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QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ACTION RESEARCH

Let's say you have been called to assist a neighborhood walk-in clinic that is interested in conducting an evaluation of its service-delivery system. The actual problems are not known so careful initial assessment on your part will be necessary. You are aware that understanding the clients' situations, needs, and responsibilities will emerge slowly during the course of the project. Time, however, is limited, so identifying some time-efficient research methods is essential. As well, the health professionals running the clinic inform you that it is critical that you include client-based perspectives in your study.

About now, you are probably thinking back to your studies on research methods and perhaps to earlier chapters in this book. What type of a research design will permit you to examine a variety of yet undetermined situational and conditionally based issues? At this point, you really don't have much more than a general idea about the research. As Chapter 2 indicates, design is an excellent place to begin, but how do you proceed? A trip to the library to consult pertinent literature is helpful for general and background information, but the literature will not provide much insight about specific conditions and situations facing the clients at the walk-in clinic you have been asked to evaluate. There may be an answer, however, to this dilemma; namely, *action research*.

For the past several decades, the practice of *action research* has been a fairly common mode of investigation in educational research, especially among those researchers interested in classroom teaching practices (see, for example, Brown, 1988; Freire, 1972a, 1972b; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Many sources credit Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) with coining the term *action research* in about 1934 (Mills, 2000). According to Lewin, action research is a process that "gives credence to the development of powers of reflective thought, discussion, decision and action by ordinary people participating in collective research on 'private troubles' that they have in common" (Adelman, 1993, p. 8). Today action research represents a viable, practical strategy for social science studies requiring systematic, organized, and reflective investigations (Stringer, 1999). In its present use, action research is one of the few research approaches that embraces principles of participation, reflection,

empowerment, and emancipation of people and groups interested in improving their social situation or condition.

Action research, sometimes referred to as *participatory action research*, is a research framework that evolved from a number of different intellectual traditions. The approach has been described to be a highly reflective, experiential, and participatory mode of research in which all individuals involved in the study, researcher and subjects alike, are deliberate and contributing actors in the research enterprise (Gabel, 1995; Wadsworth, 1998).

The origins of action research are not entirely clear. Holter and Scharz-Barcott (1993) state that action research originated in the field of psychology with Kurt Lewin (1946). Yet, it has also been traced to anthropological- and sociological-based community research by investigators such as William Goodenough (1963), Elton Mayo (1933), and William Foote Whyte (1943; 1991). Action research can also be found in feminist literature (see, for example, Reinharz, 1992) and in the literature on educational change and teaching practices (see, for example, Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). More recently, action research has been used in nursing studies (see, for example, Holter et al., 1993; Seymour-Rolls & Hughes, 1998).

The common threads that draw these disciplines together in the conducting of action research are:

- A highly rigorous, yet reflective or interpretive, approach to empirical research
- The active engagement of individuals traditionally known as subjects as participants and contributors in the research enterprise
- The integration of some practical outcomes related to the actual lives of participants in this research project
- A spiraling of steps, each of which is composed of some type of planning, action, and evaluation

Stated slightly differently, action research can be understood as a means or model for enacting local, action-oriented approaches of investigation and applying small-scale theorizing to specific problems in particular situations (Reason, 1994; Stringer, 1999). Put another way, action research is a method of research in which creating a positive social change is the predominant force driving the investigator and the research.

Drawing on various traditions from which action research originates, a number of assumptions or values can be outlined. These include the following:

- The democratization of knowledge production and use
- Ethical fairness in the benefits of the knowledge generation process
- An ecological stance toward society and nature
- Appreciation of the capacity of humans to reflect, learn, and change
- A commitment to nonviolent social change.

Action research targets mainly two primary tasks. First, it is intended to uncover or produce information and knowledge that will be directly useful to a group of people (through research, education, and sociopolitical action). Second, it is meant to *enlighten* and *empower* the average person in the group, motivating each one to take up and use the information gathered in the research (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Reason, 1994).

THE BASICS OF ACTION RESEARCH

Action research is a collaborative approach to research that provides people with the means to take systematic action in an effort to resolve specific problems. This approach endorses consensual, democratic, and participatory strategies to encourage people to examine reflectively their problems or particular issues affecting them or their community. Furthermore, it encourages people to formulate accounts and explanations of their situation and to develop plans that may resolve these problems.

Action research focuses on methods and techniques of investigation that take into account the study population's history, culture, interactive activities, and emotional lives. Although action research makes use of many traditional data-gathering strategies, its orientation and purpose are slightly different. It does not use, for instance, elaborate and complex routines originating exclusively from the perspective of the researcher; instead, action research collaborates with the very people it seeks to study. The language and content of action research also differ from other approaches—especially those that utilize complex, sophisticated, difficult-to-understand statistical techniques. Language and content with this approach are easy to understand by both professional researchers and lay people alike.

The basic action research procedural routine involves four stages: (1) identifying the research question(s), (2) gathering the information to answer the question(s), (3) analyzing and interpreting the information, and (4) sharing the results with the participants. Similar to the way I described the general research process in Chapter 2, action research follows a kind of spiraling progression rather than the more traditional linear one (see Figure 7.1).

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) also describe the action research process as a spiral of activity: plan, act, observe, and reflect. Other formulations of action research suggest a somewhat varied grouping of activities, but the process they delineate is similar and, typically, a spiral. For example, Stringer's (1999) spiral is: look, think, and act. In effect, different sources seeking to describe the action research procedure all seem to describe essentially the same set of activities, simply in different ways and in different sequences.

One could reasonably argue that all research requires action. After all, research itself is a type of action, and most research produces some sort of consequence (even apathy). With many types of research, the consequence is

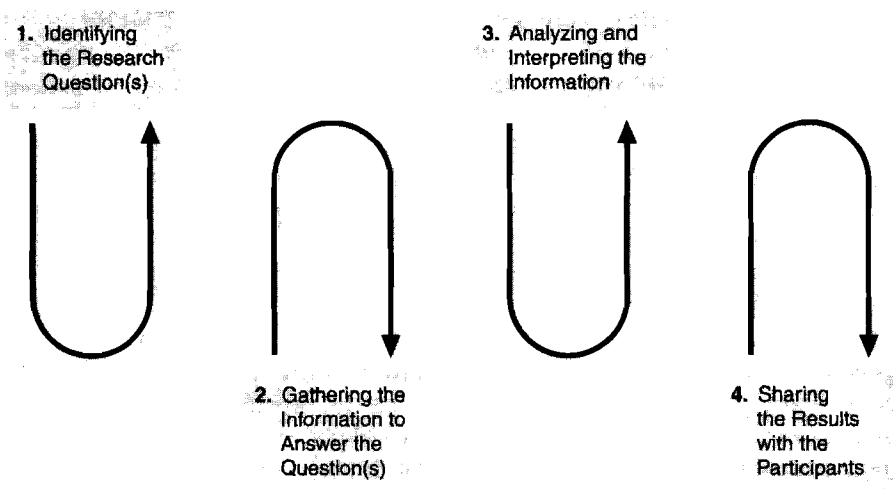


FIGURE 7.1 The Action Research Spiral Process

some sort of change or modification with the way something is done or understood. If our approach is metaphysical, the very act of asking questions and actively seeking answers can be viewed as a kind of intervention into a situation or problem and will inevitably bring about changes in those individuals involved. Whether these individuals then choose to continue along the same paths as they had before the research was conducted or to change their course means the new situation will either be different from before or remain essentially the same. In either event, the decision to change or not to change constitutes action or, more precisely, action or inaction.

In action research, investigators are aware of the inevitable effect of intervention and the subsequent potential for change. Most action research, then, consciously seeks to study something in order to change or improve it. This may be a situation uncovered by the researcher or brought to the attention of the investigator by some interested or involved party. Let's consider the four stages described in the current discussion of the action research process.

IDENTIFYING THE RESEARCH QUESTION(S)

The first stage of the action research process involves the researcher assisting the people in the research population—who may be called the *stakeholders*—to examine their situation and to recognize their **problems**. Alternatively, the researcher may identify a problem and bring it to the attention of the stakeholders. It is important for the action research investigator to recognize that

the issues to be studied are considered important by the stakeholder and are not simply of interest to the researchers. This means that the task of the investigator is to assist individuals in the stakeholding group to jointly formulate research question(s), and as the research questions are created, to assist in formulating questions that are actually answerable. To some extent, this notion relates to the size of the problem at hand, but it also has to do with the type of information that may be available to the researcher. For example, the study may involve a community health workshop where many of the participants are drug addicts. Although considerable information may be available concerning drug addiction, treatment programs, and even direct information from participants, in this study it may not be possible to extend findings from gathered information beyond this particular community health workshop.

A good way to develop answerable relevant questions is to brainstorm or perhaps conduct focus groups with stakeholders (see Chapter 5). In these meetings, the investigator can ask: "What are the kinds of problems or issues you face?" With a little bit of digging, the investigator should be able to uncover relevant problems for study.

GATHERING THE INFORMATION TO ANSWER THE QUESTION(S)

Any information the investigator gathers can potentially be used to answer the questions or solve the problems that have been identified. How one goes about gathering these data is essentially a matter of the investigator's choice and largely depends on limitations set by the stakeholders or the nature of the problem and setting. Thus, as in any standard methodological approach (see Chapter 2) the investigator is guided by the research question. Some problems will direct the investigator toward conducting interviews with relevant parties. Other problems may require various types of ethnographic or observational data. Still other studies may seem to be best addressed with archival data. Naturally, some investigators may choose to triangulate their studies in an effort to strengthen their findings and potentially enrich the eventual analysis and understandings.

ANALYZING AND INTERPRETING THE INFORMATION

At this stage of the research process, participants need to focus on analyzing and interpreting the information that has been gathered. Data analysis, from the action research perspective, involves examination of the data in relation to **potential resolutions** to the questions or problems identified during the first stage of the research process.

The actual task of analysis will depend on the data-gathering method or methods used in stage 2 of this research process. The overall effort will be to create descriptive accounts based on the information captured by various data-collection technologies. Following are two alternative sets of general procedures investigators may consider to assist stakeholders in formulating descriptive accounts of the problems and issues that confront them. Readers should recognize similarities to processes for analyzing and understanding interviews, ethnography, and other forms of qualitative techniques described earlier in this text.

Procedures for Using Interview and Ethnographic Data

The process for recording responses in Chapter 3 outlines interviewing; Chapter 4, focus groups; and Chapter 5, ethnographic research. These same techniques may also be used in an action research framework. Hence, responses to questions (from interviews) and statements from field notes (ethnography) should be recorded and then placed in summary charts or on tally sheets showing the textual context as well as summaries of the materials. In most cases, analysis involves creating categories or themes and then sorting answers to questions or statements from the fieldwork into these categories. The data are sorted into piles that share some broader characteristic (the theme or category name). After accomplishing this, you can then write a summary that captures the essence of each broader categorical characteristic. This material will be used to create descriptive accounts of the stakeholders (discussed later).

Guiding Questions of Analysis: Why, What, How, Who, Where, When?

There are a number of questions one can pose to the data at a meeting with participants that will provide a guiding procedure for analyzing this material. The first question, *why*, establishes a general focus for the investigator and stakeholders, reminding everyone what the purpose of the study originally was. The remaining questions—*what*, *how*, *who*, *where*, and *when*—enable participants to identify associated influences (Stringer, 1999). The intent is not to create categories or themes but rather to better understand the data in context of the setting or situation. *What* and *how* questions help to establish the problems and issues: What is going on that bothers people? How do these problems or issues intrude on the lives of the people or the group? *Who*, *where*, and *when* questions focus on specific actors, events, and activities that relate to the problem or issues at hand. The purpose here is not for participants to make quality judgments about these elements; rather, it is to assess the data and clarify information that has been gathered. This process is likely to draw out more than a mere explanation of already gathered information. It is likely to

provide further history and context to the material (in a manner similar to a focus group interview). Additionally, this process provides a means for participants to reflect on things that they have themselves discussed (captured in the data) or that other participants have mentioned.

Descriptive Accounts and Reports

There are two major concerns in developing descriptive accounts and creating reports of these accounts. First, it is critical that accounts reflect the perceptions of *all* stakeholders in the study population. If accounts exclude portions of the group, the resulting analysis may provide inadequate basis for viable action. Accounts, then, need to be created collaboratively (Stringer, 1999). Second, except in situations in which the stakeholders amount to only a very few people, all of them usually cannot be included in all steps of the process all of the time. In such situations, the investigator needs to make every effort to regularly keep all stakeholders informed of various activities and provide opportunities for people to read various accounts as they develop (not simply after the project is complete). In this way, these individuals can also be afforded the opportunity to provide their own input by way of feedback to what they have read.

SHARING THE RESULTS WITH THE PARTICIPANTS

One of the operative principles of action research is to inform and empower people to work collectively to produce some beneficial change. This necessarily includes both informal and formal meetings with the investigator at every stage of the research process. Stringer (1999, p. 81) suggests a number of activities that an investigator can use in order to maximize participation by many of the participants, especially when these participants may include large numbers of diverse stakeholders:

- *Focus groups* in which people with similar interests or agendas discuss particular issues
- *In-group forums* in which people from single-interest or stakeholder groups discuss particular issues
- *Informal meetings* that form spontaneously in response to particular circumstances or issues
- *Agency, institution, or departmental meetings* that provide personnel with opportunities to discuss common interests or agendas
- *Community group meetings* in which community members meet to explore interests or agendas

It is also important that when the study is over, the stakeholders still need to know what the results are. This can be accomplished in a wide variety of ways. Traditionalists are likely to think about providing some form of a report to each participant in the study. However, this may still make the information inaccessible to some participants. As Denzin (1997) suggests, there is a growing need (perhaps demand) for methods of reporting that represent people's lived experience in clear, everyday language. Traditional methods of presenting participants with paper copies of technical reports tend to include stiff or stilted scientific jargon that is meaningless to the average lay person.

Current technology provides a means for communicating with a large number of people in an interesting, engaging, and accessible manner. For example, information may be placed on a project Web site and its address provided to those participants interested in using the Internet. Others may be more interested in seeing material presented via some form of presentation placed on a videotape (e.g., a verbal presentation of a report, a dramatic presentation or some type of role-played reenactment of situations uncovered in the research, etc.).

THE ACTION RESEARCHER'S ROLE

The formally trained researcher stands with and alongside the community or group under study, not outside as an objective observer or external consultant. The researcher contributes expertise when needed as a participant in the process. The researcher collaborates with local practitioners as well as stakeholders in the group or community. Other participants contribute their physical and/or intellectual resources to the research process. The researcher is a partner with the study population; thus, this type of research is considerably more value-laden than other more traditional research roles and endeavors.

The approach a researcher takes when conducting action research, therefore, must be more holistic, encompassing a broad combination of technological, social, economic, and political aspects of relationships and interactions between the researcher and the stakeholders in the project.

TYPES OF ACTION RESEARCH

Several sources outline three distinct types of action research. For example, Grundy (1988, p. 353) discusses three modes of action research: technical, practical, and emancipating. Holter and Schwartz-Barcott (1993, p. 301) discuss three types of action research—that of a technical collaborative approach, a mutual collaborative approach, and an enhancement approach. McKernan (1991, pp. 16–27) also lists three types of action research: the scientific-technical view

of problem solving, the practical-deliberate action research mode, and a critical emancipating action research.

If we collapse these generally similar categories, we derive something like *a technical/scientific/collaborative mode, a practical/mutual collaborative/deliberate mode, and an emancipating/enhancing/critical mode.*

Technical/Scientific/Collaborative Mode

Janet Masters (1998) outlines early advocates of action research such as Lippitt and Radke in 1946, Lewin in 1947, Corey in 1953, and Taba and Noel in 1957 as having advocated a fairly rigorous scientific method of problem solving. From this approach, the primary goal was to test a particular intervention based on a prespecified theoretical framework. The relationship in this mode of action research was between the research and a practitioner. For example, a relationship might arise between a researcher and a clinical psychologist working with a family support group of some type. The researcher serves as a collaborator and a facilitator for the practitioner, whereas the practitioner brings information from the researcher to his or her clients (Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993, p. 301). In effect, the researcher will work with the clinical psychologist, who in turn will act as a kind of liaison between the researcher and his or her clients throughout the research process. The communication flow within this type of research is primarily between the facilitator (practitioner) and the group, so that the researcher's ideas may be communicated to the group (Grundy, 1998). In other words, the researcher identifies a problem after collaborating with the practitioner and then provides information to this practitioner who facilitates its implementation with the group.

A Practical/Mutual Collaborative/Deliberate Mode

In this mode of action research, the researcher and the practitioner come together and collaboratively identify potential problems and issues, their underlying causes, and possible interventions (Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993, p. 301). The research problem is defined only after the researcher and practitioner have assessed the situation and reach a mutual understanding. This sort of "practical action research," as Grundy (1988, p. 357) describes it, seeks to improve practice-and-service delivery of the practitioner through application of the "personal wisdom of the participants." The communication flow in this mode of action research starts with the researcher and facilitator working collaboratively and then flows from the practitioner (facilitator) to the group of stakeholders.

This design of action research creates a more flexible approach than the *technical/scientific/collaborative mode* in that it embraces a greater concern for empowering and emancipating stakeholders working with the practitioner. The gain in flexibility and effects of emancipating participants does, however,

reduce some degree of measurement precision and control over interpretations, interactive communications, and detailed descriptions (McKernan 1991). These are not seen, however, as the primary goals in this mode of action research. Rather, “the goal of practical action researchers is understanding practice and solving immediate problems” (McKernan, 1991, p. 20).

Practitioners involved in such mutual collaborative approaches to action research tend to reflect on their own practice styles, incorporate new information developed by the research, and implement interventions that may effect lasting changes in the groups with whom they participate. Unfortunately, the changes that result in such projects tend to be associated with the change agents (those facilitators working in the research); consequently, the interventions may cease to be used when these individuals leave the system.

Emancipating/Enhancing/Critical Science Mode

This third mode of action research “promotes emancipatory praxis in the participating practitioners; that is, it promotes a critical consciousness which exhibits itself in political as well as practical action to promote change” (Grundy, 1987, p. 154). There are actually two distinct goals in this approach to action research. The first goal is an attempt to increase the closeness between the day-to-day problems encountered by practitioners in specific settings and the theories used to explain and resolve the problem; in other words, an attempt to bring together theory and book knowledge with real-world situations, issues, and experiences.

The second goal is to assist practitioners in lifting their veil of clouded understandings and help them to better understand fundamental problems by raising their collective consciousness (Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993). This is accomplished by developing a social critique, wherein the consideration of theory and practice comes together. Development of this sort of social criticism has three parts: theory, enlightenment, and action (see Grundy, 1988). The generation of action-oriented policy, then, may be seen as following from this mode of action research and this tri-part notion of theory, enlightenment, and action. It is actually the coming together of theory and enlightenment that provides the emancipation and empowerment to the participants, which then leads to action and change.

PHOTOVOICE AND ACTION RESEARCH

During the past decade, the use of photographs in ethnographic research has begun to move toward a greater action research orientation. That is, before the 1990s, qualitative investigators used photographs **more or less** traditionally to either serve as the data (see, for example, Dowdall & Golden, 1989; Jackson,

1977; Musello, 1980) or simply to illustrate and/or document the ethnographic record (see Spradley, 1979). The current trend among some action researchers is to use photographs as a means to enable the investigator to gain perceptual access to the world from the viewpoint of individuals who have not traditionally held control over the means of imaging the world. This technique has been called photovoice (Clark & Zimmer, 2001; Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

Photovoice researchers literally give their subjects a camera and ask them to photograph certain aspects of their lives. Often this is undertaken in addition to more traditional elements of observation and field note-taking or photos taken by the investigator. For example, as part of a larger investigation, Clark and Zimmer (2001) gave disposable cameras to women in their study at three-month intervals and asked them to record events or situations these women felt were relevant to their children’s health in general. This activity resulted in 1,018 mother-generated photographs. These were added to photographs taken by both researchers and their assistants during home visits to these women (an additional 943 photographs). In effect, the photovoice method puts cameras in the hands of folks in the community so that they can document what they see in their community from the ground up. In turn, these photos are discussed among participants and then brought to the attention of community leaders or appropriate policy makers.

In another recent study conducted by Robert Strack and Cathleen Magill, faculty at the Center for Adolescent Health Promotion and Disease Prevention of the Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health, 15 adolescents from local neighborhoods were engaged to capture photographs of their urban neighborhoods. These photographs of neighborhoods, neighborhood residents, family members, friends, and the youths themselves served as powerful stimuli for discussions about these communities. The photographs were shown to the community in three exhibits, to which the 15 adolescents invited surrounding community members (Alexander, 2000).

The Goals in Photovoice

There are essentially three major goals when using photovoice as an action research strategy. These include:

1. Empowering and enabling people to reflect their personal and community concerns.
2. To encourage a dialogue and to transfer knowledge and information about personal and community issues through discussions about photographs among participants.
3. To **access the perception** of those not in control of various problem issues and **share** this information with those who are in control (policy makers, politicians, health professionals, educators, etc.).

Central to action research is the notion of it being participatory. As an action research strategy, then, photovoice is also necessarily participatory. Photovoice allows participants to define themselves, their families, their work, and anything else that can be focused through the viewfinder of a camera. Because these photographs are then discussed with others, they provide a means by which others can share the meanings participants attach to the people, scenes, objects, and situations captured in the photographs.

According to Wang (2000), study members themselves guide each step of the research process so that their voice can be fully expressed. After the photographs have been taken, the method has three stages: selecting photographs, contextualizing stories, and codifying issues.

Selecting Photographs. The participants will need to identify which of the photographs they believe most accurately reflect their concerns and issues or which photographs best depict their view about the world around them. As in other action research strategies, this can be accomplished in small or large groups.

Contextualizing Stories. In this stage, the participants share stories about their photographs. In more traditional research terms, they *offer accounts* about the photographs, why they were taken, what the image means to the individual, and what they intended the photograph to depict. Sharing stories is a key element in this technique because it quite literally offers the *voice* element to the photographs. In the absence of this stage, photographs do not provide the inner perceptions of their creators (the participants who took the photographs).

Codifying. Like any other coding stage, this one identifies the central issues, themes, or theories that emerge during the course of contextualizing and discussing the photographs in the various groups. During this stage, participants may earmark certain concerns that they want to target for action or prioritize issues for action.

Photovoice provides a means for involving people in both sharing and defining issues, problems, and concerns. As an action research technique, it allows the investigator to gain insights as well as to inform relevant policy makers or other change agents. It is a means by which participants can reflect, both individually and together, on their own concerns, made visible in photographs and given voice through discussions and accounts.

TRYING IT OUT

1. Divide the class into two separate groups. Designate one of the students in each group as *researcher*. Next, see if you can identify problems and issues facing each group of students. Remember, this may involve several

meetings of the group (small town meetings) led by the *researcher* of each group. Once each group has devised a list of concerns and issues (the action focus), have the *researcher* report this to one large town meeting of the entire class. How similar were the concerns listed by each group?

2. Divide the class into three groups. Have each group identify a concern or interest of the entire group that exists on campus. Now have students take photographs that depict their group's concern or interest. The groups will need to meet separately to discuss their photographs and share their meanings. Finally, have the groups exhibit their photographs. The exhibition may be accomplished by hanging the photographs in a hall, using the classroom walls, launching them onto the Web, and so on. Be sure some narratives have been included with the photographs.

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