Emerging Action Research Traditions: Rigor in Practice

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ABSTRACT

The authors argue here that contemporary use of action research shares the exploratory, inductive nature of many qualitative research approaches—no matter the type of data collected—because the type of research problems studied are set in complex, dynamic, rapidly changing contexts and because action research is undertaken to support social and organizational change that requires buy-in from many stakeholders affected by the research problem. Action research serves as a critique and alternative to more traditional views of social science. In this article, the authors first describe action research as defined 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. By using the example of an innovative action research approach to doctoral research, the authors illustrate the context-rich, exploratory nature of action research that both generates knowledge for and in change, and developmentally engages collaborating researchers and participants. They conclude with reflections on criteria for rigor and relevance in action research in today’s post-modern, complex world.

KEYWORDS
Action Research, Action Science, CDAI, Rigor

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 article offers a new perspective on validity in action research.

The Lewinian Tradition

Kurt Lewin (1946)—when inquiring into complex social issues in his era—concluded that research methods needed for social management 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

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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 change 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. See Figure 1. 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 saw the benefit of collaborative reflection and dialogue. What was particularly telling in one action research initiative was the effect of the evaluation meetings held 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

Figure 1. Lewin’s action research cycle
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