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Editorial: Special Issues and Implications in Action Research

The Various Traditions of Action Research

Action research (AR) is considered an umbrella term for a family of approaches applied in a range of fields, including community development, education, administration, psychology, health care and others. Kurt Lewin was the first to develop a theory of action research as “a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a cycle of planning, action, observation and the evaluation of the result of the action.”¹ His view of organizational and social change was criticized by Argyris and Schon as it did not address continuous organizational learning. They coined the term “Action Science” which incorporated aspects of Habermas’s theory of communicative action and emphasized organization learning.² Holter and Schwartz-Barcott described three approaches of AR including: 1) technical collaborative in which the researcher acts as facilitator within a pre-specified framework; 2) mutual collaborative which fosters mutual understanding; and 3) enhancement which leads to the emancipation of all participants.³ This type of research is often described as: action research; participatory action research (PAR); participatory action research with youth (YPAR); cooperative inquiry; community-based participatory research (CBPR); participatory rural appraisal; and feminist action research.

Action research is carried out under diverse intellectual traditions, and new traditions are still emerging. Modern action research has its basis in critical social theory (CST) and critical social science. The goal of CST is to liberate individuals and communities from distorted communication by creating knowledge to further autonomy and responsibility.⁴ PAR is best known for its interdisciplinary focus and includes a political dimension. PAR is generally used to counteract oppressive conditions experienced by a particular segment of society by challenging social customs and assumptions that keep people marginalized and oppressed. Basic elements of PAR involve context (local); full engagement of research and participants; attention to how the research process affects the lives of others; and having participants drive change and decision making. CBPR values the collaborative partnership of equal and joint control of all partners in a cyclical iterative process of community assessment, setting priorities, implementation, sustainability, evaluation, and feedback.⁵ A wide cross-section of the community is involved to foster community ownership of the project and actions rather than imposing an outside agenda.⁶

Action Research Methods

Stringer suggests establishing a positive climate that engages the energy and enthusiasm of all stakeholders through three fundamental phases: look, think and act.⁷ This is conducted through a continuous cycle of exchange, negotiation, realignment, and repair. Planning a research process includes designing research, seeking consensus, and being in the field. Look is the process of gathering information to understand the experience and perspective of stakeholders. All stakeholders should be people whose lives are affected by the issue and they should participate in defining and exploring the problem under investigation. Data collection can include interviews, focus groups,

participant observation, questionnaires, documents, records and reports, surveys, and a literature review.^{7,8,9} Think is the process of reflection and analysis that enables participants and researchers to better understand underlying problems. Act is the planning process through setting priorities and defining tasks; implementing activities; and evaluation. Berg proposed four stages of action research including: 1) identifying the research questions; 2) gathering the information; 3) analyzing and interpreting data; and 4) sharing the results with the participants.¹⁰ Fongkaew, Turale and Meechamnan identified five phases of a PAR process including 1) problem identification; 2) planning and formulating a program; 3) program implementation; 4) refining and revising the program; and 5) future implementation critique.¹¹

Pitfalls of Conducting Action Research

There are some pitfalls that researchers have to be very careful to avoid. The following examples are taken from Thailand:

1. Imbalance between action and research: Some researchers focus too strongly on either action or research and neglect balance between both components;
2. Intervention focus on researchers' interest rather than participants' needs and try to test the intervention without authentic community participation and partnership;
3. Researchers think that they are able to build new knowledge and continually inform communities to address their problems but in reality often do not and just test some theories;
4. Not selecting relevant stakeholders or real representative of organization or community to involve in the project;
5. Focusing on successful outputs;
6. Confused about the steps of action research since action research does not outline how to conduct research at each step. For example, how to identify appropriate data collection methods, and how to identify the specific process for reflection;
7. Using the Deming Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) or AIC process in conducting action. PDCA and AIC are work development processes contain a similar processes of understanding the situation.^{12,13} However, AR includes planning for action, implementation and evaluation and it is unnecessary to use PDCA or AIC;
8. Not informing participants clearly about their roles in each step of conducting action research;
9. Possible conflicts for participants who participate in the action research but do not participate in the research project;
10. The final pitfall concerns publication of results. Researchers who try to write all of the results in one article can cause reader confusion and lead to article rejection. There are some approaches that researchers can decide the number and the content of each PAR manuscript.¹⁴

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