

DOING ACTION RESEARCH IN YOUR OWN ORGANIZATION

David Coghlan
& Teresa Brannick

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ONE

Introducing Action Research



See www.uk.sagepub.com/coghlanandbrannick for a short introduction to the chapter from David Coghlan

We begin by focusing on the big picture of your insider action research initiative. As you are poised to embark on this venture, we pose the following questions for your consideration. Out of what experience of your organization are you wishing to change something? What is or has been going on that puzzles you, or what anomalies do you experience that you wish to address? What patterns of deliberate action may support this inquiry and provide the opportunity for insights? With whom will you work so that this initiative will be good for you, worthwhile for your organization and useful for others? In this chapter we present a brief introduction to action research, and then go straight into how it might be enacted. The theoretical discussion of action research and its tenets may be found in Chapter 3.

As a preliminary activity to focus your mind, take a sheet of paper and explore the following questions. Think of a project within your organization on which you are working. What is the context of this project? What is its purpose? What are your hoped-for outcomes? What puzzles or challenges you about it? What do you think needs to change? What obstacles do you anticipate? Where do you fit in, or what role do you have? With whom are you working on this project to complete it successfully? What do you think are the obstacles? What is the potential impact of this project on others? What would you need to do if you wanted to understand this project more deeply and thoroughly than if you were simply focusing on solving a problem, or completing it as a project? If you were invited to give a talk on your project to interested others who have not been directly involved, what might you want to say?

This preliminary activity provides an introductory sense of what action research involves. Now begin reading this chapter and those following it to broaden and deepen your understanding and application of action research in your own organization.

Inquiring in your own organization

As we begin our exploration of doing action research in your own organization, we lay out some foundations about organizations and about studying your own organization, whether action research or not (Costley et al., 2010).

First, we note that organizations are social constructions (Campbell, 2000): they are artefacts created by human beings to serve their ends. They follow processes that are shaped and affected by human purposes, and they do not exist independently of human minds and actions. They are systems of human action in which means and ends are guided by values and intended outcomes. They are, in effect, communities created by meaning with a rich tapestry of cultural rules, roles and interactions (Van Maanen, 1979). There is also the psychodynamic perspective, which understands organizations in terms of unconscious social defences (Hirschhorn, 1988). These perspectives on organizations have implications for rigorous inquiry, as empirical observation and logical reconstruction of organizational activities may not be sufficient to uncover the meanings, whether explicit or tacit, that organizational members hold and have held (Schein, 2010). The action research approach is founded on the notion that organizations may be understood experientially through processes of deliberate change.

Inquiring into your own organization presents challenges that mark it out from studying an organization as an outsider (Evered and Louis, 1981). Schon (2004) [1995] contrasts how researchers can view practice from the high ground, where they can study issues from a distance: for example, because they are not organizational members or because their data are based on pre-constructed surveys or interviews. Or they can be immersed in 'swampy lowlands' where problems are messy, confusing and incapable of a technical solution, because they are either organizational members whose actions influence the reality that they see, or they are outsiders who are contracted to influence what they see. He concludes that unimportant issues may be studied from the high ground according to predetermined standards and rigour, while the critically important ones, such as how to generate whatever changes in practice we wish to see, can be confronted only by being immersed in the 'swampy lowlands'.

Inquiry from the inside involves researchers as natives and actors, immersed in local situations generating contextually embedded knowledge which emerges from experience. Goffman (1959) adopts a dramatic approach and points to a distinction between the 'front region', where performance is public for the benefit of clients or customers, and the 'back region' or backstage, where public access is restricted. Actors can drop their public persona in the privacy of the backstage. Goffman's rich exploration of backstaging provides an important framing of knowing organizations from the inside. Being an insider provides access to the drama of the informal organization with all its paradoxes and problems, Schon's 'swampy lowlands', and what

Evered and Louis (1981) see as 'blooming, buzzing confusion'. Accordingly, we need a method for engaging in such insider inquiry. Evered and Louis (1981) refer to their mode of inquiry for acquiring insider knowledge as 'groping in the dark' into the hidden organizational realities around them, in many directions simultaneously as 'multisensory holistic immersion' and 'messy, iterative groping'.

A brief introduction to action research

In the words of Reason and Bradbury, 'action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview' (2008: 1). This working definition provides a flavour of the broad scope and intent of action research with the ultimate aim of 'the flourishing of individual persons and their communities'. Shani and Pasmore provide a more restricted definition:

Action research may be defined as an emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioural science knowledge is integrated with existing organizational knowledge and applied to solve real organizational problems. It is simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in organizations, in developing self-help competencies in organizational members and adding to scientific knowledge. Finally, it is an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry. (2010[1985]: 439)

Given the context of this book, where we expect readers to be working on action research projects in their own organizations, we are working more from Shani and Pasmore's definition than from Reason and Bradbury's.

Shani and Pasmore present a complete theory of the action research process in terms of four factors (Figure 1.1).

1. Context – these factors set the context of the action research project. Individual goals may differ and impact the direction of the project, while shared goals enhance collaboration. Organizational characteristics such as resources, history, formal and informal organizations and the degrees of congruence between them affect the readiness and capability for participating in action research. Environmental factors in the global and local economies provide the larger context in which action research takes place.

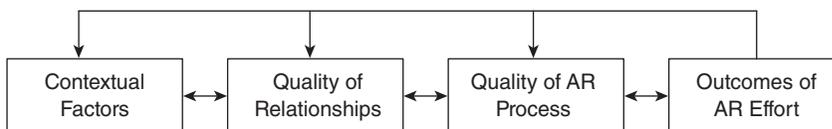


Figure 1.1 Complete Theory of Action Research

(Shani and Pasmore, 2010: 253)

2. Quality of relationships – the quality of relationship between members and researchers is paramount. Hence the relationships need to be managed through trust, concern for others, equality of influence, common language, and so on.
3. Quality of the action research process itself – this is grounded in a dual focus on both the inquiry process and the implementation process.
4. Outcomes – the dual outcomes of action research are some level of sustainability (human, social, economic, ecological) and the development of self-help and competencies out of the action and creation of new knowledge from the inquiry.

Several broad characteristics define action research:

- research *in* action, rather than research *about* action;
- a collaborative democratic partnership;
- a sequence of events and an approach to problem-solving.

We will discuss each in turn.

First, action research focuses on research *in* action, rather than research *about* action. The central idea is that action research uses a scientific approach to study the resolution of important social or organizational issues together with those who experience these issues directly. The goal is to make that action more effective while simultaneously building up a body of scientific knowledge. Action research works through a cyclical, four-step process of consciously and deliberately: (a) planning; (b) taking action; (c) evaluating the action; (d) leading to further planning, and so on.

Second, action research is a collaborative, democratic partnership. Members of the system that is being studied participate actively in the cyclical process outlined above. Such participation contrasts with traditional research, where members of the system are subjects or objects of the study. An important qualitative element of action research is how people participate in the choice of research focus, and how they engage in the processes of action and inquiry to co-generate knowledge.

Third, action research is both a sequence of events and an approach to change and to problem-solving. As a sequence of events, it comprises iterative cycles of gathering data collaboratively, jointly analysing the data, jointly planning action, taking joint action and evaluating jointly, leading to further joint data-gathering, and so on. As an approach to change and to problem-solving, it is an application of a rigorous method of fact-finding and experimentation to practical issues requiring action solutions, involving the collaboration and cooperation of the action researchers and members of the organizational system. The desired outcomes of the action research approach are not just solutions to the practical issues, but also important learning from outcomes both intended and unintended, and a contribution to actionable knowledge: that is, knowledge that is useful for practitioners and robust for scholars.

Three audiences, voices or practices

An integrative approach to research incorporates three voices and audiences: first, second and third person (Reason and Torbert, 2001; Reason and Bradbury, 2008). Traditionally, research has focused on third person: researchers doing research on third persons and writing a report for other third persons. In a more complete vision of research as presented by action research and many other transformational inquiry approaches, authentic third-person research integrates first- and second-person voices. Typically, *first-person* research is characterized as a form of inquiry and practice that one does on one's own, and so addresses the individual's ability to foster an inquiring approach to their own life, to act out of awareness and purposefully. First-person research can take researchers 'upstream', where they may attend to and inquire into their basic assumptions, desires, intentions and philosophy of life. In addition, it can take them 'downstream', where they attend to and inquire into their behaviour, ways of relating and their action in the world. *Second-person* inquiry or practice addresses their ability to inquire into and work with others on issues of mutual concern, through face-to-face dialogue, conversation and joint action. Second-person practice poses an important challenge as to who is involved in the research, and how. As action research is integrally collaborative and democratic, the quality of second-person inquiry and action is paramount. *Third-person* inquiry or practice aims at creating communities of inquiry, involving people beyond the direct second-person action. Third person is impersonal and is actualized through dissemination by reporting, publishing and extrapolating from the concrete to the general. As Reason and Torbert (2001) point out, there are plenty of implicit examples of first-, second- and third-person inquiry, but what is required now is explicit integrating of all three persons with action and inquiry. The construct of first-, second- and third-person inquiry is a development of Reason and Marshall's popular notion of three audiences of research:

All good research is for *me*, for *us*, and for *them*: it speaks to three audiences ... It is for *them* to the extent that it produces some kind of generalizable ideas and outcomes ... It is for *us* to the extent that it responds to concerns for our praxis, is relevant and timely ... [for] those who are struggling with problems in their field of action. It is for *me* to the extent that the process and outcomes respond directly to the individual researcher's being-in-the-world. (1987: 112–113)

In our view, second-person practice is primary. It is through working with others through collaborative processes of engaging in constructing the project, planning action, taking action, evaluating action and framing learning that individual (first person) learning takes place, and it is from that second and first experience and learning that actionable knowledge for a third person audience emerges.

The three approaches, first, second and third person, enacted in and through action, may be understood to underpin the notion of the scholar-practitioner (Wasserman and Kram, 2009; Coghlan, 2013). Scholar-practitioners are not merely practitioners who do research; rather, they integrate scholarship into their practice and generate actionable knowledge. Other terms that capture the same idea are the 'reflective practitioner' (Schon, 1983), the 'practitioner-researcher' (Jarvis, 1999) and the 'manager-researcher' (Coghlan, 2004): that is, those who engage in a science of action (Argyris and Schon, 1974; Torbert and Associates, 2004) and who produce useful research (Mohrman et al., 2011). Traditional research has polarized rigour and relevance, and holds that it is a case of one or other. As Levin (2012) argues, action research has a 'Janus face' – a head which faces in two directions simultaneously – to address relevant issues and problems and to be rigorously scientific is how these issues are investigated and addressed.

As we will develop in this book, the work of scholar-practitioners takes place in the present tense as they endeavour to change their organizations and to generate actionable knowledge. The three interdependent processes described above – learning about oneself through the action, collaborative work with others and the generation of learning that is robust for scholars and useful for practice – may be viewed in terms of Macmurray's reframing of the core of contemporary philosophy when he asserts the primacy of the practical, where the Cartesian 'I think, therefore, I am' is replaced by 'I do, therefore, I am' (1957: 84).

The contrast of researcher roles is between that of a detached observer in positivist science, and of an actor and agent of change in action research. Weisbord (1988) explores the images of taking photographs and making films in relation to organization development. He describes taking photographs as freezing a moment in time and arranging key elements in a conceptual framework. No photograph takes in the whole of reality; it only takes in what is intended to be included in the frame. Photographers decide what is to be in the frame, and they manipulate the setting to include and exclude desirable and undesirable features. In contrast, making films is an engagement in patterns of activity and relationships by multiple actors who are moving and interacting over a period of time and across locations. It is increasingly common to find actors directing their own films. In these cases, actor-directors engage in their acting role in costume, and then return to behind the camera in order to study the take, critique it and make decisions about proceeding to the next take. We find this image of making films and the action researcher as an actor-director pertinent and useful for thinking about doing action research. As Riordan expresses it, action research is:

[A] kind of approach to studying social reality without separating (while distinguishing) fact from value; [it] require[s] a practitioner of science who is not only an engaged participant, but also incorporates the perspective of the critical and analytical observer, not as a validating instance but as integral to the practice. (1995: 10)

In a seminal article, Chandler and Torbert (2003) explore how first-, second- and third-person voice and practice may be engaged in the past, present and future. Much of what we refer to as qualitative research is focused on the past. Action research builds on the past and takes place in the present, with a view to shaping the future. Action research scholars such as Chris Argyris, Edgar Schein, Bill Torbert, Rami Shani, Judi Marshall and Peter Reason have led the way in exploring how to do first-person and second-person inquiry in the present tense, and how this practice may be rigorous and have quality. Their work permeates this book.



TRANSFORMING
INQUIRY &
ACTION

Enacting action research cycles

In its original Lewinian and simplest form, the action research cycle comprises a pre-step and three core activities: planning, action and fact-finding (Lewin, 1997[1946]). The pre-step involves naming the general objective. Planning comprises having an overall plan and a decision regarding what is the first step to take. Action involves taking that first step, and fact-finding involves evaluating the first step, seeing what was learned and creating the basis for correcting the next step. So there is a continuing 'spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action' (Lewin, 1997[1946]: 146).

These core steps have been articulated differently by different authors, from Stringer's (2013) simple 'look, think, act', to French and Bell's (1999) complex action research organization development framework involving iterative cycles of joint action planning, feedback, further data-gathering, diagnosis and action of an external organization development consultant with a client system.

The action research cycles

For the context of doing action research in your own organization we present an action research cycle comprising a pre-step, context and purpose and four basic steps: constructing, planning action, taking action and evaluating action (Figure 1.2). The

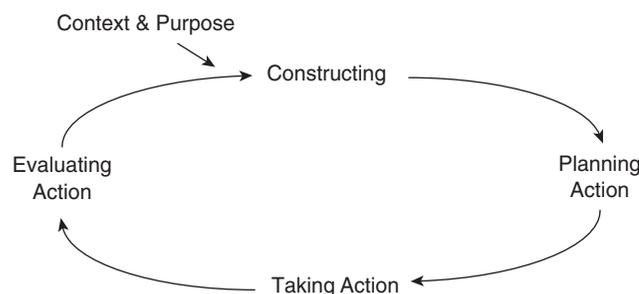


Figure 1.2 The Action Research Cycle



DAVID
COGHLAN
DESCRIBES
THE ACTION
RESEARCH
CYCLE

exploration of the action research cycle needs to be understood in terms of the four factors of action research that we presented above: context, quality of relationships, quality of the action research process itself and the outcomes.

Pre-step: context and purpose

The action research cycle unfolds in real time and begins with seeking an understanding of the context of the project. Why is this project necessary or desirable? In terms of assessing the external context, what are the economic, political and social forces driving change? In terms of internal forces, what are the cultural and structural forces driving change? Assessment of these forces identifies their source and potency, and the nature of the demands that they make on the system. Included also is assessment of the degree of choice in how the system responds to the forces for change. Once a sense of the need or desirability for the project is identified, then the most useful focus for attention is the definition of a desired future state. The process of defining the desired future state is critical, as it sets the boundaries for the purpose of the project and helps provide focus and energy for the later stages (these issues are elaborated on in Chapter 5).

Another critical consideration in this pre-step is establishment of collaborative relationships with those who have ownership, or need to have ownership, of the above questions. A central second-person task in this regard is to develop the group or groups with which you will be working on the project. We will pick up these issues later.

Main steps

Constructing

The first step of the action research cycle is a dialogic activity in which the stakeholders of the project engage in *constructing* what the issues are, however provisionally, as a working theme, on the basis of which action will be planned and taken. As this dialogic step involves articulating the practical and theoretical foundations of action, it needs to be done carefully and thoroughly. While this constructing may change in later iterations of the action research cycle, any changes in constructing need to be recorded and articulated clearly, showing how events have led to alternative meanings, and showing the evidence and rationale for the new shared meanings on which further action is to be based. It is important that the constructing step is a collaborative venture: that is, that you as the action researcher engage relevant others in the process of constructing, and are not the expert who decides this apart from others. (In Chapter 4 we focus on how the project may be constructed, and in Chapter 7 we outline some guidelines for using frameworks for understanding organizational phenomena.)

Planning action

Planning action follows from exploration of the context and purpose of the project, and construction of the issue, and is consistent with them. It may be that this action planning focuses on a first step or a series of first steps. In Chapter 5 we will describe how you implement the action research project. Again, we emphasize the importance of collaboration in planning action.

Taking action

At this stage, the plans are implemented and interventions made collaboratively.

Evaluating action

The outcomes of the action, both intended and unintended, are examined with a view to seeing:

- if the original constructing fitted;
- if the actions taken matched the constructing;
- if the action was taken in an appropriate manner; and
- what feeds into the next cycle of constructing, planning and action.

So the cycle continues (Figure 1.3).



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EXPLAINS
SPIRAL OF
ACTION
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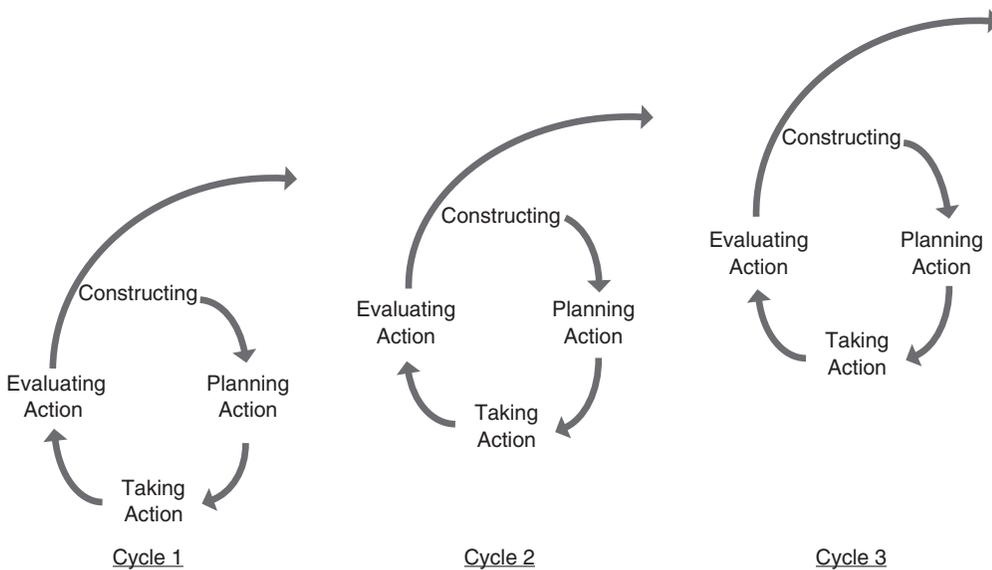


Figure 1.3 Spiral of Action Research Cycles



Figure 1.4 Concurrent Cycles of Action Research



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DISCUSSES
THE SYMBOLIC
CLOCK FACE
WITHIN
CONCURRENT
CYCLES

In any action research project there are multiple action research cycles operating concurrently. These cycles typically have different time spans. The image of a clock captures this usefully (Figure 1.4). The hour hand, which takes 12 hours to complete its cycle, may represent the project as a whole. In a large complex project, it may take several years to complete its cycle. The minute hand, which takes an hour to complete its cycle, may represent phases or particular sections of the project. The second hand, which completes its cycle in a minute, may represent specific actions within the project, for example, a specific meeting or interview. As in the clock, where the revolutions of the three hands are concurrent and where the revolutions of the second hand enable the revolutions of the minute hand, and the revolutions of the second and minute hands together enable the completion of the hour hand, the short-term action research cycles contribute to the medium-term cycles, which in turn contribute to the longer-term cycle.

While the action research cycle expresses the core process of integrating action and theory as you inquire in the present tense, it is important to keep it in perspective. For example, Heron (1996) describes two approaches to the use of the cycle. He contrasts one approach, *Apollonian*, whereby the cycles are enacted in a rational, linear and systematic manner, with *Dionysian*, an approach where there is an imaginative, expressive and tacit approach to integrating reflection and action. He cautions against being rigid in adapting the action research cycle formally, and so denying spontaneity and creativity. It is also important not to get too preoccupied in the cycles at the expense of quality of participation.

Meta-learning

In any action research project there are two action research cycles operating in parallel. This is particularly true where the action research is undertaken for academic accreditation. The first cycle is the cycle we have just described of constructing, planning, taking action and evaluating in relation to achievement of the project's aims. Zuber-Skerritt and Perry (2002) call this the *core* action research cycle. The second cycle is a reflection cycle, which is an action research cycle about the action research cycle. Zuber-Skerritt and Perry call this the *thesis* action research cycle. In other words, at the same time as you are engaging in the project or core action research

cycles, you need to be constructing, planning, taking action and evaluating how the action research project itself is going, and what you are learning. You need to be continually inquiring into each of the four main steps, asking how these steps are being conducted and how they are consistent with each other, so shaping how the subsequent steps are conducted. As Argyris (2003) argues, this inquiry into the steps of the cycles themselves is central to the development of actionable knowledge. It is the dynamic of this reflection on reflection that incorporates the learning process of the action research cycle, and enables action research to be more than everyday problem-solving. It is learning about learning: that is, meta-learning.

Mezirow (1991) identifies three forms of reflection: content, process and premise. These are useful categories.

1. *Content* reflection is where you think about the issues, what you think is happening, etc.
2. *Process* reflection is where you think about strategies and procedures, and how things are being done.
3. *Premise* reflection is where you critique underlying assumptions and perspectives.

All three forms of reflection are critical. Figure 1.5 presents how content, process and premise reflections are applied to the action research cycle as a meta-cycle of inquiry. The *content* of what is framed, planned, acted on and evaluated is studied and evaluated. The *process* of how constructing is undertaken, how action planning flows from that constructing and is conducted, how actions follow and are



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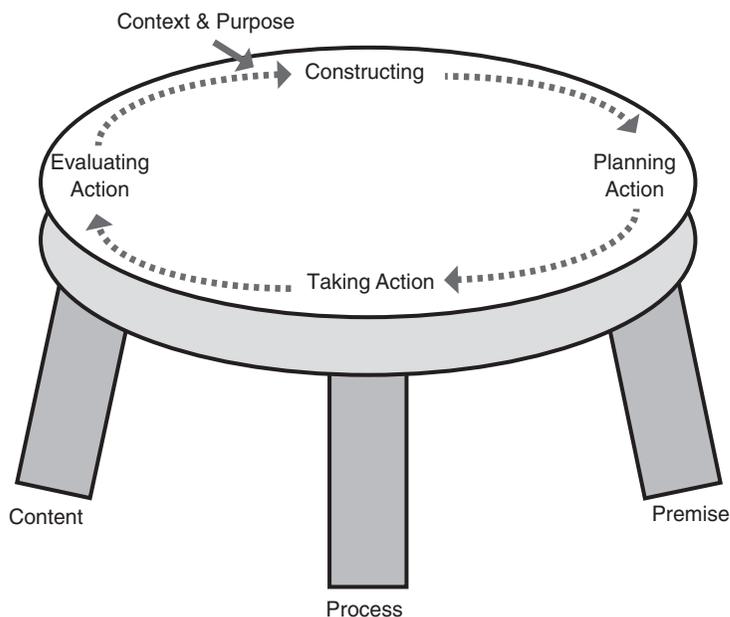


Figure 1.5 Meta-cycle of Action Research

an implementation of the stated plans and how evaluation is conducted, are critical foci for inquiry. *Premise* reflection is inquiry into the unstated and often non-conscious, underlying assumptions which govern attitudes and behaviour, such as that which might be embedded in language. For example, the culture of the organization or sub-culture of the group working on the project has a powerful impact on how issues are viewed and discussed, without members being aware of them (Schein, 2010).

If you are writing a dissertation, then the meta-cycle is the focus of your dissertation. Remember, the action research project and your dissertation project are not identical. They are integrally interlinked, but they are not the same. The project on which you are working may go ahead irrespective of whether or not you are writing a dissertation or seeking to generate actionable knowledge. Your dissertation is an inquiry into the project, hence you need to describe both cycles in a way that demonstrates the quality of rigour of your inquiry.

Mezirow's forms of reflection parallel the four territories of experience commonly used in action research (Fisher et al., 2000; Torbert and Associates, 2004). These four territories operate at the individual, interpersonal and organizational levels.

1. *Intentions* – purpose, goals, aims and vision.
2. *Planning* – plans, strategy, tactics, schemes.
3. *Action* – implementation, performance.
4. *Outcomes* – results, consequences and effects.

Action research aims to develop awareness, understanding and skills across all these territories. You try to understand your intentions, to develop appropriate plans and strategies, to be skilled at carrying them out, to reflect on how well you have carried out the plans and to evaluate their results. In addition, you can inquire about the connections between these phases. For example, you might begin with the outcomes and explore how your actions caused these outcomes; or you may take the inquiry further and look at how your intentions and plans shaped your actions.

The activities of the meta-cycle are not confined to your first-person practice as the individual action researcher. To add another layer of complexity to the learning cycle, the second-person practice with the groups and teams engaged in the action research cycles also attends to the steps of content, process and premise reflection.

Attending to the action research cycle and to the meta-cycle may involve more than simply attending to behaviour. You may draw from techniques in qualitative research approaches through the way in which you formulate the issue, collect and analyse data and report results (Sagor, 2011). Techniques from

grounded theory approaches may be useful once the core compatibilities and incompatibilities between the two approaches are recognized (Baskerville and Pries-Heje, 1999).

Quality and rigour in action research

The action research paradigm requires its own quality criteria. Action research should be judged *not* by the criteria of positivist science, but rather within the criteria of its own terms. Reason (2006) points to what he considers to be choice points and questions for quality in action research. As action research is conducted in the present tense, you are always making choices as you reflect on what is happening, wonder what to do next and make choices and decisions.

1. Is the action research explicit in developing a praxis of relational participation? In other words, how well does the action research reflect the cooperation between the action researcher and the members of the organization?
2. Is action research guided by a reflexive concern for practical outcomes? Is the action project governed by constant and iterative reflection as part of the process of organizational change or improvement?
3. Does action research include a plurality of knowing which ensures conceptual-theoretical integrity, extends our ways of knowing and has a methodological appropriateness? Action research is inclusive of practical, propositional, presentational and experiential knowing, and so as a methodology is appropriate to furthering knowledge on different levels.
4. Does action research engage in significant work? The significance of the project is an important quality in action research.
5. Does the action research result in new and enduring infrastructures? In other words, does sustainable change come out of the project?

Reason argues that as an action researcher you need to be aware of these choices and make them clear and transparent to yourself (a first-person process), and to those with whom you are engaging in inquiry (a second-person process), as well as to those to whom you present your research in writing or presentations (a third-person process). The editorial guidelines for the journal *Action Research* invite potential contributors to address these dimensions explicitly in submitting their work to the journal. An integral element of making choices in the present tense is how you make value judgements and decide what is good (or better) to do. This process is the foundation of ethics (which we will discuss further in Chapter 2).

As the action researcher, you need to show the following.

1. How you engaged in the steps of multiple and repetitious action research cycles (how constructing, planning, taking action and evaluating were done), and how these were recorded to reflect that they are a true representation of what was studied.

2. How you challenged and tested your own assumptions and interpretations of what was happening continuously through the project by means of content, process and premise reflection, so that your familiarity with, and closeness to, the issues are exposed to critique.
3. How you accessed different views of what was happening which probably produced both confirming and contradictory interpretations.
4. How your interpretations are grounded in scholarly theory and rigorously applied, and how project outcomes are challenged, supported or disconfirmed in terms of the theories underpinning those interpretations and judgements.

What does a good action research project look like? Eden and Huxham (2006) provide an extensive list of the fifteen characteristics of good action research. The foundational characteristics reflect the intentionality of the researcher to change an organization, that the project has some implications beyond those involved directly in it, and that the project has an explicit aim to elaborate or develop theory as well as to be useful to the organization. Theory must inform the design and development of the actions. Eden and Huxham place great emphasis on enactment of the action research cycles, in which systematic method and orderliness is required in reflecting on the outcomes of each cycle and the design of the subsequent cycles.

In our view a good action research project contains three main elements: a good story, rigorous reflection on that story and an extrapolation of usable knowledge or theory from the reflection on the story. These can be put in terms of three questions: 'What happened?', 'How you do make sense of what happened?' and 'So what?'

What happened?

As action research is about real-time change, its core is the story of what takes place. As mentioned previously, the action research cycle of the general objective pre-step, and the four main steps of constructing, planning, action and fact-finding, describe how the project is conceived, what is intended, the cycles of action and the outcomes, both intended and unintended. The story must be presented in a factual and neutral manner, as if it had been recorded on camera, so that all the actors can agree on what had taken place. In short, the story is based on directly observable behaviour. Therefore, you need to be able to present evidence to support your narrative. Recorded data in journals and organizational documentation are important supporting evidence.

Accordingly, it is critical that fact is clearly distinguished from value, that the basic story does not contain the author's inferences or interpretations, or at least not without such inferences or interpretations being explicitly identified. For example, if an action research story contains an assertion that a certain group was out to wreck the project, the narrative would need to be clear that there was evidence that

the group actually was trying to wreck the project, rather than it being an inference of the researcher or any party that saw itself as a victim of that group's action. (We explore the role of making inferences in Chapter 2.)

How you do make sense of what happened?

The critical process with respect to articulating your sense-making is making your tacit knowledge explicit. This involves not only providing an analysis of what you think is going on in the story, but also of how you are making sense of it as the story unfolds. In other words, sense-making is not only a retrospective process, but is also a collaborative process that is concurrent with the story, and in terms of the action research cycle, actually shapes the story – hence the image we used previously of the action researcher as an actor-director. As you report assumptions which you held as the story progressed, you need to show how you tested them, especially if these assumptions were privately held. In terms of our previous example, the researcher needs to test whether or not the group that they think is out to wreck the project, actually intends that.

So what?

The additional issue is how the action research project is contributing theory or usable knowledge. As action research is context-bound in a particular setting and set of events, it needs to have some interest and relevance to the uninvolved reader: the third-person readership. Hence the question 'so what?' is a pertinent and challenging question, or as Friedman puts it, 'if ... then ...' (2001: 168).

Conclusions

We began this chapter by seeing you poised to embark on your insider action research initiative. We have invited you to reflect on your experience of your organization, so as to explore what might change through your deliberate collaborative action involving you and others, and leading to actionable knowledge that would be of use to others who are not directly involved.

David reflects:

Action research expects us to stop just going through the motions, doing what we've always done because we've done it, doing it the same way because we've always done it that way. Action researchers take a close look at what they are doing and act to make things better than they already are. Taking a closer look is action in and of itself and that research, that knowledge creation – any action taken based on that research – has the potential to transform the work that we do, the working conditions that we sweat under and, most importantly, the people who we are.

Enacting the action research cycle involves not only the pre-step of articulating the context and purpose of the project and the main steps of constructing, planning action, taking action and evaluating, but also reflecting on content, process and premise issues in how the action research cycles are undertaken in the present tense. Both the action research and meta-learning are undertaken by individuals, teams, between teams in the interdepartmental groups and between organizations. The rigour of your inquiry is demonstrated by how you expose these activities to critique, and how your conclusions are supported by your development of theory or usable knowledge. We will now turn to how you as the action researcher can engage in knowing in action.

Recommended reading

- Brydon-Miller, M., Greenwood, D. and Maguire, P. (2003) 'Why action research?', *Action Research*, 1 (1): 9–28.
- Chandler, D. and Torbert, W.R. (2003) 'Transforming inquiry and action: Interweaving 27 flavors of action research', *Action Research*, 1 (2): 133–152.
- Coghlan, D. with Brydon-Miller, M. (2014) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research*. London: Sage. (See especially 'Cycles of action and reflection', 'Extended epistemology' and 'Symbolic interactionism'.)
- Shani, A.B. and Pasmore W.A. (2010[1985]) 'Organization inquiry: Towards a new model of the action research process', in D. Coghlan and A.B. Shani (eds), *Fundamentals of Organization Development*, Vol. 1. London: Sage, pp. 249–260.
- Wicks, P.G., Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (2008) 'Living inquiry: Personal, political and philosophical groundings in action research practice', in P. Reason and H. Bradbury (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research* (2nd edn). London: Sage, pp. 15–30.

Access a selection of author videos, encyclopaedia entries and recommended reading on this topic at www.uk.sagepub.com/coghlanandbrannick

EXERCISE 1.1

Enacting the action research cycles (from Figure 1.2)

1. Select an issue or problem that you have worked on in your team (or are working on).
2. What is the *context* of this issue? Why is it important? What are the stakes involved?
3. Describe how the issue was *constructed*. How did you decide that an intervention was needed or wanted, what was wrong, what the causes were? How did you deal with different meanings or constructions in the team?

4. What action was *planned*?
5. What happened when the action was *implemented*? What were the outcomes, both intended and unintended?
6. How did the team *review* the outcomes?
7. What was *then* constructed, planned, implemented, etc.?
8. What is the *meta-learning* from this exercise?
 - (a) As you look back on this, what insights do you have about the *content* of the issue? Did the initial constructing fit? Had you named the right issue? What have you learned about this issue in your business or organization?
 - (b) What insights do you have about process? How did the team work on the issue? What have you learned about how to plan, take action and evaluate?
 - (c) Was there any challenge to existing premises of how you thought about things, anything in the event that challenged the team to ask different questions, see the issue in terms of a different category of issue or problem, and so on?