

## Frequently Asked Questions about Action Research

### What is action research?

Action research is a research paradigm which allows you to develop knowledge or understanding as part of practice. It allows research to be done in situations where other research methods may be difficult to use. For instance, you may find it useful if...

you must remain flexible

or you wish to involve the people in the system being researched

or you wish to bring about change at the same time

or the situation is too ambiguous to frame a precise research question.

or any combination of the preceding conditions.

In short, action research is a useful way of doing research if you are a practitioner who wishes to improve your understanding of your practice. Its other common use is by activists who wish to engage the clients as co-researchers. It can also be used for preliminary or pilot research before using some other research approach. This is less common, but potentially very useful.

More formally described, action research is a research paradigm: a family of research methods united by a certain set of principles and a certain style. Examples of other research paradigms are experimental (including quasi-experimental), and ethnographic. And there are others. There are many varieties of action research within the paradigm, at least as the term "action research" is used here. Other views may differ.

As its name implies, action research is intended to achieve both action and research. It is suited to situations where you wish to bring about action in the form of change, and at the same time develop an understanding which informs the change and is an addition to what is known.

Action research is typically cyclic. The later cycles are used to challenge and refine the results of the earlier cycles. In most of its forms it also tends to be qualitative, and participative. Some would say that neither of these is strictly necessary. Some insist, strongly, on high participation as a necessary feature. Some have defined publication of results as a defining characteristic.

Action research is also critically reflective. The researchers (and probably clients acting as co-researchers) regularly and systematically critique what they are doing. They refine the questions they are asking and the methods they are using and the understanding and subsequent action plans they are developing.

Action research commonly proceeds like this. The researcher, again often involving clients as co-researchers, plans the first or next step. This is then carried out.

Researchers meet to recollect and critique their experience. In the light of this, they decide what to do for the next step: what information do they need or what outcome to pursue, and what method to use.

In short, action research alternates between action and critical reflection. The reflection consists first of analysing what has already happened in previous steps, and then of planning what next step to take.

**Is action research intended as a substitute for experimental or quasi-experimental research?**

Emphatically not. Different research paradigms serve different purposes. It may with benefit be used in some situations where quasi-experimental designs are presently used. But there are other situations where experimentation or quasi-experimentation may be far better suited.

For instance, you may wish to find out about a few variables, and the causal relationships between them. If so, experimental or quasi-experimental research will serve you much better than action research. Alternatively, you may wish to explore some organisation or group or culture in depth, and with low impact. For this, you may do better to use ethnographic or other qualitative methods.

Action research methods are most likely to be appropriate when you do not know where to start, and do not have a lot of time to invest in the study. It is useful for exploratory research, where you do not yet have a very precise research question.

But it is most valuable when you have to be responsive to the changing demands of a situation. For example, this may be when you wish to build a research component into some change program or the like. For this reason it can also be used for evaluation of an ongoing program.

Good research, it can be argued, is research which uses a methodology which fits the situation and the goals you are pursuing. Sometimes, that is action research. Sometimes it is something else.

## **What is the relationship of action research to science?**

By some definitions action research is science. By other definitions it complements science.

Those who think it is science recognise that it shares with other approaches a pursuit of understanding. It values scepticism and empiricism. That is, in pursuing knowledge it strives vigorously to disconfirm present views, and it uses evidence to do that.

If science is systematic and sceptical empiricism, then action research is scientific.

Those who think it is not science point to a number of ways in which it differs from some other scientific paradigms. For example, action research:

does not usually provide causal explanations of what is studied

usually does not attempt to answer questions which are as precise as those addressed by e.g. experimental research

mostly uses qualitative data

is done by researchers who do not make the same effort to distance themselves from what they are researching; in fact, they often set out to build close relationships with the people within the system studied

uses a research process which, rather than being standardised, is modified on the run in response to what happens

does not necessarily seek explanations at a more specific level than the phenomena it is dealing with -- that is, it tends not to be "reductionist".

In addition, action research is often regarded as giving answers which are specific to the particular situation, and which cannot be generalised to other situations. This is partly true, but a more complex issue than this criticism recognises. It can be said that the generalisation which experimental science provides is difficult to relate to social situations. I believe its value has therefore been overstated by those who criticise action research for its lack of generalisation.

Because of the differences between experimental science and action research, some would not regard action research as sufficiently rigorous to be regarded as science. In reply it can be said that this depends upon particular definitions of rigour.

In any event, action research can provide a useful contribution to knowledge, both in its own right and as a complement to more traditional approaches to research. It can provide answers to fuzzy and general questions. It can provide more "realistic" explanations. If

necessary, more traditional methods can then be used to develop causal explanations, and to check how well the explanations can be generalised to other situations.

Further, action research is designed to allow simultaneous change and understanding. You could say that

action research = action + research

It allows for systematic understanding to arise from activities which are oriented towards change. It has a capacity to respond to the demands of the informants and the situation in a way which most other paradigms can not.

### **What is the difference between action research and consulting, or action research and other professional practice? Am I already doing action research?**

It is true that many practitioners, on first hearing about action research, reply: "I am already doing that."

It is true that action research and some forms of practice are in some ways similar. Both are often directed towards the achievement of change. Both are qualitative and often participative. Both tend to be flexible and cyclic. In both instances, there is a desire to base planned changes in the situation on understanding, and to derive that understanding from evidence.

Because of these and other similarities, less formal approaches to action research may be very similar to some forms of practice.

However, most forms of action research are more deliberate in their pursuit of understanding. Most importantly, frequent critical reflection is a formal and central part of most action research. Most practice is much less reflective than action research. Most practice, if it does use reflection, is neither as deliberate nor as critical in its use.

There are other processes which do use regular and systematic critical reflection. Action learning and experiential learning provide two examples. These and action research have much in common, and shade into one another at the boundaries.

### **Can action research yield causal explanations?**

In the sense of explanations given in terms of causal relationships between variables, generally not. On occasions, the understanding developed may be causal -- people may come to recognise that event A precedes and probably causes event B. But this isn't a central interest.

A different type of causal explanation often features in action research. A causal connection between certain actions and certain outcomes may be identified. Such a

connection is then tested when the planned actions are carried out. Action research can give causal explanations in this sense. In fact, as action research is intended to produce action, this is usually an emphasis.

**How can action research justify its conclusions when it provide give causal explanations?**

It is true that action research does not usually try to provide causal explanations -- explanations of causal relationships between limited numbers of variables.

It shares a belief with some "systems" approaches: in some situations, causal explanations are either not possible, or too cumbersome to be very useful. When there are many variables, and they interact (often bi-directionally) in complex ways, causal explanations are themselves likely to be very complex.

To put it differently, when almost everything has an effect on almost everything else, it may not be much practical help to know that "a" influences "b".

As discussed above, it is usually helpful to know that I can often achieve outcome Z by doing action X. In that sense, causal understanding actively pursued.

**Can action research be quantitative?**

Yes, though it is usually qualitative.

Most of the time action research uses natural language rather than numbers: the use of natural language suits a paradigm which is participative and responsive to the situation. People communicate naturally in language. Communication is an important part of action research, especially in its more participative varieties.

Quantitative measures can be valuable. But developing them requires a substantial investment in time. This may not be warranted if you are likely to change your mind about the measures that you need. When suitable quantitative measures are available, there is no reason why they may not be used.

Qualitative and quantitative approaches can often complement each other well. For example, you might carry out a quantitative survey or other activity. These data might then be interpreted qualitatively by the people within the system being analysed.

I should probably mention the view held in some quarters that qualitative and quantitative data ought not to be used in conjunction. This is based on the argument that they depend upon different philosophical assumptions. I won't go into detail here, but in my view this is impractical. It places philosophy as an unavoidable foundation for all research. On

this view, we should give up all research right away. Philosophers don't presently agree on the foundations of research, and I see no reason to think they ever will.

**Can you generalise from action research? If not, how can action research add to knowledge?**

Often, you can't generalise from action research. In other words, you can often make claims only about the people and/or systems actually studied. It may not be safe to assume that other people or other systems are the same. For that matter, it may be hazardous to assume that what is true of this person (or organisation or community) today will be true next year.

This is often held to be one of the major disadvantages of action research. Experimental research, done well, does allow generalisation. An experimental claim can often be taken to be applicable universally.

The issue can also be looked at in a different way. Generalisability might be regarded as global relevance -- the ability to apply a finding from one experimental setting into other settings. Action research then pursues local relevance, if necessary at the expense of global relevance. Experimentation often achieves global relevance, but at the cost of being difficult to apply practically to local situations.

There are ways in which some generalisability can be claimed for the findings of action research. For example, if several studies in diverse settings give similar findings, this allows greater generalisability than a single study typically does. Similar actions may produce similar outcomes in different situations; this implies generalisability. One can also use indirectly-relevant literatures to test the relevance of findings.

Action research and experimentation value different outcomes. Unless something is done about it, action research is often limited by the local relevance of its findings. Unless something is done about it, experimental research is often limited by the narrowly defined set of variables it investigates. It might be argued that the generalisability of experimental research, when done within social systems, is a very narrow form of generalisability. Knowing that it is true that "a" causes "b" may not be much help when "a" and "b" are immersed in a system of very many other, interconnected, variables.

**Are social sciences really science?**

I don't know. Are they? It depends on your definitions of science, and what you include as social science. This is an example of a definitional problem. While I think it is worthwhile to define terms, I find it less useful to debate the definitions. For me, action research is useful in settings where other paradigms work less well. It works. I'm not concerned whether or not it's science that I'm doing.

**How can you do action research when you don't know enough to develop a hypothesis to start with?**

This is actually another definitional issue in disguise. It assumes that research is necessarily a test of a hypothesis.

If you believe this, then you will conclude that action research is not really research. As long as you don't try to persuade others of your conclusion, I doubt that you will do much harm. If you wish to change the terminological habits of action researchers you may be in some difficulty. You will then have to devise a different term to describe it. As it has been known as action research for over half a century, I don't hold much hope that you will change the verbal habits of those who do action research.

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Note: There is a Listserv list on Action Research.

Arlist-L is a medium-volume, multidisciplinary electronic mailing list. It is a moderated forum for the discussion of the theory and practice of action research and related methods.

(Discussions about action research specifically as a research methodology are probably better suited to its companion list, armnet-L. Discussions about applications of action research and related methods in management settings may be better suited to its companion list, actlist-L.

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