



Introduction: How to Situate and Define Action Research

In: The SAGE Handbook of Action Research

Edited by: Hilary Bradbury

Publication Date: 2015

Online Publication Date: September 21, 2017

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications Ltd

City: 55 City Road

Print ISBN: 9781446294543

Online ISBN: 9781473921290

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473921290>

© 2019 SAGE Publications Ltd All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Research Methods. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

Introduction: How to Situate and Define Action Research

Hilary Bradbury

Action research is a democratic and participative orientation to knowledge creation. It brings together action and reflection, theory and practice, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern. Action research is a pragmatic co-creation of knowing *with*, not *on about*, people.

How does action research contrast with conventional research?

Action researchers nearly always start with a question, such as 'How can we improve this situation'? We are committed to doing good work that minimizes suffering and brings appreciable, positive impact through the *collaborative* character of our work. Beyond privileging cognitive understanding, action researchers draw on and contribute to an ever-increasing repertoire of experiential practices at personal, interpersonal, and/or collective levels, allowing us to address complex problems while also giving attention to coordinating needed action.

No single formulation of action research can be correct, but Table I.1 nonetheless compares action research with both conventional and applied research to give a taste of overlapping and important differences. This table (developed with colleagues Steve Waddell and Kent Glenzer as we thought together about large-scale change work) aims to be a conversation starter without sacrificing too much complexity.

Action researchers also see our work as a response to conventional social science which, with some exceptions, is losing relevance for the larger public and too often reinforces the status quo. Our work as action researchers is well positioned to revitalize social science through our concern for taking action (*actionability*) toward positive impact. Action researchers understand that partnership and participation are central to our work. As important is reflexivity, i.e. taking a critical stance on what limits and enables our own and others' participation.

Table I.1 Action Research Comparison

Table I.1 Action Research Comparison

	<i>Action Research</i>	<i>Applied Research/Consulting</i>	<i>Conventional Research</i>
<i>Purpose</i>	To understand and improve.	To improve.	To understand.
<i>Basic (power) orientation</i>	Researching 'with'.	Researching 'for'.	Researching 'on'.
<i>Researcher</i>	Embedded with the research. Problem co-definer, lead research co-designer, lead research co-implementer.	Invited expert who knows what good outcomes should look like and helps to move situation toward them.	External to the context. Problem definer, research designer, research implementer.
<i>Stakeholders</i>	Problem co-definers, research co-designers, research co-implementers.	Clients of the research, sources of data.	Subjects of the research; sources of information; samples for testing conclusions.
<i>Time</i>	Focus on the here and now with reflection on past issues to influence future designs. Cyclical.	Match situation to known other situations to find existing techniques to change for the better. Sequential.	Either past focused or emphasizing 'control' comparison, isolation of key variables or forces at work. Unimportant, knowledge is 'timeless'.
<i>Evidence</i>	Experiential, partial, emergent, dialogic, intuitive. Qualitative and quantitative.	Both qualitative and quantitative.	Both quantitative and qualitative data.
<i>Learning process</i>	Learning and dissemination integrated into the research process; questions about the status quo made possible; nested systems made visible. Iterative.	Inquiry modes to define stakeholder problem and then match problem to existing intervention models or new combinations thereof. Linear.	Knowledge development with researchers distant from the phenomena. Dissemination efforts passive and after the fact.
<i>Strengths</i>	Complex contexts where what to do 'best' is a subject of discussion and negotiation; systems activity is coordinated inside political-pragmatic realities. Seeks to localize unique practices.	Expert diagnosis, aiming at contractual arrangement with defined scope of work. Seeks to deploy 'best practices'.	Understands simple and complicated contexts by weighting variables or forces into deterministic sets, seeks generalizability.
<i>Weaknesses</i>	Many positive outcomes cannot be easily summarized quantitatively. By those not familiar with action research it can appear lacking in concern for objectivity.	Efficiency orientation may conceive of new situations as versions of known prior ones, ignoring new knowledge creation opportunities. Delivering on a pre-determined contract can block emergent processes.	Commitment to objectivity standards of the natural sciences render it often as armchair speculation, i.e. inactionable and potentially misleading.
<i>Benefits</i>	The work belongs to those involved. Builds problem-solving and learning competencies in groups, organizations, communities.	Returns value to those who pay.	Serves an academic community. May exploit the participants as objects of research.
<i>Action outcomes</i>	Action is coordinated as a seamless part of the research design. Workshops, experiments, new practices, new learning, new forms of knowledge/practice, sometimes also using peer review.	Quick wins (may be short-term only wins); creates stakeholder dependence, usually requires follow up for sustainable action.	Publication or communication of new information to disciplinary colleagues through peer reviewed journals.

Does action research complement or clash with conventional social science?

While conventional inquiry methods have not kept pace with our changing world, this Handbook illustrates how the action research repertoire already brings tremendous value in responding to the big issues of our time. There is yet plenty of room for more work and partnership with our conventionally trained colleagues.

'Conventional science', as sketched in Table I.1, suggests post-Cartesian, objectivist descriptions of the world. Dualism abounds: knowledge is presumed to be pitted against practice, mind separated from heart, reflection from action, expert from lay person, self from other, etc. These dualisms – the result of the 'Cartesian Catastrophe' – are not mere philosophizing. Kant challenged us to Enlightenment's 'sapere aude!' (daring to know!), but the conduct of inquiry devolved to Bacon's call to conquer nature. Dualistic formulas (e.g. mind versus nature), abetted by ever more powerful technical know-how, have yielded objectivist practices that display a conquering attitude. Action researchers, who orient with a different set of assumptions, bring a more participative, democratic, and practical response to the issues of our time. We do this not to be nice, or politically correct, but because the nature of life, power, structural exclusion, and inter-generational injustice demands it.

Impossibly complex physics manage to influence popular imagination and the conduct of inquiry and its application. If, after Newton, philosophers and social engineers conceived a clockwork universe of particles that acted as billiard balls, it was natural that, say, in my field of management, individuals came to be treated as particles – or perhaps the metaphor here is cogs in a big machine to be fitted into vast bureaucratic systems. Ignoring that the world is emergent and interactive, the result was fragmentation throughout. Fragmentation has also marred the practice of inquiry, with central stakeholders treated as obstructions to objective insights. Thus, we have conventional health care research that excludes patients, and conventional education research that excludes students. In truth, fragmentations and dualisms are mere social constructions, but they have taken on a life of their own. Today we grapple with the implications of quantum physics and subatomic swirl. It is now timely to conceive of coordination of participative inquiry and action through webs of collaboration – the basic orientation of action research – rather than heavy-handed social engineering – as we seek sustainable outcomes for all. The term 'conventional science' is used throughout this text in contrast to the participative inquiry and emergent cooperation of action research.

Action research also helps respond to the conventional disconnect between mainstream scholarship and teaching/practice. Action researchers represent the possibility of re-enchanting knowledge creation for a flourishing world. We are called to engage with, rather than merely understand, the unprecedented and compounding challenges that surround us, such as poverty, inequality, climate change, globalization, the ethical use of technology, the information technology revolution, and fundamentalism of all types. Action researchers are concerned with the conduct and *application* of research but, unlike applied researchers, we engage stakeholders in defining problems, planning and doing research, interpreting results, designing actions, and evaluating outcomes. We step beyond applied research into the democratization of research processes, program design, implementation strategies, and evaluation.

When good action research happens, stakeholders within a system learn that they can inquire rigorously into the world. We learn that we don't need experts to do it *for us* (though scholarly training can be quite helpful). As consciousness of our planetary problems rises, and we understand more clearly how global challenges are anchored in local problems, and vice-versa, it is better to have *more citizens capable of developing practical knowledge*. And conventional scholars who long for more relevance for their work may find it by working with action researchers.

Action research, then, takes its place within a diverse ecology of inquiry. We certainly need 'conventional science' for its ability to tease out causal relationships and refine existing theories, as if reality were *also* objectifiable. Action research, then, takes its place within a diverse ecology of inquiry. Ecologists warn us against monocultures because resilience and sustainability are a product of diversity. If knowledge creators of all species could learn to self-organize we might effectively nudge complex adaptive systems in better – rather than worse – directions. Ecologists warn us against monocultures because resilience and sustainability are a product of diversity.

There are so many kinds of action research. Why the proliferation?

The present state of the world is such that an action-oriented, participative, experimental approach to knowledge creation is highly desirable. The very nature of our global problems – the intractable, complex, politicized, nonlinear problems – is ever morphing. Central to action research is our experimenting with new ways of working within the complexity in any knowledge-production situation. A first glance at action research reveals an alphabet soup of practices (the recent *SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research* represents these well). Many of us work as academics and consultants and action researchers, and we therefore mix practices to match situations. Let's think of action researchers as constituting a movement that is committed to alternative models for the creation of transformational knowledge. Acronyms abound, representing a formalization of experiments across multiple contexts: participatory action research (PAR); feminist participatory action research (FPAR); rural participatory research (RPR); and critical participatory action research (CPAR), to name but a few. Others await you in the pages of this Handbook. Beyond mere territoriality, the proliferation of action research practices manifests the fundamental values and innovations that constitute our evolving community.

I often find the metaphor of family appropriate for describing the community of action researchers: how we come together, partner, sometimes separate, and develop practices in response to a situation that together constitutes an alternative paradigm of transformational knowledge creation. Like all families, we may compete for status. We may disagree and fall out. We may (more embarrassingly) not recognize a distant relative. It is my hope (as a middle sister, perhaps, in the large family of action researchers) that with renewed vigor, more of us may meet, greet, and work together more frequently.

How does action research relate to other liberation efforts?

Action researchers have much in common with pragmatist critique (e.g. the Frankfurt School) and with social action movements (e.g. feminisms and liberation movements of all stripes). In overcoming another salient dualism, that of reflection and action, action researchers walk a middle path *between* the former's reflective observation and the latter's engaged activism. Ours is too often a misunderstood and even maligned position. Habermas, the leading voice of the Frankfurt school, warns scholars away from our type of practice; engaged activists warn

against theory generation. While we recognize that theory must be addressed in its own terms, we also know that endless talk about theory *divorced from practice* is the result of the inability to achieve the alchemy of reflection and action. So while our theoretical groundings are informed by the postmodernist deconstructing of classical theorizing, which privileged the objective observer with his ostensibly value-free language and logical deduction/generalization, we also know that criticism is not enough. We know ourselves as creative beings; we innovate beyond current conditions with varying degrees of awareness and success, toward ways of living that are somehow better for more of us. This Handbook is intended to support that innovation.

It is both exciting and useful to wonder what will be different when the action research orientation to knowledge creation becomes sustainably 'mainstream'. How would knowledge-creation enterprises and policymaking work in this new world? How would our organizations, stock markets, and governments operate? How would the G-8 function, the UN? Might the institutional, community and ecological decay we have seen in this lifetime be addressed, constructively, collaboratively? I invite you to think in those terms as you move into the Handbook.

What is the intellectual-practice lineage of action research?

The term 'action research' was coined by John Collier. Today it is common to speak of two origins of action research. They are, however, quite intertwined. One account starts with Kurt Lewin, rooted in efforts to address human complicity in the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust. Father of social psychology, Lewin stumbled, through collaboration, into bringing observers (e.g. research facilitators) and research subjects (e.g. therapeutic groups) together to share, understand, and *create new patterns* of interaction. The other account centers on the collaboration of Orlando Fals Borda (in Columbia) working with Anis Rahman (in Bangladesh), where action research went hand-in-hand with popular liberation movements. Since the 1970s, explicit concern with social liberation has been a central component of all action research. Without this emancipatory concern action research is devitalized to a set of uncritical techniques.

I find it encouraging to know that action research can trace its core orientation back to Aristotle, whose notions of multiple ways of knowing included what we might call the primacy of the practical (*techne*) and cultivation of cycles of action and reflection (*praxis*). Knowing includes the heart. The heart–mind dualism of the rational-scientific age did not infect Aristotle.

Classical Greek insistence that knowledge moves toward wisdom and ethical action (*phronesis*) would have been perfectly familiar to Aristotle. As the first rediscovery of Aristotle ushered in the European Renaissance, so again may the recognition that the action researchers orientation to knowledge seeks to integrate the true, the good, and the beautiful and leads to integrating knowledge types beyond current conventional formulations.

If the dualisms that warp Western post-Enlightenment inquiry were never sundered in the foundational work of Aristotle, the same holds true for Lao Tzu and Confucius (the Asian equivalents of Socrates and Aristotle?), and Buddha (the Asian equivalent of Plato?) whose ideas reverberate, indeed are strongly resurgent, in contemporary Asian thought (e.g. the Kyoto School). And while these remain too little known among action researchers, the notable uptake of the Asian concept/practice of mindfulness, which shapes especially many of the Skills chapters, is especially auspicious as we allow concerns for harmony to influence our work. Interestingly, the Chinese character for mind is one and the same as the character for heart: 心. Perhaps the heart–mind in action researchers' work can help engender collaborations that can yet save us. For it certainly seems that we live amid techno-rational systems and infrastructure increasingly at odds with the sustainable patterns of the natural world (be it our reliance on fossil fuels to the flourishing of fundamentalisms). The result of seeking short-term security and well-being for a minority is proving unsustainable for us as interconnected communities in the Global Village.

Appreciating epistemological diversity

Like many of my colleagues, I came to action research because it offered a way of creating knowledge that made sense to me. Action research practices did not ask me to abandon what I considered crucial to knowledge creation: relationships, cultivation of skillful practice, democratic/feminist values, engagement with big issues, delight in spending time with other spirited activists of backgrounds ranging from anthropologists to philosophers, human care providers to change agents of all stripes. Under the 'big tent' of action research, I noticed a shared interest in moving human institutions beyond pervasive inequality, inequity, and patriarchal injustice; with a commitment to bringing skillful practice, intellectual integrity, and empirical evidence to that action.

I took inspiration from knowledge generated in practice that successfully addresses itself to power inequalities. Proto-action researchers inspired me, such as Ignaz Semmelweis, Donald Henderson, and Joanna Macy. Semmelweis (1818–1865) taught me that revolution in

practice, even if cognitively simple, may be far from simple to implement. He recognized that maternal mortality was three times higher in doctors' wards than in midwives' wards; unlike his fellow physicians, however, he was open to learning with the midwives. His recommendation was that doctors wash their hands between patients. Simple! But he was met with vehement defensiveness. Semmelweis died in an asylum, still relatively young (perhaps a reminder to keep aspirations lofty and expectations low).

In the 1970s, Donald Henderson led the WHO team that eradicated smallpox. The vaccine predated the eradication by over a century but had failed in the field. Henderson however brought skill with cultivating collaborative networks, and was able to accord local knowledge the same weight as the original scientific advances in immunology. Combining insight and artistry, leadership and participation, he thus led in realizing a cure the world over.

Joanna Macy has connected systems thinking, spirituality, and ecology, with great skill in inspiring people with innovative practices that open hearts and minds (there is no separation). Her integration of the personal with the professional felt very important.

These examples remind us that impactful inquiry is so much more than cognitive insight. Since we published the first *Handbook of Action Research*, many action researchers have seen the value of what Heron and Reason called 'extended epistemology', which calls us to go beyond privileging cognitive propositions to acknowledge the importance of experience, artistry, intuition and practical contribution. In a similar vein of expanding the strictures of what counts as important in inquiry, we have the potency of Torbert's concept of first, second, and third person action research/practice. The value of these frameworks is in acknowledging the equal legitimacy of multiple epistemological claims for what they offer in practical contribution to self and other. When action researchers think of epistemology we understand the impoverishment of having *only* the objective voice of conventional social science. We are called to consider how multiple epistemological voices can be better integrated to serve our inquiry and our co-inquirers.

What are the core characteristics and principles of action research?

All knowledge is political in the sense that as shapers of discourse we exercise agency in our efforts to do and describe action research. This applies acutely to the shaping of discourse on what constitutes quality. Far too rarely is the purpose of knowledge even debated. Because what is taken for granted does not have to explain itself, it just 'is', action researchers are called to influence the assumptions but perhaps more importantly to experiment with, create, and offer helpful practices around knowledge creation.

Key characteristics, originally articulated with Peter Reason for this Handbook's first edition, have withstood the test of time. Action research is emergent and developmental. It concerns practical issues and human flourishing. Its modality is primarily participative and democratic, working with participants and toward knowledge in action.

In articulating principles of contemporary action research, a starting point is that human beings find ourselves without easily defined boundaries as, experientially, we are never alone. From a physical standpoint, we are constantly metabolizing resources (air, water) in relationship with the world that is apparently, though not materially, outside ourselves. So too we live in relationship with social, emotional, cognitive, historical resources. Complex, intractable, nonlinear problems (climate change, structural inequality, etc.) are in part created by treating people as atoms, as billiard balls, as if their subjectivity doesn't matter, as if the 'system' has nothing to do with our intersubjectivity. Honoring plural subjectivity has been central to the Western Pragmatist tradition of James and Dewey (and the Asian tradition where it's referred to as 'no (separate) self'). We may state a first principle of contemporary action research then *that the self is relational*.

We are a species graced with capacity for partnership and collaboration (along with easily awakened tendencies to dominate). Over the centuries, our human systems have slowly supported collaboration on a wide scale (e.g. democracy and liberation movements). Spectacles that celebrate domination have been relegated to the margins of the civilized world (though atrocities remain worryingly frequent). In truth, institutionalizing collaborative structures remains difficult to achieve because we have inherited both psychological and cultural habits that impede collaboration, especially where there is resource scarcity. Our habit patterns are combinations of social structure (injustice, exclusion) and individual bias (black and white thinking, short-term tribal logic, fear). So much of our work as action researchers is, therefore, to acknowledge the systems of interconnection we live within, and how they have

operated over time, then see how to remove trenchant obstacles to collaboration. Seeing what is 'out there', we so often turn to find that it is also 'in here'. Seeing independences in systems allows us to appreciate the deeper patterns at play, and to consider how we might do things differently, over time. Appreciating the temporal quality of our inquiry and its embeddedness in systems reminds us to be humble, yet persevering. We may state the second principle of contemporary action research that our *systems seek wholeness over time*, moving beyond obsolete fragmentation.

And what is it all for? Action researchers care about social action that is practical and emancipatory. Finding ourselves in relationship within complex emergent systems, we seek to make a positive difference, to minimize suffering, to work toward justice, to muddle through. Practical knowing offers a culmination of knowing that emerges when we balance science and artistry. We bring our knowing to fruition as a contribution for self and others. A third principle of contemporary action research is *the primacy of practical contribution*.

Table I.2 offers these characteristics and principles.

Table I.2 Characteristics and Principles of Action Research

Principles	Characteristics
The self is relational.	Participative. Democratic. Knowledge in action.
Systems seek wholeness.	Emergent. Developmental.
The primacy of the practical.	Practical issues concerning our flourishing

How do we know when we are doing good action research?

The following seven criteria are the product of a 'collogue' among editors of *Action Research* journal on what constitutes 'quality in action research'. We developed these from the original formulation of quality choice points in the Handbook's second edition.

1. Quality requires articulation of objectives. The extent to which the action research explicitly addresses its objectives.

 2. Quality requires partnership and participation. The extent to and means by which the action research reflects or enacts participative values and concern for the relational component of research. By the extent of participation, we are referring to a continuum from consultation with stakeholders to stakeholders as full co-researchers.

 3. Quality requires contribution to action research theory–practice. The extent to which the action research builds on (creates explicit links with) or contributes to a wider body of practice knowledge and/or theory, that it contributes to the action research literature.

 4. Quality requires appropriate methods and process. The extent to which the action research process and related methods are clearly articulated and illustrated. By illustrated we mean that empirical papers 'show' and not just 'tell' about process and outcomes by including analysis of data that includes the voices of participants in the research.

 5. Quality requires actionability. The extent to which the action research provides new ideas that guide action in response to need.

 6. Quality requires reflexivity. The extent to which self-location as a change agent is acknowledged. By self-location we mean that authors take a personal, involved, and self-critical stance as reflected in clarity about their role in the action research process, clarity about the context in which the research takes place, and clarity about what led to their involvement in this research.

 7. Quality requires significance. The extent to which the insights of the action research are significant in content and process. By significant we mean having meaning and relevance beyond their immediate context in support of the flourishing of persons, communities, and the wider ecology.
-

Why a third edition *Handbook of Action Research*?

Action research's 'arrival' is celebrated in this volume as we name and acknowledge our contributions and seek to complement the dominant conventional forms of research. Earlier editions of the Handbook (and the related journal of *Action Research*) ongoingly shape discussion and practice in constructive ways. In truth they are more similar to volumes than to editions because most content is new or else completely revised. We are, after all, an emergent and responsive field, always adaptively learning.

For me, the Handbook's first edition managed to convene the many actors in the global field of action research. We began to see ourselves, for the first time, as a community. The second edition turned the spotlight on action research quality, giving more attention to research rigor and learning from each other. This volume, the third, aims to address the relationship between action research and conventional social research, and to define it as complementary rather than competitive. It does so by updating and refreshing practical action research approaches (Practices), presenting and celebrating successes that could only be realized through action research (Exemplars), articulating philosophical underpinnings (Groundings), and discussing some of the crucial competencies of an action researcher (Skills). We include familiar and new voices. You will find more diversity of geography and ethnicity represented. Some topics previously untreated, such as working with the complexities of sexuality to the challenge and promise of new media, have become more urgent now. Generally then this volume brings refreshment and expansion to the global action research community. More detailed chapter introductions will come in the section introductions.

Striking to me is to see a new generation articulate, update, and expand familiar Practices. Exemplars tell of impactful work that has happened over decades. The Skills section especially is much expanded over previous volumes. This is as it should be as there is so often a significant gap between intellectual self-knowledge and the ability to take skillful, timely action. Intellectual analysis and description only go so far in pointing the way. Skillful action research calls for the alchemical work of opening the heart and understanding complex systems, for bringing awareness to the role of facilitation and for working with power, for taking qualitative and quantitative skills of interviewing and data collection, and then mobilizing these in a way that offers a positive contribution. It is my hope that ongoing attention to capacity- and skills-building for the current and future generations of action researchers meets some of the high demands we place on ourselves and signals the sophisticated nature of our work.

How is the Handbook organized?

There are four Parts in the Handbook that follows: Practices, Exemplars, Groundings, and Skills. We open with Practices, to signal appreciation for what we accomplish with others as we 'walk the talk' in our work.

Each Part is introduced with an essay by the colleagues who partnered with me as section editor. Thank you to Alfredo Ortiz Aragón and Tere Castillo-Burguete, who helped edit Practices. Thank you to Svante Lifvergren and Kent Glenzer, who helped edit Exemplars. Thank you to Dusty Embury, who helped edit Skills. I edited Groundings.

What's next?

In an age of social media and online interactivity the future will simply emerge, repeatedly. No doubt, our work will be modified and improved. To this end, we created the website www.actionresearchplus.com as a companion to this Handbook: all are welcome to participate, no matter what stage of the action research journey you find yourself in. I hope that crowdsourcing and digital media may provide the action research community with useful tools and innovative ways of working well beyond this static text.

Acknowledgement

A bow of appreciation to all action researchers who have created the path we walk on. I am especially grateful for the inspiration I received from my mentors, the pathmakers Bill Torbert, Peter Reason, and Peter Senge. Thank you also to Bjørn Gustavsen, whose work at a distance illustrated what was possible in large networks of change.

For the preparation of this Handbook I am grateful especially to my colleagues on the board of the *Action Research* journal with whom a decade and more of work together shapes my thinking, teaching, and practice of action research. Thank you Alfredo Ortiz, Annabel D'Souza Sekar, Davydd Greenwood, Dusty Embury, Hok Bun Ku, Karim Aly Kassam, Kent Glenzer, Mary Brydon-Miller, Patricia Gaya, Svante Lifvergren, Tere Castillo, and Victor Friedman.

Dedication

The book is dedicated to my daughter and the next generation of action researchers who inherit, along with our impossible mess, some inspiration for inquiring into and designing a better way of living and working together, a way more worthy of our aspiration. May this Handbook inspire new capacity.

Hilary Bradbury, Portland, OR

10.4135/9781473921290.n1