Action Research

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Rhett Diessner

published in Converging Realities1:1

Switzerland: Landegg Academy, 2000

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Abstract: Action research is not a technique or particular method of research, but rather a focus on the issue of the "final" cause of research, or the question of the "purpose" of the research. The purpose of action research is transformative action, action that makes a difference in the life-worlds of both the researcher and the researched. The applicable domain of action research is both description of, and prescription in, the social world of humans. Action research is: (1) democratic, consultative (viz. Abdu'l-Bahá, 1980) and based on bilateral communication (Argyris, 1980; Argyris, Putnam, Putnam, & Smith, 1985); and (2) critical and emancipatory (Habermas, 1971).

1. Introduction

Action has effect. One act is better than a thousand words.
Jesus Christ says: 'By their fruits' (actions) and not by their words.
What is the effect of words alone? The real thing is action.

Action has made
man eloquent. There is no eloquent language better than action. As long
as the sun is bright, is it necessary that it should say 'I am bright'?
There is no need for that.
— —
Cited in Randall-Winckler & Garis

It is typical to divide research into two broad domains, quantitative
and qualitative. Quantitative approaches are associated with precision
of measurement, experimental and correlational design, statistics, "hard"
data, and the correlation of human behavior in terms of ordinal, interval,
or ratio scales. Qualitative approaches are associated with ethnographies,
interpretive techniques, and "soft" data. Occasionally "action research"
is considered a third, "ultra" soft, approach: I once overheard one of
my colleagues saying, "They didn't prepare a decent research design, so
they called it action research." That attitude will be refuted in this
article.

2. A Focus on Purpose

As defined herein, action research is not a type of research that is
differentiable from qualitative or quantitative research, nor from nomothetic
(an approach to science in which universal laws are sought) or idiographic
(studying the unique individual in her/his own context — no
attempt is made to generalize the findings to other human beings) approaches.
Rather, the main difference between action research and other approaches
is an explicit focus on research for action, change, and transformation.
Its purpose is to change behavior, to alter action, to cause development
to occur-both in
the concern that is under study and in the researcher(s). A critical factor
in action research is to maximize the meaningfulness of the study. The
research design should fit the best notions of validity, external and internal,
and may be either qualitative or quantitative, or a combination thereof.
The difference between action research and most research published in academic
journals is that the results of the research are intended to
feed back
directly to the researchers' practice, as well as directly influence
the researched. In other words, action research is intended to advise the
researchers themselves how to act, as much as to advise others how to act.
Its main emphasis is on improving the human condition in a specific context,
with secondary attention given to generalizing the findings.
Why is it that few researchers focus on action research? Why is that
most researchers tend to distance themselves from the problems under study
and expect "practitioners" to read their journal article work and transform
it into action? One reason is that it is "safer" to study others' behavior
than your own; it lowers one's responsibility to make significant changes
in one's own practice. However, this approach is a form of "distancing,"
which is a disservice to society (cf.
Argyris, 1980; Argyris,

Putnam, & Smith, 1985). As a practical example: I work in teacher education. There is a plethora of data-based journals in education, but teachers seldom read them. The questions/hypotheses addressed in the journals are generally not the questions teachers are wondering about; they are questions that professional academic researchers are wondering about, and teachers seldom find any concrete advice about how to improve their practice in these journals. Additionally, the proofs and evidence that many researchers use are either not convincing or not meaningful to the "practitioners," the teachers.

3. What is action? Who are the "Professionals"?

First of all, nearly all producers of work, whether craftsperson, professionals, tradespeople, managers, etc., perform informal action research. All human actions include three components, although at times we may process the components so quickly (milliseconds) that we are unaware of them. Every human action involves: (a) a planning phase, (b) an execution phase, and (c) an assessment phase. Take the simple action of eating a potato chip snack. A human walks by a bowl of potato chips. The human thinks, "I'm hungry; those look good. I think I'll eat some." This is the planning phase. The human then reaches out a hand, takes some chips, and places them in his or her mouth. This is the execution phase. Then, if they tasted good (which is the assessment!), they reach for some more. Another example: teachers plan a curriculum, execute a method of teaching the curriculum, then give their students a test, thus assessing the teacher's effectiveness in teaching and the students' effectiveness in learning. A physician makes a plan for a cure, provides the medicine, then has the patient come back in ten days for assessment of the effectiveness of the cure. A plumber plans the method of installing the pipes, executes the installation, then turns on the water to check for leaks. The "action research" being advocated in this article is an extension of natural human activity (action), with careful reflection and systematization of issues of reliability and validity, especially in the assessment phase of action.

Because the term "professional" connotes a privileged class, many workers aspire to this status. The present writer, having worked extensively with nurses and teachers, is aware of the importance of the designation "professional."

Normally, physicians, dentists, attorneys, and architects, among others, have this hallowed station. Yet, the present writer has argued elsewhere (Diessner, 1991) that the requirements for professional status should not be socioeconomic class, or ability "to police their own profession" but rather it is an issue of action research. Those that are "truly" worthy of the appellation 'professional' need to actualize being: (a) involved in choosing the "ends" of their practice, and (b) then making/having the opportunity to evaluate the success of their "means" of attaining

those ends. Action research is required to produce valid evaluation.

4. Democratic, Consultative, and Bilateral Research

In the best of action research, the lines between the "researcher" and the "researched" are blurred and may become one and the same. A question may be initiated by a social scientist or by any group of humans. A group of workers may ask, How can we be more productive?; or a researcher may be hired by the business administration to ask the same question. Regardless of the starting point of the question, those immediately and substantially affected by the potential outcome of the research should have a voice in framing or reframing the question under study, a voice in selecting the means of answering the question (which is what we normally call "the research"), and a voice in determining the criteria to decide whether the question has been validly answered.

On the "practical" side, if the "researched" are not included in the decision making, the results are always suspect. If the researcher brings in her set of questions, they may be irrelevant to the researched. If the researched do not have a hand in determining the research questions, if they do not get to help decide the methods of completing the study, and if they are not included in assessing the effectiveness and accuracy of the outcome of the research, they are likely either to sabotage the research, be apathetic, and not be intrinsically motivated to solve the problems under study. This can easily be seen now in the so-called development projects imposed on the "Third World" by the "First World." Most of them did not "work." For examples of such failures, and the solutions through "participatory" involvement, the reader is referred to the following sources: Social and Economic Development: A Bahá'í Approach (Vick, 1989); "The Development of Communication and the Communication of Development" (Stephens, 1990); "Developing a Participatory Approach to Learning" (Pihlainen, 1991); and "Principles of Consultation Applied to the Process of Innovation in a Corporate Environment"(Rosenfeld & Winger-Bearskin, 1991).

One of the great pioneers in action research is Chris Argyris (Argyris, 1980; Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985). He has described how most research follows "normal science" (Kuhn, 1970), which is based on a paradigm he calls "Model-One". Argyris documents how Model-One style research is based on the values of unilateral control of the research situation, "winning" (proving oneself right), and suppression of any data that does not fit one's preconceived notions. His description and explanation of "Model-Two" represents a consultative approach, in which the researcher

and the researched have "bi-lateral" control of any studies, wherein winning is not being "right," but rather uncovering the truth, and no dialogue is suppressed, even if it is painful.

For example, at the university level, students and professors shall co-determine the "ends" of the research, and the "means" to attain these ends, along with mutually deciding what will be convincing proof that the "ends" were attained or not (evaluative aspect of action research). Thus, students would have a say in the objectives of the course, how those objectives are met (the methods of teaching and learning), and what assessment would convince both the students and the professor that the objectives were accomplished. Hence, the line between researcher and researched blurs, leaving all significant parties as participants: not an observer and the observed, not the subjector and the subjects (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

In research into the efficacy of psychotherapy, the clinician and clients would consult together on what should be the goal of the therapy, how the therapy should proceed, and what would be convincing evidence to both of them that the therapy "worked." This approach does not devalue the expertise of the professor or the clinician, and it does not assume that the professor has "equal" status with the students, or that the "clinician" has "equal" status with the client. What is does, is to engage all ranks of society in a mutual pursuit of truth, in a consultative manner.

5. Critical and Emancipatory Research

Research is aimed at creating or uncovering knowledge. Habermas has argued that seeking knowledge always serves some interest (1971). He reasons that the empirical sciences, which aim to discover "laws" of nature, have a "technical" interest (he means "techne" in the traditional Greek sense which is the instrumental interest of science to control and predict). The goal of this technical interest, its "final" cause, is to be able to predict and control nature, things, and beings. This, however, becomes problematic in both moral and truth-oriented ways. It is immoral to treat humans as things that can be controlled for the interests of someone else. This is treating humans as a "means" and not as an "end," thus violating Kant's categorical imperative. It also violates truth-seeking if one believes humans have free-will. If humans do have free-will, then they are inherently unpredictable, as they are creative beings and are not bound by their genetic inheritance or the rewards and punishments from their environment.

The second human interest that Habermas addresses is that of the historical-hermeneutic sciences. These "sciences" have a "practical" (praxis, normativity) interest; the goal of that practical interest being the understanding and interpretation of humans. The typical domain of this interest are the humanities and non-nomological (sciences that don't seek universal predictive laws) social sciences.

The third human interest, in regard to knowledge,
Habermas calls the "emancipatory," and it deals with the domain of philosophy
and critique. Its goal is to set humans free from the fetters of the past,
both the cultural past, and their own alienation during their ontogeny
(natural history). He uses Marx as an example of emancipating us from the
cultural past, and Freud as an exemplar in freeing the individual of the
errors of her/ his development. Although Bahá'ís will take
exception to the materialism of Marx and Freud, the interest of emancipation,
and
freedom from the imitation of our forebears is a critical goal for Bahá'ís
(viz.
Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, 1950;
and Saiedi, 1997).
Action research is aimed, not at the interest
of techne, but rather at the practical interest of understanding and the
emancipatory interest of truth. This parallels the goal of Bahá'í
consultation, which is truth. The Bible says, "And ye shall know the truth,
and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

The purpose is to emphasize the statement that
consultation must have for its object the investigation of truth.
(Abdu'l-Bahá
1982, p. 72)
Man must consult on all matters, whether major
or minor, so that he may become cognizant of what is good. Consultation
giveth him insight into things and enableth him to delve into questions
which are unknown. The light of truth shineth from the faces of those who
engage in consultation. Such consultation causeth the living waters to
flow in the meadows of man's reality, the rays of ancient glory to shine
upon him, and the tree of his being to be adorned with wondrous fruit.
The members who are consulting, however, should behave in the utmost love,
harmony and sincerity towards each other. The principle of consultation
is one of the most fundamental elements of the divine edifice. Even in
their ordinary affairs the individual members of society should consult.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, 1980)

6. Call for Action
This plea for action research is not entirely
new; Corey in 1949, from Teachers College, urged
us to move from "fundamental research" to action research, because teachers
were not consuming research. The problem is not just among educators, however.
Even among social scientists studying social issues, reports of action
research are relatively rare. This is why Deutsch
(1969) and Sanford (1970), invoking Kurt
Lewin, have begged for action research to be the mode of study reported
in the Journal of Social Issues. This type of action is also congruent
with Paolo Freire's seminal work in critical pedagogy

(1970).

7. Summary: The Issues Revisited

Selecting ends. Research in Spiritual Psychology must be "spiritual' and moral in its mode of conduct. It cannot do research "on" humans, but only "with" other humans in a collaborative, consultative search for truth. Therefore, the goals of research should be co-determined by both the researcher and the researched, and it is best if the "question" (the "end" of the research) is generated by the researched themselves.

The means of examining the question must also be co-determined by the researcher and the researched. This is normally called the method of the study.

The means of assessment must be agreed upon by both the researcher and the researched. What will "count" as valid proof? Those that will be involved in the action under study must help set the criteria for what will be acceptable confirmation or disproval of any hypotheses. This will be crucial for the researched to be intrinsically interested in making the results actionable.

In all of the above three aspects of action (a) the planning, (b) the execution, the method, (c) the results, the assessment, a consultative methodology which is bilateral must be followed (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985). Both the researcher and the researched will need to follow this practice, to reach actionable truth:

They must clearly advocate their ideas.

They must provide data, facts, or reasons for their ideas.

They must explain why their data, facts or reasons warrant their advocated idea.

They must invite inquiry from their collaborators, the researchers and researched alike, about the quality of their advocacy, data, and explanation.

This four-step process will help ensure that all research agreements have the least bias and prejudice, the most truth-value, and the best likelihood of all parties being intrinsically motivated to make the results actionable.

Unless these thoughts are translated into the world of action, they are useless. The wrong in the world continues to exist just because people talk only of their ideals, and do not strive to put them into practice. If actions took the place of words, the world's misery would very soon be changed into comfort. (`Abdu'l-Bahá, 1969, p. 16)

If we are true Bahá'ís speech is

not needed. Our actions will help on the world, will spread civilization, will help the progress of science, and cause the arts to develop. Without action nothing in the material world can be accomplished, neither can words unaided advance a man in the spiritual Kingdom. It is not through lip-service only that the elect of God have attained to holiness, but by patient lives of active service they have brought light into the world. (`Abdu'l-Bahá, 1969, pp. 80-81)

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