

Key Research Concepts in Politics & International Relations

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..... Action Research

Action research is not to be confused with **case study** research. In action research, researchers test and refine principles, tools and **methodologies** to address *real-world* problems.

It is a characteristic of action research that the participants or 'practitioners' as well as the researchers participate in the analysis, design and implementation processes and usually add as much as the researchers to any decision-making. It can be said to create a *synergy* between the practitioners and the researcher as they test, modify and test again research ideas for solving *real-world* problems. The flow of continual feedback used to modify the tests encourages positive information and discussions between the two, so that the test and the research questions can be improved on and developed.

The purpose of the research – to provide new data and information for the practitioners – also can change with the development of the reinvention of the testing that results from the increasing awareness of both researcher and practitioner. Thus, whereas case study research examines phenomena in their 'natural' environment with the researcher as an independent (separate) observer, in action research the researcher ought to be useful as well as an observer.

Action research, then, is a form of experiments based on the new developments that come out of the reinvention of the original test and research questions. For those researchers interested in **qualitative methods**, this approach allows them to use research that consists of first-hand experiences, people's stories guiding the aims of good research to solve real-world problems while dealing with localized contingencies. Action research involves using participatory methods as much as possible. As the researcher and practitioner modify the experiment at each stage, they could reach different outcomes from what is being achieved as a result of the modifications.

If we take an example, we could argue that, in the world of political policy development, the practitioner may not come from a research background and therefore needs the assistance of the researcher to discover public opinion or develop the projection of political policy. This format also often stresses the necessity of moving relatively quickly



towards *new* action. The informality and interpretive (experimental) nature of this methodology encourages the collaboration between participant and researcher. It is because of this relationship that action research is often carried out by those who already recognize there is a problem or limitation within their subject and intend for the research project to bring those involved together in a manner that will facilitate and reflect on outcomes. As such, effective action research is associated with experienced researchers.

The key thing to remember about action research is it is intended to be a developmental tool and method that allows the researcher to reflect and then act. An example here may help to illustrate the action research process. When undertaking a piece of research, we often follow the conventional process of setting a question (hypothesis), developing a fieldwork study, analysing that study and drawing out the conclusions. This process proceeds from point A to point B in a linear push, whereas action research involves a cycle of action, reflection, the development of questions, the mapping out and review of past and current actions, drawing in the experiences of the participants/practitioners. The process continues by developing some conclusions at these stages and then setting a course of new actions. It is important to note here that this cycle does not end but often continues with the practitioners (and sometimes the researcher) reflecting again on the new actions and moving through the system once again, which is then further researched.

The differences between action research and the conventional process are not necessarily about it being a 'new' kind of research method, but, rather, in terms of the involvement and consideration of those implementing and participating in the 'day-to-day' actions or practices. It makes sense to assume that all research is an implementation of action. Research in itself is an action involving current problems or situations and, as a result of this, researchers have to keep in mind that their involvement always has consequences.

Action research, by definition, operates at the social level and, thus, researchers are aware that interventions and changes will have to be made in the process. Most action research is designed to look into a particular situation, policy or scenario in order to change it or improve it. It makes sense that those involved in a situation that is seen to be unsatisfactory will wish to alter it for the better and also ought to be included in the process of developing new actions. However, it is not always the case that action research springs out of an unsatisfactory situation. It can be used to replicate or add to an experience that works



well. For example, a winning economic development project or a strong campaign strategy can be examined in order to test its success in a new setting or when used by a different organizational group.

In action research, even though there is a conceptual difference between the ‘action’, the ‘research’ and the ‘participation’ involved, such differences begin to disappear during the research project itself. Remember, there is not a linear push through the project (participation + research = action). Instead, there are cycles of reflection on actions (past and present), followed by new actions that then themselves become the subject of reflection. The hallmark of action research is that change does not happen at the end of the research project but throughout it.

FURTHER READING

Coghlan, D. (2005) *Doing Action Research in your Own Organization* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

EXAMPLES

- Burgess, J. (2006) ‘Participatory action research: First-person perspectives of a graduate student’, *Action Research*, 4 (4): 419–37.
- Coghlan, D. and Shani, A. (2005) ‘Roles, politics, and ethics in action research design’, *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 18 (6): 533–46.
- Kenny, S. (1994) *Developing Communities for the Future*. Melbourne: Thomas Nelson.
- Wakeford, T. and Pimbert, M. (2004) ‘Prajateerpu, power and knowledge: The politics of participatory action research in development’, *Action Research*, 2 (1): 25–46.

..... Autobiographical/

..... Biographical Research

Autobiographical and biographical research (BR) are interpretivist **qualitative methods** usually sited within the **narrative** research tradition. Such research has a long history, with antecedents such as Plutarch’s

