Social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946) believed that social research was often distant from or unrelated to practical issues. Researchers identified problems and published their articles, yet people’s situations did not change. To bridge the gap between research and application, Lewin proposed action research, which combines two goals in a single study: the advancement of knowledge and the improvement of a local situation. These two objectives can be accomplished, Lewin maintained, through the direct involvement of the potential users of the information in the research process. Instead of the researcher doing a study and giving the results to a group or organization, the researcher assists the group in doing its own research. For the research process, this represents a major shift in authority, from the researcher to the group. Because of the direct involvement of potential users, the approach is sometimes called participatory research, participatory action research, or collaborative research.

Action research is not a fancy name for applied social research. Action research rejects the separation of basic and applied studies, in the belief that both the advancement of knowledge and practical application can be achieved within a single collaborative project. It is the partnership with the end users of the information that is its essence. If the end users have not been involved in formulating the research questions and collecting and analyzing the data, then the activity is not action research, no matter how much the investigator is socially concerned and inclined toward application. For example, if a campaign to reduce teenage smoking is both applied and socially conscious, but the researcher has not collaborated with teenagers at all stages of the campaign, it is not action research.

Action research is value driven, rather than value neutral, in that it has the explicit goal of improving the situation of the participants. It includes implementation strategies (how the knowledge gained will be applied) within the initial design, rather than as an afterthought. A good test of the success of action research is whether the participants are better off after the research than they were before it. A particular action research study will involve a mix of advancing knowledge and improving a local situation in various proportions. Sometimes the desire to find new knowledge predominates, and at other times the need to solve a pressing problem, but the goal in action research is to combine the twin goals in a single project.

Trade-offs

As full partners in the research, laypeople make important decisions, such as the wording of questions in a survey, who is to be interviewed, and how the results are to be analyzed, probably using frequencies and percentages that they understand. Although this collaboration can be frustrating to a researcher who loses control over the process, it can also be rewarding as local people take ownership of the project; contribute their ideas, talents, and knowledge of local conditions; and become advocates for the survey. This involvement helps ensure that the results will not be filed and forgotten as happens in so many surveys.

Self-survey

The research technique most closely associated with action research is the self-survey. Residents of a community perceive a problem and approach a researcher for assistance. In conventional social science, the researcher may undertake a survey to learn the nature and extent of the problem and then write a report for the group. In action research, the researcher helps the community do a self-survey, providing assistance at all stages of the research process: helping the group to clarify its goals (what it wants to find out), decide on the method, and develop a list of questions to be asked and training people to collect, tabulate, and interpret the data.

Action research requires a shift in roles. The researcher gives up authority to become a collaborator and consultant. Local residents no longer are passive recipients (subjects) of the research process; they become active participants. The researcher remains involved in the study, contributing the best available social science knowledge, suggesting ways to make the questions clear and meaningful, seeing that the interview is not overly long or intrusive, perhaps putting the answers into a multiple-choice format that will be easy to score (laypeople have difficulty tabulating and interpreting answers to open-ended questions), and ensuring that ethical guidelines are followed. There are no passive roles in action research; it is an evolving collaborative process.

Other Techniques

Action research is not limited to surveys or interview studies; it can involve other techniques. As an example, field experiments can be used to see if there is dis-
crimination in apartment rentals. Couples of different ethnic backgrounds—dressed in similar clothing, identifying themselves in the same way (for example, as university students or government employees)—visit buildings with vacancy listings seeking to rent an apartment.

Local residents could be involved in a content analysis of television programs or in counting trace measures, as in systematically tabulating the amount of litter or graffiti in a neighborhood. People who have spent several weeks counting discarded beverage containers will never look at litter the same way again. They are also more likely to become advocates for change, for example, requesting signs to discourage littering, additional city waste receptacles, more frequent emptying of filled receptacles, heavier fines for littering, and recycling fees for beverage containers.

Box 14–1 summarizes the potential goals and disadvantages of action research. There are many possible gains along with daunting challenges. Some action researchers mention the need for a trade-off between rigor and relevance—a choice between doing methodologically sound standardized research under controlled conditions versus doing less-tight, less-controlled research in the flux of the outside world. The trade-off between rigor and clients’ involvement is a major dilemma in action research. Rigor requires control over the study by the researcher, but this control will inevitably reduce clients’ involvement (Hakel, Sorcher, Beer, & Moses, 1982).

Steps in Action Research

Because it is such a fluid and dynamic approach, with its methods developed from ongoing interaction with the users of the information, it is easier to describe action research in the context of an actual study, rather than in the abstract. Here, we use a common problem on a university campus—complaints of noise in a residence hall.

Some students desire quiet for study while others want to play their stereos. The key people in this example are Kendra and Bill, students in a research methods class who want to make this a term project, and a committee of residents, representing different sides on the noise issue (i.e., some are bothered by the noise while others are not).

1. Kendra and Bill meet with the committee to discuss noise issues and decide what information is needed.

2. On the basis of this discussion, they and the committee decide to undertake a survey to learn the degree to which the residents are bothered by noise. The study sample should be selected so as to obtain a representative view of residents’ opinions, not simply the opinions of students who have made formal complaints. The survey could be done by door-to-door interviews, telephone, mail, or e-mail. To increase personal contact, the decision is made to use door-to-door interviews with a random sample of 50 residents.

BOX 14–1. Goals and Challenges in Action Research

Goals

Reduce the gap between research and application.
Increase involvement of local people in an issue.
Increase the relevance and direct utility of behavioral research.
Develop a constituency for change.
Reduce the distance between researchers and the public.
Train local people in behavioral research, so they will be less dependent on outside experts in the future.
Base changes on research rather than guesses.
Test theories of human behavior in the outside world.
Provide feedback to researchers on the utility of their work.
Employ local knowledge and skills.
Lower costs by having local people conduct interviews and tabulate data.
Teach researchers how to conduct studies in fluid situations in which all the variables cannot be specified in advance.

Challenges

Takes more time. Consultation can be a tedious process. Training local residents to collect data requires additional effort.
More stressful. Developing a consensus may be difficult in the face of deep-seated disagreements or misunderstandings.
Loss of control. Local residents make the decisions and can ignore the researcher’s recommendations.
More fluid. Local people can decide to alter the procedure or drop out midway through the study.
Loss in standardization. Poorly trained interviewers may not follow guidelines or change questions.
More difficult to publish findings in view of the lack of standardization and fluidity.
Problems in obtaining human subjects approval from Institutional Review Board. When local people make the decisions, it is difficult to specify the procedures in advance.

3. In addition, the group decides to make actual counts of loud noises in the hallways over a two-week period.
4. The next task is to divide up the tasks, assign roles, and develop a schedule and deadlines for the research.
   a. With the help of Bill and Kendra, the committee drafts a list of interview questions. These questions are then pretested in a small pilot study in another residence hall.
   b. The committee also makes a check sheet for recording loud noises. Two observers working independently try this sheet out in the corridors of another residence hall. The agreement between the two observers’ ratings is checked.
5. After the two instruments (the interview questions and the noise check sheet) have been found to be satisfactory, Kendra and Bill train the students who will use them.

6. The committee collects the data. Kendra and Bill are available to provide assistance.

7. Kendra and Bill assist the group in tabulating the data.

8. The committee meets with Kendra and Bill to discuss the results and prepare a summary report to be distributed to all the residents.

9. The report is placed on the agenda of the monthly meeting of the residence hall. There is now factual information on loud noises, as well as residents’ opinions. Kendra and Bill are present at the meeting to answer any questions about the research and help facilitate a discussion of solutions.

10. In a month or two, Kendra and Bill check back with the committee to find out what action has been taken. This step, feedback to the researchers, is necessary to improve the practice of action research.

11. Bill and Kendra report on the study in class, receiving input from fellow students and the instructor.

**Why Action Research Is Different**

This sequence of steps represents a significant departure from those in conventional research, in which the researcher sets the problem, chooses the methods and instruments, collects and analyzes the data, and writes the report. In the preceding example, the committee did all these things, with the assistance of Kendra and Bill. For the research community, action research is not business as usual but a different type of business. The involvement of the users of the information is likely to alter all steps in the research process, from the methods used to how the data are analyzed and reported. There is no point in using complex statistics that the hall residents will not understand. Such statistics will turn them off to the entire report and discourage them from undertaking future studies on their own. Action research also takes more time than conventional research. Bill and Kendra could have done an e-mail survey in less time and with more standardization. The key question is whether the time and effort invested in consultation and training the residents will promote the discussion and utilization of the survey results and, in this way, reduce the gap between research and application.

From the standpoint of mainstream social science, a major deficiency of action research is the lack of standardization and consistency. With local people serving as full partners in the research, each study becomes unique in terms of participants and method. The questionnaire on noise complaints described in the preceding example would probably never be used again in its original form. A new committee of dormitory residents would probably choose different items and may prefer a shorter, faster e-mail survey. Because of this lack of standardization, action research consists largely of case studies that are difficult to summarize and develop into a body of theory. Its practitioners believe that these disadvantages are outweighed by the possibility of doing research that will be relevant and used by community groups.

Action research has had more influence in applied fields, such as adult education and organizational development, than in mainstream social psychology and sociology. There are also spin-offs of action research, as in *empowerment evaluation*, in which a local group or organization undertakes a self-evaluation with the assistance of a behavioral science consultant. Similar to action research, empowerment evaluation is value driven and designed to help people help themselves and improve their programs using self-evaluation and reflection. Again, there is the need to trade off technical rigor against benefits to the participants (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996).

Action research merges roles and procedures that more academic research keeps separate, such as that between the researcher and subjects, fact gathering and improvement, and evaluation and change. In action research, the self-evaluation of a situation is intended to empower local residents, which is a goal of the study as well as the means.

**Tower or Swamp?**

Psychologist Donald Schon (1983), best known for his work in organizational development, asked whether researchers should remain on the hard, high ground of rigorous research, doing well-controlled studies with standardized methods, or descend to the swamp to deal with the most important and pressing problems that require a trade-off in technical rigor. Swamps are uncomfortable places—sticky and full of unknown creatures (Farbstein & Kantrowitz, 1990). Fortunately, the choice between tower and swamp as places to do research is not irrevocable or permanent. Botany and geology provide ample precedents of university researchers making scheduled trips to swamps, forests, and polar regions to collect samples that they bring back to university laboratories for analysis. Gathering data in the swamp is messy, but analyzing it in the laboratory follows standardized procedures. Researchers should adopt the model and methods that suit the problem. There are times for laboratory experiments and times for participatory studies designed with community groups to solve practical problems. As we have shown, there are advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

**Summary**

Action research was developed to bridge the gap between research and application. At its core is the intense involvement of the end users of the information in all stages of the research. Action research is value driven, rather than value neutral, and requires a trade-off between scientific rigor and relevance to the participants’ needs. The technique most closely associated with action research is the self-survey.
References


Further Reading


from

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A Practical Guide to Behavioral Research (5th edition)
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