

RESEARCH IN PROFESSIONAL AND PUBLIC LIFE



THE PURPOSES AND APPLICATIONS OF ACTION RESEARCH: WHO DOES ACTION RESEARCH, AND WHY DO THEY DO IT?

Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives. Unlike traditional experimental/scientific research that looks for generalizable explanations that might be applied to all contexts, action research focuses on specific situations and localized solutions. Action research provides the means by which people in schools, business and community organizations; teachers; and health and human services may increase the effectiveness of the work in which they are engaged. It assists them in working through the sometimes puzzling complexity of the issues they confront to make their work more meaningful and fulfilling.

For many people, professional and service occupations—teaching, social work, health care, psychology, youth work, and so on—provide appealing avenues of employment. These occupations have the potential to provide them with meaningful and fulfilling work that they find intrinsically rewarding. Increasingly, however, people in these sectors find their work to be more demanding and less satisfying. They often struggle to balance growing demands on their time and energy as their workloads continue to expand, and they are routinely confronted by problems rarely encountered 20 or 30 years ago.

The pressures experienced in professional practice reflect tensions that exist in modern society. The complex influences that impinge on people's everyday social lives provide a fertile seedbed for a proliferating host of family, community, and institutional problems. Professional practitioners and agency workers are increasingly held accountable for solutions to problems that have their roots in the deeply complex interaction between the experiences of individual people and the realities of their social lives: stress, unemployment, family breakdown, alienation, behavioral problems, violence, poverty, discrimination, conflict, and so forth.

Although adequately prepared to deal with the technical requirements of their daily work, practitioners often face recurrent crises that are outside the scope of their professional expertise. Teachers face children disturbed by conflict in their homes and communities, youth workers encounter resentful and alienated teenagers, health workers confront people apparently unconcerned about life-threatening lifestyles and social habits, and social and welfare workers are strained past their capacity to deal with the impossible caseloads spawned by increasing poverty and alienation.

There is an expectation in social life that trained professionals, applying scientifically derived expertise, will provide answers to the proliferating problems that confront people in their personal and public lives. Community responses to crises that arise from drug abuse, crime, violence, school absenteeism, and so on invariably revolve around the use of a social worker, youth worker, counselor, or similar type of service provider whose task it is to eradicate the problem by applying some intervention at an individual or programmatic level. These responses have failed to diminish the growing social problems that have multiplied much faster than the human and financial resources available to deal with them. Moreover, evidence suggests that centralized policies and programs generated by "experts" have limited success in resolving these problems. The billions of dollars invested in social programs have failed to stem the tide of alienation and disaffection that characterize social life in modern industrial nations.

If there are answers to these proliferating social problems, it is likely that centralized policies will need to be complemented by the creative action of those who are closest to their sources—the service professionals, agency workers, students, clients, communities, and families who face the issues on a daily basis. Centralized policies, programs, and services, I suggest, should allow practitioners to engage the human potential of all people who contribute

to the complex dynamics of the contexts in which they work. Policies and programs should not dictate specific actions and procedures but instead should provide the resources to enable effective action that is appropriate to particular places. The daily work of practitioners often provides many opportunities for them to acquire valuable insights into people's social worlds and to assist them in formulating effective solutions to problems that permeate their lives.

We therefore need to change our vision of service professionals and administrators from mechanic/technician to facilitator and creative investigator. This new vision rejects the mindless application of standardized practices across all settings and contexts and instead advocates the use of contextually relevant procedures formulated by inquiring and resourceful practitioners. The pages that follow describe some of the ways professional and community workers can hone their investigative skills, engage in systematic approaches to inquiry, and formulate effective and sustainable solutions to the deep-rooted problems that diminish the quality of professional life. This volume presents an approach to inquiry that seeks not only to enrich professional practice but also to enhance the lives of those involved.

As a young teacher, I had the rare experience of being transferred from the relative security of a suburban classroom to a primary school in a remote desert region of Western Australia. My task was to provide education for the children of the traditional hunter-gatherer Aboriginal people who lived in that area. On my first day in class, I was confronted by a wall of silence that effectively prevented any possibility of teaching. The children refused to respond verbally to any of my queries or comments, hanging their heads, averting their eyes, and sometimes responding so softly that I was unable to hear what they said. In these discomfiting circumstances, I was unable to work through any of the customary routines and activities that had constituted my professional repertoire in the city. Lessons were abbreviated, avuncular, and disjointed, and my professional pride took a distinct jolt as an ineffective reading lesson followed an inarticulate math period, preceding the monotony of my singular voice through social studies.

The silence of the children in the classroom was in marked contrast to their happy chatter as we walked through the surrounding bush in the afternoon, my failing spirits leading me to present an impromptu natural science lesson. I was eventually able to resolve many of the problems that faced me in this unique educational environment, but the experience endowed me with an inquiring professional mind. In these circumstances, all the taken-for-granted assumptions of my professional life rang hollow as I struggled to understand the nature of the problems that confronted me and to formulate appropriate educational experiences for this wonderfully unique group of

Formal research is an extension of these day-to-day inquiries. The success of scientific research can be ascribed to its insistence on precise and rigorous formulation of description, observation, and explanation. The meticulous association of what is observed and what is explained provides explanations whose power and efficacy enable us to predict and control many facets of the physical world. The outcomes of scientific research are embodied in the technical achievements that continue to transform our modern world. The miracles of construction, manufacture, communication, and transport that have now entered the daily lives of those living in wealthy nations are testament to the huge advances in knowledge that have resulted from science.

Less successful, however, have been the attempts of the social and behavioral sciences to emulate the accomplishments of the physical sciences. Despite a profusion of theory, the application of scientific method to human events has failed to provide a means for predicting and controlling individual or social behavior. Teachers, health workers, and human service practitioners often find that the theoretical knowledge of the academic world has limited relevance to the exacting demands of their everyday professional lives. The objective and generalizable knowledge embodied in social and behavioral research often is only marginally relevant to the situations they encounter in their daily lives and has little application to the difficulties they face.

Action research, however, is based on the proposition that generalized solutions may not fit particular contexts or groups of people and that the purpose of inquiry is to find an appropriate solution for the particular dynamics at work in a local situation. A lesson plan, a care plan, or a self-management plan that fits the lifeworld of a middle-class suburban client group may be only tangentially relevant in poor rural or urban environments or to people whose cultural lives differ significantly from the people who serve them. Generalized solutions must be modified and adapted in order to fit the context in which they are used.

The wheel provides a good metaphor to understand the nature of this process. Wheels provide a general solution to the problem of transporting objects from one place to another though there are many different purposes to which they are put. Consider the different purposes, parameters, and processes required to use wheels for the following objects:

- A jumbo jet
- A small, single-engine aircraft
- A truck

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- A child's tricycle
- A skateboard

Although the general concept of the wheel applies to all, there is considerable difference in the form wheels must take to enable them to achieve the general purpose that underlies their "wheel" function. Careful and systematic design work is required to ensure that the "wheel" functions efficiently and safely for the particular context in which it operates.

The same applies in most fields of human activity. Although there are general processes involved in, for instance, teaching, health care, social work, business, and industry, there is always a need to modify and adapt those processes for the particular people involved and the place where they are applied. Action research provides the means to systematically investigate issues in diverse contexts and to discover effective and efficient applications of more generalized practices. The primary purpose of action research is to provide the means for people to engage in systematic inquiry and investigation to "design" an appropriate way of accomplishing a desired goal and to evaluate its effectiveness.

As will become evident, however, the practitioner does not engage this work in isolation. An assumption of action research is that those who have previously been designated as *subjects* should participate directly in the research. Community-based action research works on the assumption that all people who affect or are affected by the issue investigated should be included in the processes of inquiry. The "community" is not a neighborhood or a suburb, but a community of interest. Action research is a participatory process that involves all those who have a stake in the issue engaging in systematic inquiry into the issue to be investigated. Professional practitioners, as research facilitators, engage their communities of interest in careful and systematic explorations that provide them with knowledge and understanding that, in very direct ways, improve the quality of their lives.

As a graduate student, I was excited by the possibilities of the hypothetico-deductive method of research. Here, I thought, was the means for obtaining answers to the significant social problems that concerned me. By careful measurement of critical variables related to the problem under

investigation and precise definition and measurement of the relationship between them, it would be possible to describe the genesis of the problem and take appropriate steps to resolve it. The major task was simply to identify the appropriate variables, measure them, and analyze them using appropriate statistical techniques. It would then be possible to predict the ways people would behave or perform in particular circumstances and to take remedial action.

In my attempts to understand the reason for low achievement levels of minority students, I set out to map the variables that had impacts on their school performance, with the intent of first defining, then measuring, the extent of the relationships between the factors that related to their academic performance. I equipped myself for the task by taking many courses in descriptive and inferential statistics and experimental and survey research methods, while concomitantly immersing myself in the voluminous and burgeoning research literature that spoke to these issues.

My disenchantment with this approach to inquiry came through courses in anthropology and sociology, which awakened me to a relativistic social universe. It was a perspective that revealed a world far different from the mechanistic, soulless vision that, at that time, was favored by scientists. For me, the new paradigm encompassed social spheres composed of the changing lives of people as they created and re-created their realities according to systems of meaning inherent in their differing situations. The social world, I discovered, was not static and mechanistic but dynamic and changing, encapsulated by and redefined continuously by the symbolic systems of thought and language through which human beings fashion their physical and social universe.

The transformation of my thought was dramatic. I realized that I, as an impartial, objective observer, could never hope to define, discover, or measure the worlds of meaning that embodied human behavior in any social setting; that any hypothesis or explanation that I formulated at a distance from those worlds of meanings could bear little meaningful relationship to the actions and activities of the people who inhabited them; and that any interpretation of their behavior that failed to take into account the ways in which participants defined and described their situations must necessarily fail as an explanatory system.

Through rigorous exploration and inquiry, I had acquired a new vision of the world, a new way of comprehending the complexity that surrounded me and, in doing so, reconfigured my relationship with the people I proposed to study. Far from defining and describing the variables that explained the nature of their existence and generating explanations about why they behaved as they did, I was now cast in a position of ignorance in relation to those who had previously been potential subjects of study. Only through them, the cultural experts in their own settings, could I acquire the information that would enable me to understand how they behaved as they did. A new "researcher" emerged.

A Basic Routine

Action research is a collaborative approach to *inquiry* or *investigation* that provides people with the means to take systematic *action* to resolve specific problems. Action research is not a panacea for all ills and does not resolve all problems but provides a means for people to “get a handle” on their situations and formulate effective solutions to problems they face in their public and professional lives. The basic action research routine provides a simple yet powerful framework—look, think, act (see Box 1.1)—that enables people to commence their inquiries in a straightforward manner and build greater detail into procedures as the complexity of issues increases. The terms in parentheses in Box 1.1 show how the phases of the routine relate to traditional research practices.

Box 1.1 A Basic Action Research Routine

- | | |
|-------|---|
| Look | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather relevant information (Gather data) • Build a picture: Describe the situation (Define and describe) |
| Think | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore and analyze: What is happening here? (Analyze) • Interpret and explain: How/why are things as they are? (Theorize) |
| Act | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan (Report) • Implement • Evaluate |

The “look, think, act” routine is but one of a number of ways in which action research is envisaged. Kemmis and McTaggart (1999), for instance, present action research as a spiral of activity: plan, act, observe, reflect. Different formulations of action research reflect the diverse ways in which the same set of activities may be described, although the processes they delineate are similar. There are, after all, many ways of cutting a cake.

Although the “look, think, act” routine is presented in a linear format throughout this book, it should be read as a continually recycling set of

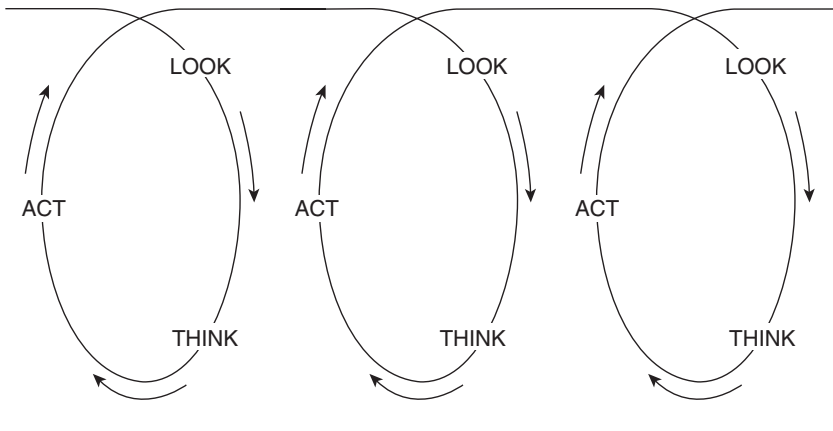


Figure 1.1 Action Research Interacting Spiral

activities (see Figure 1.1). As participants work through each of the major stages, they will explore the details of their activities through a constant process of observation, reflection, and action. At the completion of each set of activities, they will review (look again), reflect (reanalyze), and re-act (modify their actions). As experience will show, action research is not a neat, orderly activity that allows participants to proceed step-by-step to the end of the process. People will find themselves working backward through the routines, repeating processes, revising procedures, rethinking interpretations, leapfrogging steps or stages, and sometimes making radical changes in direction.

In practice, therefore, action research can be a complex process. The routines presented in this book, however, can be visualized as a road map that provides guidance to those who follow this less traveled way. Although there may be many routes to a destination, and although destinations may change, travelers on the journey will be able to maintain a clear idea of their location and the direction in which they are heading.

The procedures that follow are likely to be ineffective, however, unless enacted in ways that take into account the social, cultural, interactional, and emotional factors that affect all human activity. “The medium is the message!” As will become evident in the next chapter, the implicit values and underlying assumptions embedded in action research provide a set of guiding principles

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Action research is always enacted in accordance with an explicit set of social values. In modern, democratic social contexts, it is seen as a process of inquiry that has the following characteristics:

- It is *democratic*, enabling the participation of all people.
- It is *equitable*, acknowledging people's equality of worth.
- It is *liberating*, providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions.
- It is life *enhancing*, enabling the expression of people's full human potential.

Community-based action research works on the assumption, therefore, that all stakeholders—those whose lives are affected by the problem under study—should be engaged in the processes of investigation. Stakeholders participate in a process of rigorous inquiry, acquiring information (collecting data) and reflecting on that information (analyzing) to transform their understanding about the nature of the problem under investigation (theorizing). This new set of understandings is then applied to plans for resolution of the problem (action), which, in turn, provides the context for testing hypotheses derived from group theorizing (evaluation).

Collaborative exploration helps practitioners, agency workers, client groups, and other stakeholding parties to develop increasingly sophisticated understandings of the problems and issues that confront them. As they rigorously explore and reflect on their situation together, they can repudiate social myths, misconceptions, and misrepresentations and formulate more constructive analyses of their situation. By sharing their diverse knowledge and experience—expert, professional, and lay—stakeholders can create solutions to their problems and, in the process, improve the quality of their community life.

The role of the research facilitator, in this context, becomes more facilitative and less directive. Knowledge acquisition/production proceeds as a collective process, engaging people who have previously been the “subjects” of research in the process of defining and redefining the corpus of understanding on which their community or organizational life is based. As they collectively investigate their own situation, stakeholders build a consensual vision of their lifeworld. Community-based action research results not only in a collective vision but also in a sense of community. It operates at the intellectual level as well as at social, cultural, political, and emotional levels.

INQUIRY IN USE

A colleague approached me after listening to my report on one of the action research projects in which I had been involved. "You know," she said, "the difference with your work is that you expect something to actually happen as a result of your research activities."

My colleague's statement characterizes, for me, one of the significant differences between action research and traditional research. Traditional research projects are complete when a report has been written and presented to the contracting agency or published in an academic journal. Community-based action research can have these purely academic outcomes and may provide the basis for rich and profound theorizing and basic knowledge production, but its primary purpose is as a practical tool for solving problems experienced by people in their professional, community, or private lives. If an action research project does not *make a difference*, in a specific way, for practitioners and/or their clients, then it has failed to achieve its objective. The analogue of hypothesis testing in action research is some form of change or development that is tested by its ability to enhance the lives of the people with whom it is engaged.

Community-based action research has been employed successfully in schools, hospitals, health clinics, community agencies, government departments, rural communities, urban and suburban organizations, churches, youth clubs, ethnic groups, extension services, and many other settings. It has been used with factory workers, agency staff, school students, youth groups, young mothers, senior citizens, poor people, persons who are unemployed, community groups, people with particular forms of disability or illness, and so on. Action research has been successfully facilitated by welfare workers, social workers, community workers, teachers, nurses, doctors, managers and administrators, urban and community planners, and agency workers in a wide range of social contexts.

The ability of ordinary people to engage in complex organizational work usually deemed the province of professionals has been demonstrated many times. One of the most striking examples I have seen was a community school set up by an Aboriginal group in a remote region of Australia. Wary of sending their young children 150 miles away to the nearest town for schooling, members of the community asked a young teacher to assist them in developing their own school. Untrained for this specialized task, she

- Social work
 - Child protection
 - Assessment and evaluation
 - Youth programs
 - Parenting programs
 - Community development

- Organizational development
 - Review
 - Planning
 - Change process
 - Project and program development
 - Training programs
 - Cross-cultural programs
 - Human resource development

- Planning and architecture
 - Urban planning projects
 - Community planning projects
 - Housing development projects
 - Housing needs surveys
 - Youth housing needs

THE LITERATURE ON ACTION RESEARCH

The literature on action research is now extensive, indicating the extent to which it is applied to a wide range of professional and organizational contexts. The literature not only provides insight into different approaches to action research but also presents many examples and case studies of the way people have applied it in different contexts.

A variety of journals supply a rich body of resources for those intent on exploring the diversity of approaches to action research and the different contexts in which it is applied. Major sources include the *Action Research Journal*, *ALAR—The Action Learning/Action Research Journal*, the *International Journal of Action Research*, and *Educational Action Research*. Online journals include *Action Research International*, *AR Expeditions*, and, in education, the *Ontario Action Researcher*.

A central resource for action research is the *Handbook of Action Research* (Reason & Bradbury, 2007), which explores the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of action research, as well as provides case studies from a number of fields. Other general texts include those by McNiff and Whitehead (2006), Whitehead and McNiff (2006), and Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991), and an action research planner by Kemmis and McTaggart (1999). McTaggart (1997) describes the application of action research in an international context, while Heron (1997) provides a detailed and practical guide to cooperative inquiry, one of the many variants of action research. Tyler (2006) and Reeb (2007) present community-focused approaches to action research, and Greenwood and Levin (2006) and Schmuck (2006) present action research as a tool for social change.

Education is perhaps the most prolific source of action research resources. Holly, Arhar, and Kasten (2004) show how action research can be used for curriculum purposes and incorporate case studies in classroom contexts. Mills (2006) positions action research as a fundamental component of teaching, alongside curriculum development, assessment, and classroom management, and Stringer (2004) applies action research more broadly to classroom teaching, student research, and work with families and communities. Other education sources include Noffke and Stevenson (1995); McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead (1996); Hendricks (2006); McNiff and Whitehead (2006); and Sagor (2004).

In the health sciences, Stringer and Genat (2004) present detailed procedures and case studies of action research in health contexts. Hart and Bond (1995), Morton-Cooper (2000), and Koch and Kralich (2006) provide practical guidance for the use of action research in health care practice. Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001) present a synthesis of the theories and principles guiding action research, and Benner (1994) provides a phenomenological perspective on research health issues that is consonant with action research.

In other fields, Stringer and Dwyer (2005) present action research processes particularly relevant to social workers and other human service professionals, and Coughlan and Brannick (2004), McMurray and Pace (2006), and Whitehead and McNiff (2006) focus on the conduct of action research in organizational settings.

These citations, however, provide only a sample of the literature on action research. It continues to proliferate and is complemented by an increasingly large array of Web-based resources (see Appendix B).

Reflection and Practice

The questions at the end of each chapter provide opportunities for readers to reflect on the issues presented to assist them in “making sense” of the content of the chapter. Individual readers may relate the issues to their own experience to ensure that they understand the concepts, procedures, and techniques that have been described. The process of clarifying and understanding will be enhanced if they engage in conversations around these issues with friends, colleagues, or classmates.

This section also includes activities that provide opportunities for readers to practice some of the techniques and procedures presented. Practice the activities suggested, reflect on what you have done, and have others observe you, if possible. The process of reflecting and obtaining feedback on your actions will be informative.

If you cannot perform all the activities, choose those with which you have least experience or understanding, or which appear to be most useful for your purposes.

Think about the following questions:

- What are the main features of action research?
- Can you describe how action research relates to other forms of research? How is it similar? How is it different?
- Think about a place you work or where you engage in significant activities (clubs, church, friendship groups, etc.). What are some of the issues and problems you or others experience in this context?
- Do you have any ideas about how to resolve any of the issues or problems?
- Write down the place, the issues/problems, and the way you think you might resolve them. Keep these notes for later activities.
- Discuss these issues with a group of colleagues or classmates.

NOTE

Throughout this book, I use my own experiences to illustrate points made in the text. These sections, *biographical bulletins*, are set off from the text with a different typeface.

BOX 1.2**Action Research in Professional and Public Life****Purpose**

This chapter introduces the reader to action research as an approach to inquiry.

Content

The chapter presents:

- The purpose of action research and where and how it is applied
- How action research acts as a systematic process of inquiry
- A basic action research routine
- An understanding of the participatory nature of action research
- The ways that action research is used by diverse groups of professional practitioners and community groups
- An introduction to the literature on action research