *participatory research*. The authors state that action research involves a spiral of self-reflective cycles of:

- Planning a change.
- Acting and observing the process and consequences of the change.
- Reflecting on these processes and consequences and then replanning.
- Acting and observing.
- Reflecting.
- And so on …

Figure 1.1 illustrates the spiral model of action research proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (2000: 564), although the authors do not
recommend that this is used as a rigid structure. They maintain that in reality the process may not be as neat as the spiral of self-contained cycles of planning, acting and observing, and reflecting suggests. These stages, they maintain, will overlap, and initial plans will quickly become obsolete in the light of learning from experience. In reality the process is likely to be more fluid, open, and responsive.

We find the spiral model appealing because it gives an opportunity to visit a phenomenon at a higher level each time and so to progress towards a greater overall understanding. By carrying out action research using this model, one can understand a particular issue within a healthcare context and make informed decisions with an enhanced understanding. It is therefore about empowerment. However, Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001) point out that the spiral model may suggest that even the basic process may take a long time to complete. A review of examples of studies included in this book and the systematic review of studies using the action research approach by Waterman et al. (2001) show that the period of a project has varied significantly, ranging from a few months to one or two years.

Several other models have also been put forward by those who have studied different aspects of action research and we shall present some of these later in this section. Our purpose in doing so is to enable the reader to analyse the principles involved in these models which should, in turn, lead to a deeper understanding of the processes involved in action research. No specific model is being recommended here and as the reader may have already noticed they have many similarities. Action researchers should always adopt the models which suit their purpose best or adapt these for use.

The model employed by Elliot (1991: 71) shares many of the features of that of Kemmis and McTaggart and is based on Lewin’s work of the 1940s. It includes identifying a general idea, reconnaissance or fact-finding, planning, action, evaluation, amending plan and taking second action step, and so on, as can be seen in Figure 1.2. Other models, such as O’Leary’s (2004: 141) cycles of action research shown in Figure 1.3, portray action research as a cyclic process which takes shape as knowledge emerges.

In O’Leary’s model, for example, it is stressed that ‘cycles converge towards better situation understanding and improved action implementation; and are based in evaluative practice that alters between action and critical reflection’ (2004: 140). O’Leary sees action research as an experiential learning approach, to change, where the goal is to continually refine the methods, data, and interpretation in light of the understanding developed in each earlier cycle.
WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

Identifying initial idea

Reconnaissance (fact-finding and analysis)

General plan
- Action steps 1
- Action steps 2
- Action steps 3

Implement action steps 1

Monitor implementation and effects

'Reconnaissance' (explain any failure to implement, and effects)

Revise general idea

Amended plan
- Action steps 1
- Action steps 2
- Action steps 3

Implement next action steps

Monitor implementation and effects

'Reconnaissance' (explain any failure to implement, and effects)

Revise general idea

Amended plan
- Action steps 1
- Action steps 2
- Action steps 3

Implement next action steps

Monitor implementation and effects

'Reconnaissance' (explain any failure to implement, and effects)

Amended plan
- Action steps 1
- Action steps 2
- Action steps 3

Implement next action steps

FIGURE 1.2 Elliot’s action research model.

SOURCE: Elliot, J. Action Research for Educational Change, p.71 © 1991. Reproduced with the kind permission of the open University Press. All rights reserved.
Although it is useful to consider different models, we must include a word of caution here. Excessive reliance on a particular model, or following the stages or cycles of a particular model too rigidly, could adversely affect the unique opportunity offered by the emerging nature and flexibility that are the hallmarks of action research. The models of practice presented in this chapter are not intended to offer a straitjacket to fit an enquiry.

**Definitions of action research**

Closely related to the purposes and models of action research are the various definitions of action research. Although there is no universally accepted definition for action research, many useful ones do exist. We shall consider some of these in this section. Reason and Bradbury (2006) describe action research as an approach which is used in designing studies...
which seek both to inform and influence practice. The authors state that action research is a particular orientation and purpose of enquiry rather than a research methodology. They also propose that action research consists of a ‘family of approaches’ that have different orientations, yet reflect the characteristics which seek to ‘involve, empower and improve’ aspects of participants’ social world. A further list of features of action research, put forward by the same authors (2008: 3), states that it:

- is a set of practices that respond to people’s desire to act creatively in the face of practical and often pressing issues in their lives in organizations and communities;
- calls for an engagement with people in collaborative relationships, opening new ‘communicative spaces’ in which dialogue and development can flourish;
- draws on many ways of knowing, both in the evidence that is generated in inquiry and its expression in diverse forms of presentation as we share our learning with wider audiences;
- is value oriented, seeking to address issues of significance concerning the flourishing of human persons, their communities, and the wider ecology in which we participate;
- is a living, emergent process that cannot be pre-determined but changes and develops as those engaged deepen their understanding of the issues to be addressed and develop their capacity as co-inquirers both individually and collectively.

At this point, it may be useful to explore some of the other definitions and observations on action research as a methodology offered by various authors. We define action research as an approach employed by practitioners for improving practice as part of the process of change. The research is context-bound and participative. It is a continuous learning process in which the researcher learns and also shares the newly generated knowledge with those who may benefit from it. In the context of practitioner research, Hopkins (2002) maintains that action research combines a substantive act with a research procedure and that it is action disciplined by enquiry and a personal attempt at understanding, while engaged in a process of improvement and reform. Cohen and Manion describe the emergent nature of action research in their definition and maintain that action research is:

essentially an on-the-spot procedure designed to deal with a concrete problem located in an immediate situation. This means that ideally, the step-by-step process is constantly monitored over varying periods of time and by a variety of mechanisms (questionnaires, diaries, interviews and case studies, for example) so that the ensuing feedback may be translated into modifications, adjustment, directional changes, redefinitions, as necessary, so as to bring about lasting benefit to the ongoing process itself rather than to some future occasion (1994: 192).
In their systematic review of action research, Waterman et al. (2001: 4) provide a comprehensive and practically useful definition:

Action research is a period of inquiry, which describes, interprets and explains social situations while executing a change of intervention aimed at improvement and involvement. It is problem-focused, context specific and future-orientated. Action research is a group activity with an explicit value basis and is founded on a partnership between action researchers and participants, all of whom are involved in the change process. The participatory process is educative and empowering, involving a dynamic approach in which problem-identification, planning, action and evaluation are interlinked. Knowledge may be advanced through reflection and research, and qualitative and quantitative research methods may be employed to collect data. Different types of knowledge may be produced by action research, including practical and propositional. Theory may be generated and refined and its general application explored through cycles of the action research process.

Finally, Winter and Munn-Giddings’s (2001: 8) definition of action research, as a ‘study of a social situation carried out by those involved in that situation in order to improve both their practice and the quality of their understanding’, captures the essence of the philosophy underlying the action research approach.

A careful study of the definitions and viewpoints we have presented in this section should help to highlight some of the unique features of action research. The key concepts include a better understanding, participation, improvement, reform, problem finding, problem solving, a step-by-step process, modification, and theory building. These words also perhaps demonstrate the reasons for the popularity of action research as a mode of study for healthcare professionals.

**Key characteristics of action research**

Many attempts have been made, over the years, to identify the characteristics that highlight the uniqueness of action research and distinguish it from other methodologies. Carr and Kemmis (1986: 164) in their seminal text on action research included the underlying principles of the action research approach. These include its

- participatory character;
- democratic impulse;
- simultaneous contribution to social science (knowledge) and social change (practice).
In the *British Medical Journal*, Meyer (2000) explains these three characteristics from a practical perspective which is presented in detail in the following section as this has some important information and practical guidance for action researchers.

Meyer contends that participation is fundamental in action research as it is an approach which demands that participants perceive the need to change and are willing to play an active part in the research and change process. Conflicts may arise in the course of the research. It is vital that outside researchers working with practitioners must obtain their trust and agree the rules for the control of the data and their use, as well as acknowledging how any potential conflict will be resolved.

In order to address the feature of democratic impulse, according to Meyer, this requires participants to be seen as equals. The researcher works as a facilitator of change, consulting with participants not only on the action process but also on how it will be evaluated. One benefit to this is that it can make the research process and outcomes more meaningful to practitioners by rooting these in the reality of day-to-day practice. Throughout the research process the findings are fed back to participants for validation. In the formative process involved in the spirals of planning, observing, reflecting, and re-planning care needs to be taken because this can be threatening, something which is common in healthcare settings.

With regard to the role of action research to contribute to social science and social change, Meyer highlights the concern about the theory-practice gap in clinical practice; practitioners have to rely on their intuition and experience since traditional scientific knowledge – for example, the results of randomized controlled trials – often do not seem to fit with the uniqueness of the situation. Action research, Meyer maintains, is one way of dealing with this because it draws on a practitioner’s situation and experience and can therefore generate findings that are meaningful to them. In this context we are thus made aware of an important feature – that the contributions to knowledge arising from action research and any generalizations are different from other conventional forms of research. Reports from action research projects will rely on readers underwriting the accounts by drawing on their own knowledge of human situations and therefore it is important for action researchers to describe their work in rich contextual detail.

**Philosophical worldview of an action researcher**

Research is a form of disciplined enquiry leading to the generation of knowledge. The knowledge your research generates is derived from a range
of approaches. Your approach to research may vary according to the context of your study, your beliefs, the strategies you employ, and the methods you use. The research paradigm (a collection of assumptions and beliefs which will guide you along the path to conducting research and interpreting findings) you select will be guided both by your subject discipline and your beliefs. Action research is a specific method of conducting research by health professionals with the ultimate aim of improving practice. Your epistemological and ontological views may influence your research and the research methods you use.

When conducting research of any kind, a consideration of the philosophical stance or worldview (Guba and Lincoln, 1990) is important. Creswell (2009: 6) describes a worldview as a ‘general orientation about the world and the nature of the research that the researcher holds’. In an attempt to position action research within a research paradigm we think it may be useful to discuss the positivist, interpretivist, and participatory worldviews here. The positivist paradigm is based on a belief in an objective reality which can be gained from observable data. This worldview is often referred to as scientific method and the knowledge gained is based on careful observation and measuring the objective reality that exists ‘out there’ (Creswell, 2009). This method relies on quantitative measures and the relationships between variables are highlighted.

Interpretivism, which has emerged as a worldview developed in the social sciences, allows for a departure from positivist constraints. Qualitative methods such as phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative research are used within this paradigm which is based on the belief that knowledge is socially constructed, subjective, and influenced by culture and social interactions. Within this worldview, the researcher gathers data while still retaining their objectivity.

Waterman et al. (2001) provide an illuminating account of the philosophical perspectives that underpin action research in healthcare. They highlight that the most influential of these is critical theory, which draws on the writings of Jürgen Habermas (1971, 1984). Waterman et al. also state that this approach arose from a desire to democratize research in order to present a challenge to the institutionalization of research which was viewed as being exclusive and exploitative. One aim here is to encourage those who are actually excluded from the process of informing it, thereby making it participatory. Linked to this is a desire for social improvement: the Aristotelian notion of praxis – of acting on the conditions of one’s situation in order to change them (Meyer, 1995) – and Kemmis and McTaggart’s (2000) argument that to study practice means
What is action research?

To change it, but also, that practice is changed in order to study it. Waterman et al. (2001) maintain that in this approach value is attached to both qualitative and quantitative research methods; these are seen as complementary. However, critics of this approach would argue that it is idealistic and the desire to create a more just healthcare system is both naive and optimistic.

Some experts would hold the view that action research is located in the participatory worldview and that it is unique because it is context-bound and involves action which is designed to change local situations. The researcher is involved in the research process which informs practice and knowledge is generated from practice. As Punch (2009: 135) describes it, ‘the central idea is conveyed by the term action research’. Action researchers ‘engage in careful diligent enquiry not for the purpose of discovering new facts or revising accepted laws or theories, but to acquire information having practical application to the solution of specific problems related to their work’ (Stringer, 2004: 3).

Theoretical positioning of the action researcher

The essence of the type of enquiry conducted by an action researcher is that it involves an investigation of some component or aspect of a social system. Such a system is composed of humans engaged in interaction, using gestures and language, resulting in the creation of impressions and the transmission of information. The quest for knowledge – to be conveyed as information – has its historical roots in metaphysics, which may be regarded as a quest for some form of immutable reality that exists behind the face of changing, transient, social entities. The physical sciences inherited this quest and established forms for the various fundamental, atomic components of our world. The social sciences in embracing action research are driven by the pursuit of meanings and interpretations which are socially constructed, thus forming the systems of belief and understanding that direct and enrich the lives of human beings.

For social systems some would argue that a postmodernist approach looks for knowledge within a social system, as opposed to the positivist approach which demands logical or scientific support for beliefs. They hold the view that action research does not subscribe to a positivist viewpoint concerning evidence and the conclusions inherent in a research exercise and would argue for a postmodernist attitude to epistemology (theory of
knowledge) – advocating questions and discussions within the research exercise – so that emerging beliefs, whilst not embedded in an immutable reality, are the product of a negotiated consensus that contributes to a future harmony of actions and elevations of the life course. The authors of this book would leave the reader to position themself within a view which they feel is compatible with their beliefs and convictions.

**Making the researcher’s philosophical stance known**

When selecting and making a decision about what methodology to use, and to adopt while also reporting on findings, researchers will need to consider their ontological and epistemological stance. Whichever philosophical stance they take, it is important to declare this and understand the implications of doing so with regard to data collection and analysis. In order to do that we need to take closer look, in the next section, at what the different theoretical perspectives mean within the context of action research.

**Ontological issues**

The term ‘ontology’ is used to designate the theory of being. Its mandate is the development of strategies which can illuminate the components of people’s *social reality* – about what exists, what it looks like, the units that make it up, and how these units interact with each other (Blaikie, 1993: 6). Within action research, researchers would consider this reality as socially constructed and not external and independent. The meaningful construction occurs through interpretations of researchers’ experiences and communication. The stories they tell will be based on subjective accounts from the people who live within their environment. The methods of data collection they use will be consistent with their ontological stance. Action researchers must ideally make their theoretical stance clear at the start and also at the dissemination stage.

**Epistemological issues**

The term ‘epistemology’ is used to designate the theory of knowledge and it presents a view and justification for what can be regarded as knowledge – what can be known and the criteria that knowledge must satisfy in order to be called knowledge rather than beliefs (Blaikie, 1993: 7). For traditional researchers, knowledge is certain and can be discovered through scientific
means. For an action researcher, the nature of knowledge and what constitutes knowledge are different. The type of data collected is more subjective where the experience and insights are of a unique and personal nature (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). What people say and how we interpret what they do and say are important for an action researcher for knowledge creation. Again, in any reporting of their research and claims to knowledge generation, action researchers need to acknowledge their epistemological stance.

Further reading is also provided at the end of the chapter for those who wish to delve deeper into these issues.

Some practical examples of action research projects

In the following section, four examples of published action research projects will be presented. These projects, set within different contexts and locations, are included here for the explicit purpose of introducing readers to what has been reported previously as action research studies. These are presented here as summaries, while keeping them as close as possible to the original published papers in order to capture the contexts and situations in which they were located, as well as to attempt to present the viewpoints of the researchers in their own words. (We would, however, recommend reading the full version of each paper; full references for all these can be found in the reference section.) And while you may as yet be unfamiliar with the technical terminology used in the papers, these accounts should introduce you to the key concepts involved in action research.

Each project is presented in the same format; it starts with the background of the study, which is followed by the methods used, and then presents any outcomes. Each example concludes with the researchers’ commentary on why they selected action research as their research approach.

While reading these examples, based on what has been reported by the researchers themselves, it would be useful to consider whether and how their experiences relate to the different models and definitions presented earlier in this chapter. These published examples (where researchers have stated that they have used an action research approach) are presented for the purpose of encouraging critical reflection; we hope the reader will examine each one critically and make an initial appraisal of whether and in what way they reflect the principles and features of action research.
Example 1.1  Development of an information source for patients and the public about general practice services: an action research study (Marshall et al., 2006)

Background
Publishing of information about the performance of healthcare providers is regarded as central to promoting greater accountability and empowering patients to exercise choice. Marshall et al. state that the aim of the study was to explore the information needs of patients in the context of UK Primary Care and to develop an information source about general practice services that was designed to be usable and useful to patients. This project was set against the background of a national call that highlighted a need to provide better and more accessible information about the performance of healthcare providers, something that was considered essential if the health services were to become more orientated around the needs of patients and members of the public.

Methods
The study was conducted using an action research approach, making use of data gathering from formal and informal interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and a review of documents. The setting was the geographical areas covered by two Primary Care Trusts in the North of England and two Local Health Boards in South Wales. The participants included 103 members of the public, general practice staff from 19 practices, National Health Service (NHS) managers from four Primary Care organizations, and the research team.

The Primary Care Organizations (PCOs) were selected on the basis of their geographical proximity to the research bases, their willingness to participate in the projects, and their contrasting demographic and organizational characteristics. The research team worked with a senior member of the management team who ‘championed’ the project and recruited up to six volunteer practices. Each of the practices agreed to work with their patients, PCO managers, and the research team to develop and publish information about their services and performance. Patient participators were drawn from established practice-based patient participation groups, or from individuals who had responded to advertisements in the various practice waiting rooms. While these were volunteers they included representatives from both genders, all social classes, and adults from all age groups.

Data were collected using a multi-method process, which emphasized the iterations between defining the issues, developing solutions, and evaluating. In-depth interviews were carried out with PCO members, managers, and practice staff. Data were also gathered via focus group meetings (conducted with
patients registered with the practice and with practice staff), informal meetings with practice staff and PCO managers, and by participant observation of PCOs. Practice meetings (including patient participation/support groups meetings), backed up by fieldnotes, research dairies, and a review of relevant documentation – such as annual reports and minutes of meetings – also provided datasets.

Data (field notes, interview transcripts, reflective diaries, and documents) were analysed using a constant comparative approach. The research team identified emerging themes from participants' discussions that described the factors influencing the public's use of information and their information needs. Themes were explored and interpreted in an interactive way with the project participants and were then triangulated between the different stakeholder groups and sites. The findings were used in turn to guide the development of an information source for patients and the public about general practice services.

**Overview of outcomes**

The research team found that the public wanted to know more about the quality and range of general practice services, but the sources of information then current did not meet their needs. The public did not like league tables that compared the performance of various practices and only a small number of people wanted to use comparative information to choose between practices. They seemed to be more interested in the content and availability of services and the willingness of practices to improve than in each practice's absolute relative performance. They also wanted to be clear about the source of the information in order to be able to make personal judgements about its veracity. Information was most likely to be useful if it adhered to the basic principle of cognitive science in terms of its structure, content, and presentation format. Using these findings, paper and electronic prototype versions of a guide to general practice services were developed.

**Researchers' comments on the use of the action research approach**

The authors chose action research as an approach because it was felt to be compatible with the participation and developmental nature of the project and with their desire to empower service users and generate a tangible product. The nature of the complex processes and the role of the researchers as facilitators of change was felt to be compatible with an action research approach. The action research approach also enabled the research team to act as partners in the process, with all of the participants sharing views and contributing to the change processes, according to their knowledge and expertise.
Example 1.2  Valuing autonomy, struggling for an identity and a collective voice, and seeking role recognition: community mental health nurses’ perception of their roles (White and Kudless, 2008)

Background

This study was carried out in a large, community-based, behavioural health system that was located in the south east United States and offered a wide range of programmes to provide a full continuum of care, including mental health, substance abuse, and mental retardation services. Programmes such as a Detoxification Unit, PACT (Programs for Assertive Community Treatment) Teams, and Group Homes employed 40 Community Mental Health Nurses (CMHNs). These CMHNs were educated to all levels and assumed different jobs. Nurses, with basic level education work on PACT teams utilizing a case management approach, managed medication clinics or worked as staff nurses in the Detoxification Unit. Those with a Master’s preparation worked as Clinical Nurse Specialists or Nurse Practitioners. Clinical Nurse Specialists (called Senior Clinicians) worked alongside other senior clinicians, such as social workers and psychologists or interdisciplinary teams, providing intake evaluations, treatment, and consultations. In this system Nurse Practitioners functioned primarily as psychopharmacology prescribers and treated the complex co-morbid conditions of the consumers. Nurses felt they were ‘chained to clerical work’ and this left them frustrated at not being able to use their nursing skills directly on behalf of consumers. They expressed their frustration resulting from this situation.

Leaders of this community mental health system approached the problem of job frustration, moral issues, and the turnover concerns of their Community Mental Health Nurses (CMHNs) by designing a study using Participatory Action Research Methodology (PAR). The goal was to understand and resolve CMHNs’ frustrations. A consultant researcher was hired to assist the nurses with outlining their concerns and problems and worked with them in giving ‘voice’ to their frustrations.

Methods

Critical theory was ‘both a philosophy and science’, according to the authors who used it as an organizing framework. Within the critical social theory framework, Habermas’s (1984) philosophy was adopted. This involved a process of allowing all participants to present their claims as to what they held to be ‘truth’. Participatory action research which built on Habermas’s philosophy was used to approach the problems and concerns of the CMHNs.

Data collection involved using six focus groups and was followed by report writing and validation. The use of such groups was justified as an effective method by the researchers because they felt that interviewing individuals would be more time-consuming and that a diversity of opinion was important in addressing the problem (Munday, 2006).
Six focus groups were formed to address the nurses’ concerns and their recommendations. Focus group participation was voluntary. Group sizes ranged from five to ten people and the duration of the meetings ranged from an hour and a half to two hours. Information was reported while ensuring anonymity and confidentiality were met.

Themes were developed from the focus groups to explain participants’ overall concerns conceptualized as a process. A final action plan with implementation steps was drawn up and Task Forces were formed to implement this plan.

**Overview of outcomes**

Three conceptual outcomes emerged as key concerns for the nurses and formed an umbrella for their recommendations for change. These were: ‘Struggling for an Identity and a Collective Voice’, ‘Valuing Autonomy’ and ‘Seeking Role Recognition’. The study resulted in a plan of action being developed by the participants to address their concerns.

**Researchers’ comments on the use of participatory action research**

The researchers reported that this study, because of its focus group and PAR methods, empowered the nurses through its processes and that the nurse participants were ‘invested in the action plan’s outcomes’. Using the PAR framework made the implementation of the interventions and actions more effective. From the researchers’ perspective, it was important to have CMHNs participate in a process that would elicit their concerns, a process that was specifically aimed at developing a consensus regarding the expressed concerns and, finally, to assist them in identifying any recommendations for change.

**Example 1.3 Hospital mealtimes: action research for change? (Dickinson et al., 2005)**

**Background**

This study was designed to address the problem of poor nutritional care within a hospital setting: specifically to improve the patients’ experience of mealtimes. In order to implement patient-centred mealtimes for older patients by changing the focus from institutional convenience to one that focused on their requirements, an action research approach was used that focused on action and change. The project was carried out within a 26-bed unit providing care for older patients with complete discharge needs. Older patients were referred to the unit from throughout the acute NHS Trust, when the acute stage of the
condition that had led to a hospital admission had been stabilised and treated but an immediate return home was not possible because of the resulting frailty and complex diagnosis that necessitated a change in living or care arrangements. Patients generally stayed on the unit for between two weeks and several months.

The aims of the project were to implement patient-focused mealtimes for older patients within a hospital unit and to promote healthy ageing through improving mealtimes by working towards the implementation of a patient-focused and enabling culture.

The objectives were to work with staff (using an action research approach) to help them to describe and explore the mealtimes environment then current on the unit, to explore with staff ways of focusing mealtimes towards the needs of the patients, and to help staff to make changes to the mealtimes environment and their practice.

Methods

Qualitative methods were used, which included focus groups, interviews, observations, and benchmarking that utilized the ‘Essence of Care’ benchmarking tool (Department of Health, 2001). Focus group discussions were held at the beginning of the project, before the action research intervention began, in order to identify any difficulties with mealtimes and nutrition-related work on the unit and this was to be repeated at the end of the implementation phase. The focus group included staff working on the unit, together with representation from healthcare assistants, qualified nursing staff, and occupational therapy and physiotherapy staff. Photographs representing mealtimes on the unit were shown to participants as a stimulus to promote a discussion at the beginning of the focus group and the questions used in the groups highlighted various aspects of the mealtimes experience. Three focus groups involving 19 staff were undertaken. Qualitative interviews were used to gather detailed in-depth information. The focus was on each individual’s experiences and the interviewee was at the centre of this element of the enquiry. Interviews were used to assist with seeing mealtimes from a patient perspective and to explore patients’ experiences and views of unit mealtimes. A sample of six patients were interviewed. Observations included the location for eating, the involvement and activity of nursing staff, and the timing and duration of the events; all of these were recorded onto an observational schedule. Data were analysed using interpretive, inductive approaches such as categories, themes, and patterns.

Overview of outcomes

The data fell into three main themes that each impacted on patients’ experiences of mealtimes: institutional and organizational constraints, mealtimes
care and nursing priorities, and the eating environment. When this paper was published, only two of the three phases of the project had been completed. The changes that had been made thus far included alterations to practice at mealtimes that prioritised mealtime care for all staff on the unit, such as making sure that nursing staff were actively involved and had rescheduled other work, e.g. giving out medication, in order to avoid mealtimes. The ‘Malnutrition Universal Screening Tool’ was also introduced in order to identify those patients at risk of malnutrition, and changes had been made to the physical environment to ensure it was more conducive to mealtimes, including improving the ambience of the dining room by purchasing new crockery and tablecloths, etc.

Researchers’ comments on the use of the action research approach

An action research approach was selected by the researchers, as it aims to generate knowledge about social systems as well as attempting to change these (Hart and Bond, 1995). The researchers maintained that by using action research, they were able to improve the mealtime care of patients. They also suggested that the action research approach worked as a vehicle to enable practitioners and researchers to collaborate in their efforts to improve the real world of practice, including the clinical situation and the outcome for patients.

Example 1.4  Time off the ward: an action research approach to reducing nursing time spent accompanying children to X-ray (Beringer and Julier, 2009)

Background

Accompanying children off the ward for radiological and other investigations is a routine part of everyday practice. The medical staff in the location of the project recognized that while such investigations played an important part in childcare, they also found that delays in the process could mean that the child, the family, and the nurse were absent from the ward for longer than was necessary. The aim of the project was to reduce the amount of time nurses spent accompanying children to the X-ray department for radiological investigations. The objectives were to clarify and improve the process of accompanying a child to X-ray and to promote the development of a positive professional relationship with colleagues in the X-ray department.

(Continued)
Methods

An action research approach, based on the cycle of identifying an issue, collecting base-line measures, implementing change, and re-measuring (based on Lewin, 1946) was adopted.

The project was led by a nurse researcher (AB) from the local university, who was funded by the hospital to facilitate a programme of action research projects throughout the Trust. Project meetings started in November 2006 and ran through to March 2008. A total of ten meetings were held. These took place on the ward and at the university.

An audit was carried out to measure the amount of time spent off the ward by nurses accompanying the children over a period of one month. The audit sheet containing such information as the day and time of the event, the grade of staff, their destination, and the duration of absence was completed by staff each time they left the ward. The results were entered into Excel spreadsheets which were then used to analyse the information that had been collected. The analysis was used to highlight the scale of the issue to colleagues and to persuade them that it needed to be addressed. As part of the base-line information gathering the researchers undertook a mapping exercise, using Post-it notes to represent all the stages in getting a child to X-ray and to identify the staff involved in each. Using the process map and identifying the staff involved helped the team to recognize that many stages within the process depended on effective communication between the ward and the X-ray department.

Overview of outcomes

An action plan was introduced which included three main measures: to introduce the practice of ward staff telephoning the X-ray department before each visit; to nominate a link nurse to be a professional representative and conduit for communication; to extend the ward orientation programme for new staff members and students so it would include a visit to the X-ray department. These measures were introduced before a second audit was carried out.

The second audit showed that the proportion of time nurses were spending off ward in X-ray had halved since the first audit – from 24 per cent down to 12 per cent. The actual number of hours off the ward had reduced from 52 to 32. It was also found that the key day when most time was spent off the ward had changed from Tuesday to Wednesday. This was useful when preparing the off-duty rota as it enabled the team to anticipate when more staff would be needed. A link nurse from the ward was then identified who made contact with a radiographer from the X-ray department.

Researchers’ comments on the use of the action research approach

The facilitated action research approach gave structure and direction to the improvement of this routine aspect of ward practice which provided the team
with an opportunity to learn new skills while on the project that they felt could be applied to other situations. Examples of some of these new skills included collecting and processing information and finding the best way to engage with colleagues in different departments to bring about changes to practice, as well as how to make a funding application to support attendance at a conference.

Many of the salient features of action research have been exemplified through these four examples presented above. The context of all the enquiries – healthcare – varies each time. Yet it is evident that for the action researchers involved the ultimate objective of the research enquiry was the production of greater understanding of the selected groups within the system in order to produce practical principles and strategies for the improvement of that system. A possible common denominator for all four action research enquiries was that the population of participants who worked within this healthcare context system were engaged in a collaboration designed to benefit all those involved.

The life courses of participants in the research process seem to have been enhanced. That enhancement may be explained with reference to two elements: a greater understanding of the role of participants in the system founded on more detailed and profound knowledge and a greater understanding of self, due to informed and negotiated meanings of activities shared with others and a developed capacity for construction and analysis.

Summary

In this chapter we have tried to give the reader an overview of what is entailed in carrying out action research and the purposes of carrying out action research projects. The presentation of models and definitions of action research can only give a hint of the flavour of the experience – to digest the nature of action research fully you need to be an active participant. Expert views, from those who have contributed to the development and a more widespread acceptance of action research, were indicated and their names and publications were cited as landmarks in the progress of the methodology. A salient feature of action research is its cyclical structure and this was highlighted by the diagrammatic forms. Different readers will, indeed, react to each diagram differently and use them as they see fit within their own action plans. The key characteristics of the action research approach were explored. Some theoretical underpinnings, associated with action research, were briefly presented. Four examples of previously published action research projects were provided to enable the reader to become acquainted with the various processes and stages prior to experiencing them personally.
Further reading

AN ACTION-RESEARCH PROGRAM FOR INCREASING EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT IN PROBLEM SOLVING

The case study below, reported by Pasmore and Friedlander (1982), provides insights into an action research project in an industrial organization. The authors describe the use of action research to solve the problem of employee injuries, a factor leading to low productivity. Before opting for action research, management at this organization tried several other ways to solve the problem, none of which proved satisfactory. The action research project eventually implemented involved a research team, interviews, surveys, data feedback, and changes in working arrangements. The program led to a reduction in on-the-job injuries, thus achieving its intended goal.

Background

This case study was conducted in a plant within a large electronics corporation. The plant produced consumer products using modern technology; it employed 335 people. The working environment created by the plant manager and his subordinates was production-oriented, with emphasis on meeting quotas while controlling costs. Most jobs were simple and repetitive. Good hand-eye coordination was required to assemble delicate electronic parts. Ninety per cent of production workers were women, while 100 per cent of management were men. Except for the injury problem, the plant was similar to other production facilities in the corporation. Working conditions were not unusually harsh; management operated according to a traditional hierarchical style.

The injury problem

The plant manager brought Pasmore and Friedlander in to solve a serious problem involving work-related injuries. One specific injury, tenosynovitis, was affecting large numbers of workers in the plant. This condition affects muscles in the wrist, forearm, and shoulder. Even in minor cases, soreness slowed workers' production. In more serious cases, people required surgery, and the injury sometimes resulted in permanent impairment. When the study began, 104 of the 335 employees had gone to the company infirmary for treatment. Within this group, there were 209 separate reports of injuries, with forty-nine employees visiting the infirmary from one to six times; eighteen operations were performed on thirteen employees; over twenty per cent were receiving workmen's compensation; at least one woman had permanently lost the use of her right hand.

Despite intensive studies by medical and technical experts looking for the cause of the problem, it worsened over a five-year period. The studies in questions were based on traditional research methods; workers were not invited to participate actively in the search for solutions.

The authors speculated that the plant manager was reluctant to include blue collar workers in the research process for several reasons. First, he believed in a hierarchical management style. Second, he was reluctant to have people talking about the problem openly and thus calling more attention to it. Third, he trusted outside consultants to be more objective in their assessment of the problem. And, fourth, he was afraid that organizing workers around this problem would reawaken earlier attempts to unionize.

Despite initial reluctance, the plant manager called in behavioral scientists when results of previous studies suggested that the problem was due to management practices rather than technical or equipment problems. Although workers on all shifts used the same machinery, those on one particular shift tended to suffer more injuries, and when two particular foremen were in charge, the incidence of injuries tended to be significantly higher. Two doctors noted that the injuries were due not to the health of the health of the workers but to the practices in the work environment.

The action research process

Four main factors led consultants to use an action research approach. First, it was clear that employees had critical information about the injury problem. Second, steps taken by the management to solve the problem have been ineffective. Third, they hypothesized that the problem was related to poor management-worker relationships leading to stress in workers. Fourth, an action research approach involving management and workers in a joint inquiry would facilitate assessment of the management relationship while, at the same time, providing both constituencies with an opportunity to work together, thereby reducing feelings of mistrust. In addition, consultants would have access to data that might otherwise have been distorted or withheld.

The consultants began by forming the research team, the Studies and Communication Group. Its members assumed responsibility for directing the research project, providing feedback on results, and presenting recommendations for change to management and workers.

Team members were selected from a representative group of plant employees identified by management at the request of the consultants. Members included 1) representatives-of each plant area and shift, 2) employees who complained of pain and employees with no injury, 3) minorities and whites, and 4) employees with positive and negative attitudes toward management. The team included five employees who agreed to serve voluntarily, two foremen, the manager of employee relations, and the two outside researchers.

At the first meeting of the research team, the consultants introduced the philosophy and methodology of action research, and logistical concerns were discussed. By the end of the third meeting, the researchers had developed a list of questions to be asked of workers. These were based on ideas developed in a brainstorming session on the possible causes of the problem. The questions were to be included in interviews and surveys to be administered by members of the research team. The result sample interviews with fifty employees and the survey of all employees were to be summarized by the researchers and shared with the team, and then fed back to management and employees. The group would meet again to prepare recommendations for change which would be approved or rejected by management.

The research team included several open-ended questions in the interviews. Employees were asked to describe their work, including tools used, training received, and difficulties and gratification resulting from their jobs. Interviewees with injuries were also asked about actions they or management had taken to deal with the situation, and what they thought could be done to solve the problem. All employees were asked questions about the work environment, including their perceptions of management and co-workers, their ability to influence decisions, their ways of dealing with stress. In addition to the open-ended interviews, researchers developed and administered a survey including 134 questions. Answers to most survey items involved ranking statements on a one-to-five Likert scale, ranging from "not at all" to "completely."

The authors of this case study conclude that the research team's performance was both successful and controversial: Success was apparent at the first meeting, when plant employees expressed satisfaction with what they believed to be the first realistic approach to solving the injury problem. The group worked with enthusiasm, bridging status differentials, collaborating on all study tasks.
However, plant management believed the research team's role to be controversial. The team began work assuming that top management was committed to solving the problem, but after the first data feedback session, members of management were already feeling threatened. Relations were not positive, since the data fed back by the research team suggested that management style was one of the causes of injuries. Members of management, on the offensive, rejected the team's findings. Because management feared losing control, the relationship never improved. Nevertheless, management eventually accepted the validity of the findings and gradually started to implement changes to mitigate the problem.

The interview data

Interview data suggested that a cycle of events contributed to the high injury rate at the plant. Employees identified the direct and indirect causes of the problem within this cycle.

Direct causes included certain equipment items, repetitive motions, inadequate training, and poorly adjusted equipment. However, employees realized that these causes alone did not explain why workers on different shifts did not suffer the same rate of injuries. They believed that indirect causes, that is, elements in the working environment leading to stress, would explain the discrepancy among shifts. They looked into issues such as treatment by supervisors, frustration due to equipment malfunctions, material deficiencies, tense relationships with management and other workers, pressure from high production quotas, individual inability to deal with anxiety, sexism, general tension, and boredom.

Thus, employees concluded that injuries were the result of direct causes together with each individual's ability to cope with stress from indirect factors. Research corroborated this conclusion: workers suffering from injuries reported feeling significantly higher levels of stress, lack of support from management, and physical discomfort, than did their uninjured co-workers.

The injury problem itself increased stress. Injuries lowered production. Even those not suffering from injuries admitted in interviews that they worked more slowly and occasionally took a day off to prevent injury. Poor production was of concern to both managers and the workers themselves. Management reacted to the decrease in productivity by instituting stricter controls and exerting more pressure on employees to produce. This increased stress, leading to even more injuries.

Interviews further revealed that the work force was highly motivated and anxious to comply with management's high expectations. So great was their identification with management that they overwhelmingly voted against a union. Although workers were loyal to the plant, they did not feel in control of their working conditions because of hierarchical management practices. Studies suggested that those least able to influence their supervisors and working conditions were most likely to feel stress at work and to sustain injury.

By way of summary, direct and indirect factors combined to create a vicious circle of declining productivity. First, direct causes, such as repetitive hand motions, exacerbated by poorly adjusted tools, forced workers to exert more hand pressure, setting the stage for injuries. Second, a tense working environment caused the initial injuries. Demands to increase productivity and unnecessarily tight supervision of an already disciplined work force created this tension in the environment. Employees' powerlessness to control their working conditions, due to the organization's structure and management methods, exacerbated the problem. After the first injuries were reported, workers, especially those on shifts where colleagues had been injured, feared that the job was risky, and this increased stress. When injuries slowed production, management reacted by imposing even stricter controls, creating more tension, and the situation deteriorated even further.
Actions taken and changes observed

Using the data analysis, members of the research team prepared a list of sixty-one recommendations for changes in the plant, to be implemented according to one of two different plans of action. The first plan was modelled on a socio-technical system design to be implemented in a massive way. The second option proposed gradual changes to be introduced according to priorities established by management. The first plan fostered a more collaborative management-worker relationship; the second was more conservative, consistent with the existing management style. The plant manager preferred the first plan, but chose to implement the second since it could be executed almost immediately and was more in tune with financial constraints at the plant.

Afterwards, the data were fed back to management and employees, along with the plan of action to be implemented. Some of the most important actions included 1) continual biomechanical adjustment of equipment, 2) maintenance of the research team as a sounding board or management's plans, with rotating members nominated by employees, 3) establishment of a joint employee-management methods redesign group to experiment with work arrangements in the area where injuries had been more numerous, and 4) training for foremen.

Two events marked the action implementation phase. First, the group studying methods for redesigning equipment discovered that poor quality material was being used in their area in order to lower costs, and that the low quality metal could not be welded properly. Products manufactured by the workers were rejected, time and again, by quality control inspectors due to poor welding techniques. When he group informed management of the real causes for the rejections, the company went back to the original material. This finding alone had a major impact on quality and productivity at the plant.

The second event was the transfer of the supervisor of operations to another position within the plant and a change in the plant manager. The new managers, more receptive to employee needs, continued to implement the plan. Although the authors of this case study do not think that these changes, involving two powerful members of management, were related to the action research project, they believe that employees may have interpreted the event in this way.

Four years after the beginning of the action research project, the incidence of injuries declined from an average of seventy-five to ten per year, a considerable improvement. There were improvements in other areas as well. Material usage efficiency increased from 91.1 to 93 per cent, an annual savings of $500,000. Labor efficiency increased from 83.9 to 86.5 per cent, saving an additional $100,000 per year. Worker attendance improved from 96.9 to 97.3 per cent.

Managers reported that employees participated more actively in decision making than they had prior to the action research project, and that employees seemed more willing to speak up. Foremen claimed that they were more receptive to suggestions from workers. In those sections where employees helped redesign work, jobs became more fulfilling. When they were allowed to set their own production goals, workers always produced in excess of goals set by management. Managers and employees, in general, agreed that the working environment had improved.
This company is a toy manufacturer with a worldwide sales base positioned No.3 in revenues in a highly competitive—some might say "cut throat"—industry. The CEO has recently replaced one fired by the board. Sales are down, and everyone is blaming everyone else. The management team and many operating units are in disarray; meetings are mainly verbal battles. The accounting goal seems to be to cover up the financial problems the company is having (possible disclosure violations?). No one has the guts to tell the CEO that his ambitious turnaround plans for the future are not "doable."

**Intervention**

The internal consultant, a holdover from times when Toys was doing well, works one-to-one with the CEO for one morning and explores if the CEO sincerely believes that real areas of improvement can be identified and accomplished. The tentative response is, yes; and there is hope for survival. They both agree the following engagement objective for the initiative:

*To provide the organization members with realistic information about the company, focused on the CEO and the accounting situation.*

**Methods**

In the first phase of feedback, process information is gathered through individual and group interviews, focus groups, and survey instruments. Interviews are both face-to-face and over the phone; pragmatics, not scientific purity, rule. The content of the data centers on the company’s salient concerns: top management and business practices.

Questions are asked in various modalities (questionnaires or interviews), in both open-ended (for example, "What are some of the things that this organization does well?") and structured (for example, "What portion of people in your work group would you say are [scale: very... not at all] satisfied with the way this department operates?") formats. Question wording itself can be a crucial variable and should be carefully considered.

The consulting team collates the results, simply using a frequency-of-themes analysis. Similar themes are identified within the set of interviews. (or other data points) and tallied to ascertain common energy and/or pain and associated variances.

Participants are informed that they will see results in a collated form, without identification of "who said what." There are times, however, when participants are encouraged in the feedback session to take "ownership" of the themes at their discretion and for clarification purposes. This also engenders a dialogue among people in the organization at all levels so that possible solutions can be directly discussed and evaluated.
With data available, feedback is initiated. They use verbal presentations which are more effective than more formal and less interactive "paper" reports forms.

Feedback sessions range from all members of small departments attending to a wrap-up meeting for the entire organization in a large hall. Due to the sensitive nature of some information, care is taken not to use phrases that may identify individual people. Nor should the practitioner entertain any questions such as, "Who said that?"

At the end of the feedback session, intensive feedback is organized for the Toys CEO, to be given to him alone at first and then again later with the executive committee, providing a picture of how matters are seen internally. In addition, a panel of external financial experts provides feedback on the CEO's turnaround plan.

The "bottom line" phase of feedback is "What next?" At the end of the feedback process the executive decides the formation of task groups for each of the major "problem" areas that have been identified. Over a six-month period, the consultant meets with the groups to further clarify key opportunities and pitfalls in instituting change, moving gradually to a revitalization of Toys' operations.
WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH
A very quick introduction

Davide Nicolini
Today’s session

- Introduce the tradition, basic principles, and basic methodological assumptions of Action Research
- Examine some of the research designs utilised within this tradition
- Consider the differences between AR and traditional research and between AR and process consulting
Can Target Costing and Whole Life Costing be Applied in the Construction Industry?: Evidence from Two Case Studies

Davide Nicolini, Cyril Tomkins,* Richard Holt, Alf Oldman† and Mark Smalley‡

The Tavistock Institute, 30 Tabernacle Street, London EC1A 4UE, *School of Management, University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY, †AMO Consulting, 1 Chestnut Lodge, Weston Lane, Bath BA1 4AA, and ‡Warwick Manufacturing Group, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK

Building on the results of a far-reaching action research project we discuss an attempt to introduce target costing in the UK construction industry. After examining some of the issues facing the UK construction industry, we examine the case for using target costing as a way of supporting supply-chain integration in view of an improvement of the level of profitability and quality of the industry. After presenting evidence from two pilot projects we propose some considerations on target costing and its applicability to the UK construction sector and derive directions for future research.

Introduction

Target costing, understood as a cost management tool for reducing the overall cost of a product over its entire life cycle with the help of all the firm's departments and the active contribution of the supply chain, is becoming a widespread strategic management tool aimed to enhance cost leadership of leading manufacturers around the world (Kato, 1993). Originally introduced in Japan under the name of Genka Kōsatsu, an expression that clearly connotes it as an overall strategic approach to reduce costs and not only as a costing technique, target costing has been adopted by successful market leaders such as Mercedes, Kodak, Boeing, Chrysler, Goodyear and many others (Ansari et al., 1997; Cooper and Slagmulder, 1997; Kato, 1993; Sakurai, 1989; Tanaka, 1993). Although target costing has proved highly successful in new product development for commodity manufacturing, its application in the capital-intensive sector is still limited. Very successful examples of the applications of the approach in capital industry do exist, suggesting that the approach could deliver substantial benefits and competitive advantages in this sector as well. For example, in the early 1990s the North Sea oil industry utilized a comprehensive target costing approach to carry out a massive and highly effective programme of cost reduction, which achieved savings of the order of 30% (Knott, 1996). However, the adoption of the approach is still lagging

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1 The authors acknowledge the contribution of Dr. Hilary Standing to some parts of the present paper. Our thanks also extend to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions. The research was sponsored by the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions, Defence Estate, John Laing Construction Ltd and AMEC Construction Ltd.

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Building Down Barriers

Objectives

- Develop an approach to construction procurement, based on supply chain integration, called Prime Contracting.
- Demonstrate the benefits of the new approach through running two Pilot Projects:
  - value for the client
  - profitability for the supply chain
- Assess the relevance of the new approach to wider UK construction and disseminate it.

Duration: April 1997 to December 2000
Funders: DETR, DE  Total R & D Spend: £1.1m
**Action Research Methodology**

- **Aldershot Pilot Project**
  - Land Command Sponsor
  - Symonds Group
  - AMEC Supply Team

- **Wattisham Pilot Project**
  - Land Command Sponsor
  - White Young Green
  - Laing Supply Team

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**Handbook**

**Our solution in these projects:**

**Supply Clusters**

- **Core Team**
  - Main Contractor
  - Project Level Design Team
  - Cluster Leaders Team

- **Clusters**
  - Cluster Leader
    - Designer(s) Suppliers
  - Cluster Leader
    - Designer(s) Suppliers

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Warwick Business School
What has been achieved by the Pilot Projects

- Lower than predicted TLC as NPV (-14.4%, -7.4%)
- Enhanced functionality of design (VFM)
- Clients “delighted” with the process
- Enhanced buildability (right first time & efficiency)
- Outstanding efficiency on site (65-70% of time on value adding activities c/w BRE benchmark of 54%)
- Outstanding safety record
- Programme savings (10 - 25%)
- Fair margins for all (8-14%) + further gains from CI

Plus the intangibles...

- Highly collaborative team ethos
- Learning about supply chain integration
- New strategic relations in place
- Experience and confidence in the process
- Potential for delivering more savings next time (about 10%)
Can Target Costing and Whole Life Costing be Applied in the Construction Industry?: Evidence from Two Case Studies

David Nicolin, Cyril Tomkins, Richard Holt, Al Oldman and Mark Smalley

The Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK.

Introduction

Target costing, understood as a cost management tool for reducing the overall cost of a product, was the main theme of this work. It was applied to the UK construction industry and the results are discussed in the following paragraphs. The case studies included in this paper were performed on two different construction projects. The first one was a commercial building in central London, and the second one was a residential development in the suburbs of Manchester. Both projects were successful in implementing the principles of target costing and achieving significant cost savings.

The Handbook of Supply Chain Management: The Essentials

Integrating project activities: the theory and practice of managing the supply chain through clusters

Davide Nicolin1*, Richard Holt2* and Mark Smalley

1 Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK.
2 Wimco Manufacturing Group

Building on the results of two demonstration projects carried out in the UK, this paper develops the manner of workpractice in an integrated approach to whole life costing and for implementation of construction engineering principles. The goal of this paper is to present a practical tool that can be used by construction practitioners and stakeholders to improve project performance and reduce costs. The approach presented in this paper is designed to be applicable to a wide range of construction projects, from small renovations to large-scale developments. The methodology described in this paper includes the following steps: identification of project goals, development of a project plan, and implementation of the plan through the use of integrated workpractices.

Keywords: Supply chain management, construction projects, case studies, landscape architecture.

The state of the UK construction industry and the need for improved practices

A recent and far-reaching Government-commissioned report (Construction Task Force, 1998) indicated that the construction industry is one of the slowest sectors of the economy, producing only 9% of the national GDP, and has suffered for years from substantial under-investment. The report highlighted the need for improvements in plant utilization and the introduction of new technologies. These recommendations laid the foundations for the construction industry to develop more efficient and productive workpractices.

There is a growing recognition of the need for improved practices in the construction industry. This is evident in the increasing number of case studies and research papers that explore the implementation of new technologies and methodologies. The improvement in productivity and cost efficiency is the key to the success of any construction project. The case studies presented in this paper provide evidence of the benefits of adopting integrated workpractices in both small and large-scale projects.
A quick ‘definition’

- A ‘family’ of intervention practices which combine research, action, and members’ participation.
As a rule, all these ingredients need to be present in AR – otherwise we are talking about something else.
Other definitions

- **A primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives. A wider purpose of action research is to contribute through this practical knowledge to the increased well-being - economic, political, psychological, spiritual - of human persons and communities, and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part.**

- "**Action research is an approach to research which aims at both taking action and creating knowledge or theory about that action. The outcomes are both an action and a research outcome ... it is collaborative, in that the members of the system which is being studied participate actively in the process.**"
Traditions

- Participatory research in Community development (0:53- 3.36) (Southern perspective)
- Action Research in schools (0.00- 9:20; 19.10-20.52)
- Farmers PAR
- Participatory evaluation
- Action research in healthcare
- Action research in work organisations
Work on case studies

Questions:
• What are the objectives of the projects described in the case studies and who determined them?
• What were the main phases or steps of the project(s)? Is there a common pattern emerging?
• What was the researchers’ role?
• Can these projects be considered research?
Some common elements (1)

- Rejects in principle and blurs in practice the distinction between research/action, producer/user, change/new knowledge, expert/lay person.
- The focus is on real problems and/or opportunities as perceived by the practitioners.
- Members of the organisation are assumed to be highly knowledgable.
- Aim is producing local knowledge relevant to the practitioners (as well as the other constituencies represented in the project).
Some common elements (2)

- Members of the organisation take active part in (many, most aspects of) the inquiry process
- Learning and change go hand in hand
- Based on a democratic ethos (Collaboration and participation as both means and ends)
- The research process is not linear and proceeds in cycles
- The researcher is part of the research community and act as facilitator
# AR and ideology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Science</th>
<th>Fundamental Interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical</td>
<td>Instrumental [causal explanation]</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Empirical-analytic or natural sciences</td>
<td>Controlling the environment through rule-following action based upon empirically grounded laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Practical [understanding]</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Hermeneutic or ‘interpretive’ sciences</td>
<td>Understanding the environment through interaction based upon a consensual interpretation of meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emancipatory</td>
<td>Emancipatory [reflection]</td>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Critical sciences</td>
<td>Emancipation and empowerment to engage in autonomous action arising out of authentic, critical insights into the social construction of human society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on Carr and Kemmis [1986] and Grundy [1987]
The ‘moments’ of Action Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISCOURSE Among participants</th>
<th>RECONSTRUCTIVE</th>
<th>CONSTRUCTIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRACTICE in the social context</td>
<td>REFLECT</td>
<td>PLAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OBSERVE</td>
<td>ACT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Carr and Kemmis 1986:186
Organizational/industrial AR

- Research is collaborative
- The aim is to shed new understanding on a specific phenomenon in view of addressing the expectations of the “practitioners’ system”
- The process in inherently cyclical
  1. Identify and jointly define the issues at stake
  2. Further understanding
  3. Develop and agree ways of intervening to address the issue at stake (often in the form of operational hypotheses) and further explorations
  4. Implement change(s) and new explorations
  5. Evaluate the results of the intervention, address new emerging issues
  6. Institutionalise new solutions
Types of AR projects

- **Traditional research approaches:**
  - collection of survey data
  - ethnography
  - case study

- **Pragmatic action research:**
  - internal consulting
  - action learning

- **Individual engaged in reflective study of professional practice**

- **Large-scale transformational change**
The cycle of AR (+ time)
Ideal-Typical cycle of AR

1. Entry and contracting
2. Understanding
3. Plan/negotiate intervention
4. Take action
5. Evaluation
6. Institutionalisation
7. Narration and circulation of findings and exit
Action research and consulting

- Eden and Huxman are two academic AR practitioners
- AR model during the ‘70 incorporated within the OD tradition – research aspect increasingly less prominent
- AR as action & research; the challenges of doing both
- Focus on
  - Outcomes
  - Process
  - Validity
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>ACTION RESEARCH</strong></th>
<th><strong>CONSULTANCY</strong></th>
<th><strong>'PURE' RESEARCH</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Entry</strong></td>
<td>Client or researcher presents problem.</td>
<td>Client presents problems and defines problems.</td>
<td>Researcher presents problems and defines goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mutually agreed goals.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action</strong></td>
<td>Feedback, Dissonance. Joint action plan. Client action with support. Published.</td>
<td>Consultant prescribes action. Not published.</td>
<td>Report often designed to impress client with how much researcher has learned and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>how competent he/she is. Published.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Withdrawal</strong></td>
<td>Client self-supporting.</td>
<td>Client dependent.</td>
<td>Client dependent.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Darwin, 1999
Other critical questions

- Why did you use AR instead of other approaches? Emergent theories should be focus on such aspect
- Exploit triangulation not as a proof but as another source of data (a voice in the dialectical process)
- The history and context for the intervention are critical to the interpretation and to understand the likely range of applicability
- AR requires that the theory development outcomes is disseminated so that an audience wider than those involved with the AR process can access
AR as a research strategy

- AR demands an integral involvement by the researcher in an intent to change the organization
- AR must have implications beyond the specific case. The results must be able to inform other context -- at least by suggesting areas for consideration
- As well as being usable AR demands valuing theory with theory elaboration and development as an explicit concern of the process
- Action research will generate emergent theory (synthesis of data + use in practice of theory)
- In AR theory building is incremental, cyclical (theory, action reflection theory) and from particular to general
- In AR description is prescription. You need to make clear what you think can transferred to other situations. AR also requires to be reflective on the use of consultation roles and how involvement and participation is achieved
- AR requires to be highly methodic way to recording the content of the process and to reflect upon it
- The process of exploration of data (rather than collection) must be either replicable or capable of being explained to others
- Writing about research outcomes is a critical part of the research process (explicit pre understanding and methodical reflection)

From Eden and Huxman