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## ACTION RESEARCH

*What is the action research approach? • The practical nature of action research • Change and professional self-development • Action research as a cyclical process • Participation in the research process • Issues connected with the use of action research • Advantages of action research • Disadvantages of action research • Checklist for action research*

### **What is the action research approach?**

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Action research is normally associated with 'hands-on', small-scale research projects. Its origins can be traced back to the work of social scientists in the late 1940s on both sides of the Atlantic who advocated closer ties between social theory and the solving of immediate social problems. More recently, action research has been used in a variety of settings within the social sciences, but its growing popularity as a research approach perhaps owes most to its use in areas such as education, organizational development, health and social care (McNiff and Whitehead 2006; Reason and Bradbury 2006; Somekh 2006; Koshy 2010). In these areas it has a particular niche among professionals who want to use research to improve their practices.

Action research, from the start, was involved with practical issues – the kind of issues and problems, concerns and needs that arose as a routine part of activity 'in the real world'. This specifically practical orientation has remained a defining characteristic of action research. Early on, action research was also seen as research specifically geared to changing matters, and this too has

remained a core feature of the notion of action research. The thinking here is that research should not only be used to gain a better understanding of the problems which arise in everyday practice, but actually set out to alter things – to do so as part and parcel of the research process rather than tag it on as an afterthought which follows the conclusion of the research. This, in fact, points towards a third defining characteristic of action research: its commitment to a process of research in which the application of findings and an evaluation of their impact on practice become part of a cycle of research. This process, further, has become associated with a trend towards involving those affected by the research in the design and implementation of the research – to encourage them to participate as collaborators in the research rather than being subjects of it.

Together, these provide the four defining characteristics of action research:

- *Practical nature.* It is aimed at dealing with real-world problems and issues, typically at work and in organizational settings.
- *Change.* Both as a way of dealing with practical problems and as a means of discovering more about phenomena, change is regarded as an integral part of research.
- *Cyclical process.* Research involves a feedback loop in which initial findings generate possibilities for change which are then implemented and evaluated as a prelude to further investigation.
- *Participation.* Practitioners are the crucial people in the research process. Their participation is active, not passive.

Action research quite clearly is a *strategy* for social research rather than a specific method. It is concerned with the aims of research and the design of the research, but does not specify any constraints when it comes to the means for data collection that might be adopted by the action researcher. This point is captured by Susman and Evered:

Action research can use different techniques for data collection . . . Action researchers with a background in psychology tend to prefer questionnaires for such purposes while action researchers with a background in applied anthropology, psychoanalysis or socio-technical systems tend to prefer direct observation and/or in-depth interviewing . . . Action researchers with any of these backgrounds may also retrieve data from the records, memos and reports that the client system routinely produces.

(1978: 589)

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## The practical nature of action research

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Action research is essentially practical and applied. It is driven by the need to solve practical, real-world problems. It operates on the premise, as Kurt Lewin put it, that 'Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice' (Lewin 1946: 35).

But being practical would not be enough to set it apart from other approaches to research. After all, many approaches can lay claim to this territory. Many can claim with justification to offer applied research. While it certainly does embrace this aim, being 'practical' has a second sense as far as action research is concerned, and it is this which helps to give it a unique identity as a research strategy. The research needs to be undertaken *as part of practice* rather than a bolt-on addition to it.

### **Good practice: linking research with practice**

Action research [rejects] the concept of a two-stage process in which research is carried out first by researchers and then in a separate second stage the knowledge generated from the research is applied by practitioners. Instead, the two processes of research and action are integrated (Somekh 1995: 34).

Clearly, if the processes of research and action are integrated, then action research must involve 'the practitioner' very closely. And this provides a further meaning which can be added to the practical nature of action research: *practitioner research*. However, although it may be linked with the notion of practitioner research, it is important to appreciate that action research is not exactly the same thing as practitioner research. Edwards and Talbot stress this point: 'Practitioner research can only be designated action research if it is carried out by professionals who are engaged in researching . . . aspects of their own practice as they engage in that practice' (1994: 52). It is not enough for the research to be undertaken as part of the job, because this could include all kinds of data gathering and analysis to do with remote people and systems, the findings from which might have no bearing on the practitioner's own activity. To accord with the spirit of action research, the researcher needs to investigate his or her *own* practices with a view to altering these in a beneficial way.

## Change and professional self-development

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Action research is wedded to the idea that change is good. Initially, this is because studying change is seen as a useful *way of learning more about the way a thing works* (Bryman 1989). Change, in this sense, is regarded as a valuable enhancer of knowledge in its own right, rather than something that is undertaken after the results of the research have been obtained. But, of course, the scale and the scope of changes introduced through action research will not be grand. The scale of the research is constrained by the need for the action researchers to focus on *aspects of their own practice as they engage in that practice*. So change as envisaged by action research is not likely to be a wide-scale major alteration to an organization. The element of change will not be in the order of a large-scale experiment such as changes in the bonus schemes of production workers at Ford's car assembly plants. No. Because, action research tends to be localized and small-scale, it usually focuses on change at the micro level.

One of the most common kinds of change involved in action research is at the level of *professional self-development*. It is in keeping with the notion of professional self-development that a person should want to improve practices and that this should involve a continual quest for ways in which to change practice for the better. Action research provides a way forward for the professional which, while it entails a certain degree of reflection, adds the systematic and rigorous collection of data to the resources the professional can use to achieve the improvement in practice.

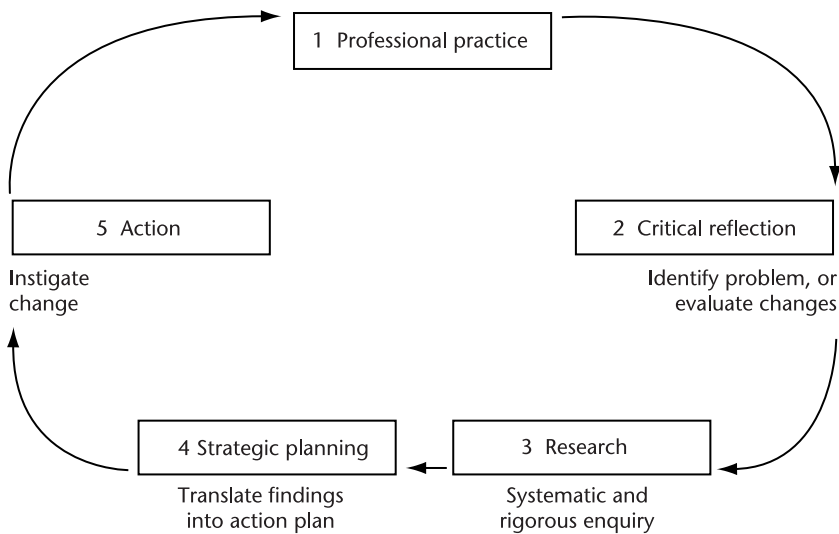
It is important to recognize that reflection may be of itself insufficient to make the professional's endeavour 'action research'. The reflection needs to be systematic if it is to qualify as action *research*. Merely *thinking* about your own practice – though possibly a valuable basis for improving practice – is not the same as researching that action. And here a distinction needs to be made between the 'reflective practitioner' (Schön 1983) as one who strives for professional self-development through a critical consideration of his or her practices, and the action researcher who, while also being a reflective practitioner, adds to this by using research techniques to enhance and systematize that reflection.

## Action research as a cyclical process

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The vision of action research as a cyclical process fits in nicely with the quest for perpetual development built into the idea of professionalism (see Figure 7.1). The purpose of research, though it might be prompted by a specific

**FIGURE 7.1** The cyclical process in action research



problem, is seen as part of a broader enterprise in which the aim is to improve practice through a rolling programme of research.

The crucial points about the cycle of enquiry in action research are: (1) that *research feeds back directly into practice*; and (2) that *the process is ongoing*. The critical reflection of the practitioner is not only directed to the identification of ‘problems’ worthy of investigation with a view to improving practice, but can also involve an evaluation of changes just instigated, which can, in their own right, prompt further research. It is fair to point out, however, that this is something of an ideal and that, in reality, action research often limits itself to discrete, one-off pieces of research.

## Participation in the research process

The participatory nature of action research is probably its most distinctive feature, since, in some ways, it goes straight to the heart of conventions associated with formal social research. Conventionally, research is the province of the expert, the outside authority who is a professional. This researcher more often than not initiates the process of research, sets the agenda and designs the collection and analysis of data. After the research is concluded, those involved might receive some feedback in the form of results from the research. They may, or may not, instigate changes on the basis of such findings. Broadly

speaking, the act of doing research is separated from the act of making changes (Boutilier et al. 1997). Action research, by contrast, insists that practitioners must be participants, not just in the sense of taking part in the research but in the sense of being *a partner in the research*.

Partnerships, of course, take many forms. Grundy and Kemmis (1988: 7) argue that 'in action research, all actors involved in the research process are equal participants, and must be involved in every stage of the research'. With action research it can be the practitioner, not some outside professional researcher, who wants to instigate a change and who consequently initiates the research (Elliott 1991). The research, in this sense, is practitioner-driven, with the practitioner not just an equal partner but a sponsor and director of the research process. And if this sounds radical, there are others who would push the matter further, insisting that the practitioner should be the dominant partner – calling the shots at all stages and in all aspects of the research.

Even in less radical revisions to the conventional relationship between researcher and practitioners, the inclusion of participation as a fundamental feature of action research brings with it a shift in the direction of *democratizing the research process*. Control is transferred away from the professional researcher and towards the practitioner. Power shifts towards the insider who is the practitioner. There is, of course, still a role for the outside expert, but that role shifts in the direction of mutual collaboration in the research process, or even to the position where the outside expert has the role of *facilitator* of the practitioner's own project, a resource to be drawn upon as and when the practitioner sees fit.

Behind this shift in the relationship there rests a respect for the practitioner's knowledge. Again, this respect may not be unique to action research, but it is an aspect of action research which is distinctive and built into an approach which is broadly sympathetic to democratizing the research process by challenging the separation of expert from lay person in research.

There can be an explicitly political angle to the participatory aspect of action research, with its 'democratization' of the research process and 'respect for practitioner knowledge'. Zuber-Skerritt (1996) refers to this as '*emancipatory*' action research. This type of action research is quite clear about the nature of the change which is brought about through action research; it is change which challenges the existing system. It is change which goes beyond *technical* matters that can have a bearing on the effectiveness or efficiency of the professional's current practice. It is change which goes beyond *practical* matters that can have a bearing on the way practitioners interpret the task at hand. For sure, emancipatory action research incorporates these, but it also challenges the fundamental framework within which the practice occurs.

**Three approaches to action research**

- 1 Technical action research aims to improve effectiveness of educational or managerial practice. The practitioners are co-opted and depend greatly on the researcher as a facilitator.
- 2 Practical action research, in addition to effectiveness, aims at the practitioners' understanding and professional development. The researcher's role is . . . to encourage practical deliberation and self-reflection on the part of the practitioners.
- 3 Action research is emancipating when it aims not only at technical and practical improvement and the participant's better understanding, along with transformation and change within the existing boundaries and conditions, but also at changing the system itself of those conditions which impede desired improvement in the system/organization.

(Zuber-Skerritt 1996: 4–5)

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**Issues connected with the use of action research**

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**'Ownership' of the research**

The participatory nature of action research brings with it a question mark concerning who owns the research and its outcomes. With conventional approaches to research this tends to be less complicated. To offer something of a caricature, the outsider research initiates the process and approaches practitioners to gain their permission for the research to be conducted (by the outsider). Having obtained authorization from relevant people, research proceeds, with the outsider 'owning' the data collected and having full rights over the analysis and publication of findings. Of course, complications arise with various forms of sponsored research and consultancy, where authorization might include certain restrictions on the rights of the two parties over the research and its findings. However, these are likely to be *explicitly* recognized as a result of negotiating access.

In the case of action research, the *partnership* nature of work can make matters rather less clear-cut. Who is in charge? Who calls the shots? Who decides on appropriate action? Who owns the data? These and similar issues need to be worked out sensitively and carefully by the partners to *ensure that there are shared expectations about the nature of participation* in action research.

### **Ethical issues associated with action research**

The distinct ethical problem for action research is that, although the research centres on the activity of the practitioner, it is almost inevitable that the activity of colleagues will also come under the microscope at some stage or other, as their activity interlinks with that of the practitioner who instigates the research. Practitioners are not 'islands' – isolated from routine contact with colleagues and clients. Their practice and the changes they seek to make can hardly be put in place without some knock-on effect for others who operate close by in organizational terms.

The idea that the action researcher is exempt from the need to gain authorization, as a consequence, evaporates. Because the activity of action research almost inevitably affects others, it is important to have a clear idea of when and where the action research necessarily steps outside the bounds of collecting information which is purely personal and relating to the practitioners alone. Where it does so, the usual standards of research ethics must be observed: permissions obtained, confidentiality maintained, identities protected.

Two things follow. First, there is a case for arguing that those who engage in action research should be open about the research aspect of their practice. It should not be hidden or disguised. Second, the need for informed consent from those involved in the research should be recognized.

#### **Good practice: ethics in action research**

Action researchers should respect the rights and sensitivities of colleagues and clients who become involved in the research. In practice, as Winter (1996: 17) suggests, this means:

- Permission must be obtained before making observations or examining documents produced for other purposes.
- The researcher must accept responsibility for maintaining confidentiality.
- The development of the work must remain visible and open to suggestions from others.
- Description of others' work and points of view must be negotiated with those concerned before being published.

### **Reflexivity and action research**

Practitioners who engage in action research have a privileged insight into the way things operate in their particular 'work-sites'. They have *'insider knowledge'*. This can be a genuine bonus for research. However, it can also pose problems. The outsider – 'the stranger' – might be better placed to see the kind of thing which, to the insider, is too mundane, too obvious, to register as an



important factor. Because the practitioner cannot escape the web of meanings that the 'insider' knows, he or she is constrained by the web of meanings. The outsider 'expert' may not have the 'right' answer, but can possibly offer an alternative perspective which can help the practitioner to gain new insights into the nature of the practical problem.

Link up with **Reflexivity, pp. 86, 327**



So, although action research respects the knowledge of the practitioners, it would be rather naïve to assume that practitioners' knowledge – of itself – provides all the answers. Particularly in relation to *practical* action research, and *emancipatory* action research, their aim is to enhance practitioner understanding and this is likely to call upon some modicum of outsider advice.

### Resources and action research

The action researcher's investigation is necessarily fairly localized and relatively small-scale. None the less, the action researcher faces the difficulty of trying to combine a probably demanding workload with systematic and rigorous research. Time constraints, alone, make this hard to accomplish. Even if, as should be the case, action research is integrated with practice rather than tagged on top of practice, the routine demands of the job are unlikely to be reduced by way of compensation. In the short run, prior to positive benefits emerging, the action researcher is likely to face extra work.

### Generalizability and action research

Given the constraints on the scope of action research projects, it might be argued that their findings will rarely contribute to broader insights. Located as they are in the practitioner's work-site, there are not very good prospects for the representativeness of the data in action research. The setting and constituent features are 'givens' rather than factors which can be controlled or varied, and the research is generally focused on the one site rather than spread across a range of examples. Action research, therefore, is vulnerable to the criticism that the findings relate to one instance and should not be generalized beyond this specific 'case'.

Link up with **Case studies, Chapter 2**



In one sense, this reservation needs to be acknowledged. Certainly, practice-driven research in local settings hardly lends itself to conclusions with universal application. New truths and new theories will be unlikely to find foundation in such studies alone. And this caution is worth taking to heart for

the action researcher: beware of making grandiose claims on the basis of action research projects. However, it can rightly be argued that action research, while practice-driven and small-scale, should not lose anything by way of rigour. Like any other small-scale research, it can draw on existing theories, apply and test research propositions, use suitable methods and, importantly, offer some evaluation of existing knowledge (without making unwarranted claims). It is the rigour, rather than the size of the project or its purpose, by which the research should be judged.

## Advantages of action research

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- *Participation.* It involves participation in the research for practitioners. This can democratize the research process, depending on the nature of the partnership, and generally involves a greater appreciation of, and respect for, practitioner knowledge.
- *Professional development.* It has personal benefits for the practitioner, as it contributes to professional self-development.
- *Practical.* It addresses practical problems in a positive way, feeding the results of research directly back into practice. In the words of Somekh (1995: 340), 'It directly addresses the knotty problem of the persistent failure of research in the social sciences to make a difference in terms of bringing about actual improvements in practice.'
- *Continuous.* It should entail a continuous cycle of development and change via on-site research in the workplace, which has benefits for the organization to the extent that it is geared to improving practice and resolving problems.

## Disadvantages of action research

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- *Scope and scale.* The necessary involvement of the practitioner limits the scope and scale of research. The 'work-site' approach affects the representativeness of the findings and the extent to which generalizations can be made on the basis of the results.
- *Control.* The integration of research with practice limits the feasibility of exercising controls over factors of relevance to the research. The setting for the research generally does not allow for the variables to be manipulated or for controls to be put in place, because the research is conducted not alongside routine activity but actually as part of that activity.
- *Ownership.* Ownership of the research process becomes contestable within

the framework of the partnership relationship between practitioner and researcher.

- *Work load.* Action research tends to involve an extra burden of work for the practitioners, particularly at the early stages before any benefits feed back into improved effectiveness.
- *Impartiality.* The action researcher is unlikely to be detached and impartial in his or her approach to the research. In this respect, action research stands in marked contrast to positivistic approaches. It is clearly geared to resolving problems which confront people in their routine, everyday (work) activity, and these people therefore have a vested interest in the findings. They cannot be entirely detached or impartial in accord with the classic image of science.

## Checklist for action research

When undertaking action research you should feel confident about answering 'yes' to the following questions:



- 1 Does the research project address a practical problem?
- 2 Is there participation by the practitioner in all stages of the research project?
- 3 Have the grounds for the partnership between practitioner and any outside expert been explicitly negotiated and agreed?
- 4 Is the research part of a continuous cycle of development (rather than a one-off project)?
- 5 Is there a clear view of how the research findings will feed back directly into practice?
- 6 Is it clear which kind of action research is being used – 'technical', 'practical' or 'emancipatory'?
- 7 Has insider knowledge been acknowledged as having disadvantages as well as advantages for the research?
- 8 Is the research sufficiently small-scale to be combined with a routine workload?
- 9 Have ethical matters been taken into consideration?