

Chapter 7

Action Research Approaches

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary use of action research draws on the exploratory, inductive nature of many qualitative research approaches—no matter the type of data collected—because the type of research problems studied are complex, dynamic, and located in rapidly changing contexts. When action research is undertaken to support social and organizational change, support from stakeholders affected by the research problem is essential, creating further complexity. Action research may serve as an alternative to more traditional views of social science. In this chapter, the authors describe action research as envisioned by Kurt Lewin, its originator. They show how two variants of action research—action science and collaborative developmental action inquiry—advance insight into how action research can be used to develop personal capability to address system changes that action research seeks to unveil. They conclude with reflections on criteria for rigor and relevance in action research in today's post-modern, complex world.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the initial framing of action research as a much needed alternative research approach in the social sciences within a positivist research tradition, and then offers emerging variations both in organizational practice and in a doctoral program to demonstrate how action research has evolved. With this evolution, new criteria for rigor are needed. This chapter offers a new perspective on validity in action research.

The Lewinian Tradition

Kurt Lewin (1946)—inquiring into complex social issues in his era—concluded that research methods needed were really a “type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action.” (p. 35). He argued that such research was not ‘lower’ than pure science, but quite the opposite- since it needed to uncover the underlying laws governing social action. Lewin noted that traditional social science research focused on fact-finding data and diagnosis. Yet, given the complexity of social problems such as intergroup relations, diagnosis was not enough. It needed to be “complemented by experimental comparative studies of the effectiveness of various techniques of change.” (p. 37) Drawing on the example of the bombing of Germany, he noted that in social action, once a plan was made, reconnaissance had to serve several functions. The proposed action had to be evaluated against actions taken and whether results were above or below expectations to help planners assess what was or was not working. Researchers could then make mid-course corrections to both the initial and overall plan. Lewin’s process of change began with collaborative fact-finding with those who sought to understand the social problem more clearly. Together they did the reconnaissance needed to further refine their plans, improve the plan, take actions, and monitor results, leading to an iterative cyclical process of action and evaluation that helped calibrate the best steps to take to resolve the social problem under study. For Sussman and Evered (1978) Lewin’s action research “provides a mode of inquiry for evolving criteria by which to articulate and appraise actions taken in organizational contexts “ (p. 599).

Lewin discovered the benefit of collaborative reflection and dialogue in the Commission on Community Interrelations (CCI). Lewin and the other interveners held evaluation meetings at the end of each day of training, in which trainers reflected on what went well, what they had observed, and what they could do differently. This reflection clearly led to changes in the pedagogy implemented the next day. As Lewin (1946) commented, “This and similar experiences have convinced me that we should consider action, research and training as a triangle that should be

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