



Action Research in Nursing and Healthcare

Graham R Williamson | Loretta Bellman | Jonathan Webster



**ACTION RESEARCH IN NURSING
AND HEALTHCARE**

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AND HEALTHCARE**

**Graham R Williamson
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INTRODUCTION

This book is written for practitioners and academics considering or involved in action research in clinical practice settings. Action research (AR) enables the integration of education, research and clinical practice to advance patient care. In practice disciplines the need for this approach is self-evident, developing personal and professional knowledge and skills while systematically implementing clinical change for patient benefit and involving other practitioners as equal participants. AR is relevant and useful for busy clinicians (including all members of the multidisciplinary health care team who have a direct clinical interface with patients) in affecting change. Managers may find this approach useful for developing services, particularly when there is a focus on quality, improvement, innovation, performance and productivity.

Throughout the book the text has been informed predominantly by the growing action research literature from nursing and healthcare as well as other disciplines, in particular education and management. As this book is focused on the use of action research in clinical settings, we have chosen to refer to this as clinical action research. However, we are in no way trying to create a new action modality within the family of action research (to rank with appreciative inquiry, action science, action inquiry, cooperative inquiry, or action learning), we have simply used the term clinical action research as a shorthand instead of the more unwieldy 'action research taking place in clinical settings'. The predominant differences between clinical action research and, for example, educational action research conducted in controlled settings in education institutions lies in the nature of culture, the context and collaboration. The attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterise healthcare organisations, the dynamic clinical context, the clinical action researcher/facilitator and co-researchers as both autonomous practitioners and multidisciplinary team members, all have an impact on a patient-centred action research project. The fundamental principles of action research remain the same (as for other disciplines), but the conduct of action research in diverse hospital and community healthcare settings, including care homes, with people with a range of often complex needs, and with multidisciplinary colleagues, requires a different focus for consideration. As in many healthcare policy documents and healthcare books, we have used a number of terms for 'patient', including service user, client, consumer and participant in care.

This book has been written for readers at different stages of their ‘journey’ as action researchers: some will be experienced in the field and will be looking for new insights and ideas about how to conduct their next projects, supported by the increasing action research literature; other readers will be at the novice end of the spectrum and looking for ideas about how best to start, plan and manage their clinical action research projects. It is obviously a challenging task addressing the different needs of interested readers. We hope that we have offered a rich mixture of theoretical material on the roots and antecedents of action research, on the different ‘varieties’ or nuanced approaches to the design and conduct of action research, as well as examples from our own and others’ work which shed light on interesting and difficult questions that action researchers often face in clinical settings. In this book issues of data collection and analysis are considered, but we believe that it is also important for action researchers to consult and use major sources from established authors in their fields, in detail and with a level of critical analysis that, due to chapter length restrictions, we are unable to supply in this text. We have endeavoured to maintain a writing style that is reasonably closely aligned, but as the chapters have been written by three authors, some differences in style and emphasis are inevitable. We also recognise the increasing use of creative writing, including poetic expression, in practitioner research. It is likely that readers will want to dip into chapters that they will find useful on their action research journey as well as reading the book through from the first chapter to the last.

The book contains several features that will help the reader to understand, assimilate and make use of the content. Each chapter opens with several clear objectives which outline what the reader can gain from the chapter, with a summary at the end of the chapter showing briefly how the objectives have been addressed. In addition, each chapter has a number of reflective activities which enable the reader to engage with the material and to understand and think through how it is directly relevant to their own setting. Some chapters include further reading and other resources such as websites. Terminology is explained in the text and there is also a Glossary at the end of the book.

The text is divided into four parts, these being:

- Section 1: What is action research?
- Section 2: Why choose action research?
- Section 3: Conducting action research in clinical practice
- Section 4: Disseminating and evaluating clinical action research projects

In Section 1: What is action research? Chapter 1 is called Foundations of Action Research and because it is important to understand the foundations

of action research and to explore different approaches to action research, we examine some of the philosophical issues underpinning action research and outline the work of early theorists, including Kurt Lewin and the influence of the critical theorists as well as more recent aspects of action research design. In Chapter 2: Discussion, Debate and Controversy Surrounding Action Research, we argue that criticism of action research often centres on its perceived subjectivity and potential for bias due to the proximity of researchers and participants, but that it can instead be seen as a ‘new **paradigm**’ approach which does not need to subscribe to its critics’ demands for a traditional approach to research rigour. Various issues are discussed concerning ‘scientific’ research standards and action research.

Section 2 addresses the question Why Choose Action Research? Chapter 3 is called Action Research, Nursing and Healthcare, and in it we explore some of the underpinning ideas concerning the application of action research to nursing and healthcare practice. We argue that action research is recognised as a sustainable force for change among diverse communities in global healthcare settings.

Chapter 4 is Clinical Action Research to Advance Patient Care, and here we argue that action research is suited to healthcare settings. We explore the role of the clinical action researcher in advancing practice-based research and development, looking particularly at the clinical context and how organisational culture impacts on a project.

In Section 3, Conducting Action Research in Clinical Practice, Chapter 5 is called Developing One’s Own Professional Practice and reflects on how action research can form an integral part of developing one’s own practice. Using the specific example of the action research that one of us (JW) undertook as a Consultant Nurse for Older People, it illustrates how working collaboratively with others can be complex, challenging and rewarding. We move on from the substantive example in Chapter 5 to examine some more theoretical material, as well as other examples. In Chapter 6, Collaborative Working in Clinical Settings, we explore some theoretical issues concerning collaboration, facilitation and team working, and emphasise the need for greater clinical academic linkage. Chapter 7, Ethical Considerations, examines the ethical implications of engaging in collaborative action research in clinical settings, identifies the challenges of ethical approval for user engagement and explores practical approaches for ethical approval in the NHS and in Universities.

In Section 4: Disseminating and Evaluating Clinical Action Research Projects, we consider, in separate chapters, how to write up studies, present them to different audiences, and also highlight some of the criteria that have been used to evaluate action research studies. Chapter 8: Writing Clinical Action Research Studies examines what to write and how to convey action

research projects in different ways. It focuses on the key areas to address in the writing of action research studies and the differences between internal report writing, writing for a higher degree and writing articles for publication in academic and peer-reviewed 'popular' journals. We also consider the challenges, criticism and creativity that exist in writing up action research studies. Chapter 9: Presenting Clinical Action Research Studies to Mixed Audiences has some important points about getting your message across in different settings, specifically knowing your audience, the requirements of effective presentation and new media and the mass media. The last chapter of Section 4 is Chapter 10: Evaluating the Quality of Action Research Projects, in which we argue that action researchers, funding bodies, ethics committees, participants and readers need a shared understanding of how to evaluate the quality of action research proposals, projects and written reports. We provide some ideas and examine some tools which can be useful in doing that.

The last chapter of the book provides some concluding material, and we have called it Looking to the Future because as well as summarising what we have achieved in the book it also looks at how action research might undergo further growth in the UK as a result of policy changes and developments and the need for continuous development of clinical practice. We also take a global perspective by examining some of the studies that have been undertaken since 2000 and published in selected journals. Our concluding remarks indicate that we see a growing use of action research in healthcare settings as practitioners, researchers and academics seek to work together to affect beneficial change in clinical practice settings.

We are grateful to our critical reviewers, Professor David Coghlan and Dr Angela Grainger, for their insightful feedback on many of the following chapters. We are also grateful to Professor Brendan McCormack for supporting the book proposal, and to the team at SAGE for their constructive comments and advice at all stages of the process.

**Graham R Williamson, Loretta Bellman
and Jonathan Webster**

SECTION 1

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

1

FOUNDATIONS OF ACTION RESEARCH

Graham R Williamson

It is important to understand the foundations of action research and to explore different approaches to action research as there are subtle differences of emphasis and suitability for different situations.

Chapter objectives

This chapter will examine:

- some of the philosophical issues underpinning action research and outline the work of early theorists, including Kurt Lewin's pioneering work and the influence of critical theory
- some of the key theoretical and interrelated aspects of action research, including:
 - human inquiry, cooperative inquiry and action science/action inquiry
 - participatory action research
 - action research and **feminsim**
 - appreciative inquiry

Introduction

Simply put, action research is a process by which change is achieved and new knowledge about a situation is generated. These two objectives go hand-in-hand to a greater or lesser degree in most action research studies: it is difficult to change a situation without working to understand it more fully, and in trying better to understand things, the possibilities for change often emerge.

Coghlan and Brannick (2010) outline four broad characteristics of action research. These are:

- 1 Action research is about research *in* action rather than *about* action. Thus a 'scientific' process of inquiry is used in social settings to link important issues with those who experience them.
- 2 It is a collaborative, **democratic** process, meaning that there is active participation of those who experience the situation in working towards solutions. This is distinct from traditional research approaches, both quantitative and qualitative, where research participants are subjects rather than collaborators.
- 3 Action and knowledge are joined so that change occurs while there is a simultaneous process of knowledge generation.
- 4 It is a sequence of events and an approach to problem solving which contributes to knowledge and understanding.

Box 1.1

This is a lengthy quote, which illustrates the challenge of being able clearly to define AR! For Waterman et al. (2001: iii), action research is

a period of inquiry that describes, interprets and explains social situations while executing a change intervention aimed at improvement and involvement. It is problem-focused, context-specific and future-oriented...founded on partnership...educative and empowering. ... Knowledge may be advanced through reflection and research, and qualitative and quantitative research methods may be employed to collect data.

Action research has been described (Reason and Bradbury 2006) as a 'new **paradigm**' in its focusing of research on participation and change. Research approaches are frequently discussed as coming from qualitative or quantitative **paradigms**, and although there is discussion and debate in the methodological literature concerning the underpinning theoretical positions each occupies, they are still frequently discussed as quite different ways of thinking about and doing research (there is more on this in Chapter 2). Quantitative research seeks to demonstrate an external reality through manipulation and control of variables and is based on a tradition of objectivity and **positivism**. This is frequently contrasted with qualitative research, which comes from a **hermeneutic** or **interpretivist paradigm**, in which the ability of human beings to construct and understand their lives is emphasised, and there is no fixed external reality (these arguments are more fully explored in Chapter 2). While some argue that this qualitative/quantitative dichotomy is a false one

(Morrow and Brown 1994), it is clear that action research fits fully with neither of these traditions, but has features of each, in that a process of change is applied to social life, whereas the reflexive nature of individuals and groups within any setting is also emphasised. This can be radical as it challenges traditional research approaches, existing forms of social organisation in the workplace and in society (Coghlan and Brannick 2010), and is described as **democratic** and participatory.

Action research has been quite recently adopted by healthcare professionals seeking to develop aspects of their practice and that of their organisations. It is not simply a 'tool' for practice development or change management; it has a long history in many sectors, and roots and a philosophical tradition which, arguably, go back to the early part of the twentieth century.

Philosophical issues and action research

The philosophical issues encompass the extent to which participation and change can be fostered in action research, and it is important to consider these because they provide a different emphasis and intention from traditional research approaches. A foundation stone for action research appears to lie in the political philosophy of the critical theorists.

Critical theory

Originally a term associated with the Marxist-oriented Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, which was founded in Germany in 1923, 'critical theory' is now taken to mean an approach to social sciences that offers a critique of existing social relations as well as a perspective on how things should be changed, developed or improved. The original Frankfurt School included 'famous names' from the broad field of sociology and psychology, such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Fromm, many of whom moved to Columbia University in the USA in the 1930s to avoid Nazism. A 'second generation', including figures such as Offe, and Habermas, was influential in the 1960s and beyond, with Marcuse in particular influencing **democratic** and political reforms in favour of the 'new social movements', which sought greater freedoms for groups such as women, ethnic minorities and followers of single-issue politics such as the Green movement (Bronner and Kellner 1989).

Critical theory is seen as an 'antidote' to the quantitative or '**positivist**' tradition in research, which is argued to be uncritical, and therefore unlikely to generate social change (Bronner and Kellner 1989). The underlying premise of critical theory is concerned with human happiness and that this

can be attained only by transforming all aspects of social life (Marcuse 1989). Critical theorists' focus is on the issue of domination: how some groups in society control all aspects of the lives of others, and thus inhibit those in oppressed groups from realising their full potential. Following Marx, critical theorists argue that economic power and class are the roots of oppression and the crucial factor is changing these existing power relations. Some critical theorists thus have an interest in beneficial change, or 'transformative praxis' (Morrow and Brown 1994: 27; although it is not the case that all critical theorists unambiguously associate 'critical theory' and a drive towards 'praxis') and their work is frequently described as being concerned with **emancipation** (Kellner 1989).

••• REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 1.1 •••

- 1 What is your understanding of the term 'praxis'?
 - 2 What is the additional meaning implied by adding 'transformative' to make 'transformative praxis'?
 - 3 How would you define the concept of '**emancipation**'?
-

••• ANSWERS •••

- 1 Praxis means a process by which a theory or skill is applied to the real world. It also has a political meaning: to change social relations, with connotations of theory and practice informing each other as change occurs. It can also mean 'making visible' and acting upon one's values.
 - 2 While different authors use the term differently, it seems as if adding the term 'transformative' implies the intention on the part of authors to change aspects of social life in conjunction with those with whom they are interacting. There is an explicit 'looking forward' to the achievement of greater equality, or social justice, or overturning of exploitative power relations. 'Transformative praxis' thus has a more overtly political tone than using the term 'praxis' alone.
 - 3 **Emancipation** means to become free or be set free. In the context of critical theory, **emancipation** can mean freedom from oppression or exploitation, in terms of economic power, gender relations or ethnicity.
-

Habermas's critical social science

The work of Habermas may be unfamiliar to you but it can provide a philosophical basis for change in contemporary society. Habermas (1981) identifies three **knowledge-constitutive paradigms**, underpinning what he calls the 'empirical-analytical', the 'historical-**hermeneutic**' and the 'critical' sciences. The empirical-analytical sciences' base is technical control of the natural world. This instrumental knowledge generates rules, which the **Natural sciences** use for explanation and prediction (Carr and Kemmis 1986), for example as in quantitative research. The historical-**hermeneutic** sciences owe their genesis to the need for effective communication in contemporary societies, both between individuals and traditions and between different traditions. Methods in the historical-**hermeneutic** sciences are interpretive and 'practical', allowing people to understand their social worlds and their histories (Carr and Kemmis 1986), as for example in qualitative research; where communication breaks down, interaction becomes problematic. However, it would appear that only the 'critical' sciences offer the potential for transcending the constraints of the former two sciences, to grasp at **emancipation**: action research is taken as an example of a research technique from the critical sciences (Morrow and Brown 1994). This **emancipation** does not, for Habermas, preclude using either empirical-analytical, or historical-**hermeneutic** methods, but the potential for self-reflection is implicitly critical, challenging dysfunctional and oppressive structures whether they are political, economic, social or organisational. Thus an ethical dimension can be re-introduced into contemporary social life (Carr and Kemmis 1986), and praxis can be established as a guiding principle in social science research.

However, identifying and establishing praxis as a central tenet of contemporary life is problematic, not least because there may be many interpretations of what challenges there should be, how praxis can be identified and sustained, and what constitutes a new ethical dimension. For Carr and Kemmis (1986), Habermas's critical social science cannot reconcile the need for praxis with the need to meet the 'scientific' **positivist** notions of rigour which society has come to expect in research. Even so, Habermas shows that social science can claim **validity** based on shared understanding rather than the laws of the **natural sciences**, meaning that consensus about the **validity** of a discourse is not subject to the measurement of objective criteria but is a **democratic** event, as people participate equally in what he refers to as the 'ideal speech act'. This discourse involves four **validity** claims: (1) that what is said is *true*; (2) that the utterance is *comprehensible*; (3) that the speaker is *sincere*; and (4) that it is *right* for the speaker to be speaking.

For social scientists, Habermas implicitly calls for change-centred action, as critical social science is about the development of theory, the organisation

of learning processes and the organisation of action: political 'doing', aimed at **emancipation**. In this manner, social scientists can facilitate 'communicative action', which tests the accuracy, sincerity and rightness of social processes, including organisational life. For Habermas, social life in contemporary society has been appropriated by purposive-rational action and functional reason, meaning that mutual understanding and consensus are virtually suspended in modern organisational life: people are divided and fragmented by the social relations of bureaucracy and expert systems (Kemmis 1996); they simply get on with the job but this is not cost-free, causing crises borne by individuals and systems. As work roles become increasingly elaborate and differentiated, communities are increasingly difficult to sustain, and there is an 'uncoupling' of system and **lifeworld** (see below) for those who inhabit them (Habermas 1987).

Habermas and action research

For Kemmis (2006), action researchers engage with the Habermas thesis, as they explicitly act on three kinds of **lifeworld processes**. These are: (1) the process of individuation-socialisation, by which participants' identities are formed; (2) social integration, forming and developing social relations; and (3) cultural reproduction, by which shared cultures and discourses are developed. Moreover, action researchers investigate and seek to change the ways in which participants are enmeshed in systems functioning. Kemmis (2006) argues that action research (AR) is an opportunity to create communicative action in participants as it illustrates and improves the alienating nature of contemporary organisations by its imperative to participate.

However, the action research movement predated Habermas by many years, and so Habermas provides retrospectively a philosophical background for methodologies advocated by action researchers (Kemmis and McTaggart 1990). Also, it is worth reflecting that although Habermas (1981) argues that contemporary societies should look critically at the over-arching dominance of **natural science** understanding, it is here that a key question arises for critical theory and similarly for action research, that is: Whose **emancipation** are we talking about? In critical theory there is an assumption that the 'common good' will appear from collective action, but this is by no means certain as what is good for one group or individual is not necessarily good for others, and the will of the majority is not necessarily clearly expressed or unconditionally good. Action researchers must be clear that they themselves do not simply impose the majority will on others as this would be oppressive.

The diversity of action research

Kurt Lewin's pioneering work

Kurt Lewin is frequently credited with pioneering early AR work (Dickens and Watkins 1999; McNiff 1988), and with coining the term 'action research' (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Greenwood and Levin 1998), although there is debate about the extent to which he inherited the idea from others (McNiff and Whitehead 2002). Lewin criticised his contemporaries' disconnected academic research, saying 'research that produces nothing but books will not suffice' (Lewin 1946: 35). He was convinced that social scientists should develop and apply techniques to equip groups with the ability to change aspects of their social or organisational lives for themselves (McNiff 1988). He conceptualised action research as a spiral methodology involving discrete phases (Lewin 1946):

- first, a planning or fact-finding phase, beginning with a general idea following extended 'diagnosis', and next,
- the implementation or execution of the plan, with this 'experimental' phase followed by further fact finding to evaluate the results of the action.

Lewin's (1946) work on 'minority problems describes a four-step cycle of action research (Figure 1.1), and he advocates repeated turns around the cycle so that the experience gained in the evaluation phase can be reapplied to the experimental phase.

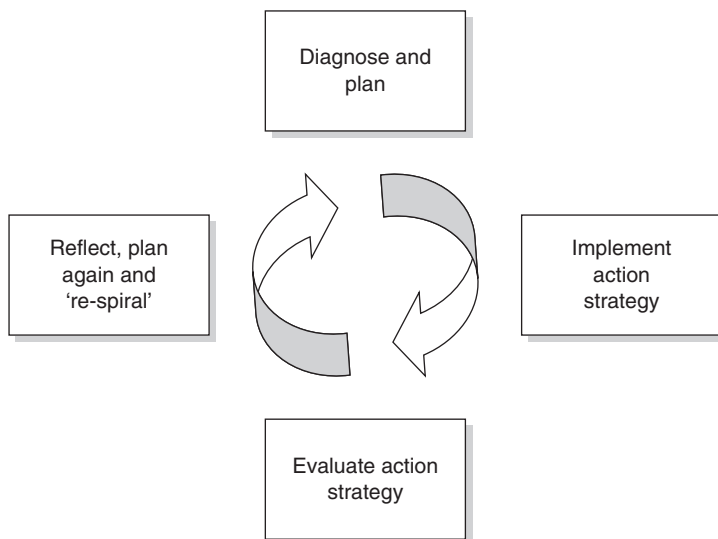


Figure 1.1 Action research spiral framework (adapted from Lewin 1946)

However, a critical evaluation of this spiral framework indicates that it has certain weaknesses (Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001).

- 1 It appears to oversimplify a complex iterative process, suggesting that the overall 'goal' in AR remains fixed when this is frequently not the case.
- 2 The emphasis on repeated spirals implies that AR must have a long time scale when this need not be the case.
- 3 AR seems difficult to distinguish from everyday interaction with colleagues, and so a criticism is whether or not AR really is a 'research' methodology.

Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001) continue by saying that AR is actually an ideal methodology for changing workplace practice, and the emphasis on reflection means that new knowledge and understanding are generated.

In work aimed at changing eating habits, Lewin (1966) demonstrated the relative efficacy of group decision-making processes compared to experts' exhortations by setting up a series of 'experiments' using his spiral AR methodology. In a study which aimed to alter mothers' preferences for certain foods, he examined whether his female participants would serve orange juice, cod liver oil, and fresh and evaporated milk to their families. He found that they were much more likely to introduce these 'new' foods when involved in a group decision-making process as opposed to receiving only a health education lecture. He was able to show that he could change elements of a pre-existing social system.

Although Lewin discusses 'experimentation' as predictive of participants' behaviour and sees the social system as relatively fixed following his 'intervention', unlike in a traditional scientific **paradigm**, results are studied in order to adjust the strategy and to refine it. There are no tightly set limits or controls on the 'experimentation', and the action researcher approaches the participants in their 'natural' state (Dickens and Watkins 1999).

Lewin's work was the building block for today's AR movement, setting the stage for a methodology that produces knowledge for the solution of real-world problems. He developed a new role for the researcher, and redefined criteria for judging the inquiry process. He also 'relocated' researchers, so that instead of disconnected observation, participation and concrete problem solving are central to their role. This was a radical departure from previous 'command and control' strategies intended to regulate workers' lives (Greenwood and Levin 1998), meaning that, rather than simply diffusing or disseminating new ideas in academic journals, action researchers are

instrumental in the implementation of solutions to the problems they help to identify (Sitzia 2001).

Varieties of action research

Although in the following discussion the major strands of AR are treated distinctly, they are by no means so distinct, and there is a considerable overlapping and sharing of ideas, despite a somewhat different emphasis. These slightly different perspectives are included so that readers can get a flavour of the AR work that has taken place.

Human inquiry, cooperative inquiry and action science/action inquiry

Human inquiry, cooperative inquiry and action science/action inquiry are closely related AR strands (Greenwood and Levin 1998). The central emphasis is on human experience and engagement, as distinct from today's perceived alienated living.

Human inquiry

For Reason, AR is a philosophical movement with an approach to living as much as a research approach, and it is not only about the search for truth, but should 'heal' (Reason 1994a: 10) the alienation of modern existence. Critics may see this as a call for bias, but this is false as, he argues, human beings are fundamentally located in the world, not abstracted from it. **Positivistic** principles bring a detrimental loss of relationships with other people, but this can be overcome by participation. This is a **dialectical** process of change where tension and contradiction drive forward the evolution of a future participatory human consciousness.

Cooperative inquiry

Cooperative inquiry is a variant of AR which is about finding ways of working with people who have similar concerns in order to understand the shared aspects of their worlds and to learn how to act to change things for the better (Heron and Reason 2006). Its micro-political format encourages individuals and groups to cooperate against controlling authoritarian processes (Heron 2001), and it has roots in humanistic psychology. Cooperative inquiry seeks 'authentic communication', for which orthodox social science methodology is inadequate as it excludes human beings from decision-making processes in research. In cooperative inquiry, those involved should be reciprocating co-researchers, reflecting the essential self-determining character of human

beings. It takes place in four phases of action and reflection, which rely on certain ideas about the nature of knowledge. These are:

- that co-researchers identify research propositions based on their experience, and identify procedures to observe and record their experience (propositional knowledge);
- that these procedures are applied to their everyday life and work, searching for nuisances and subtleties in the work (practical knowing);
- that new insights arise for the researchers as a result of their engagement in the project, developing an openness that allows them to bracket off personal beliefs to see the issues in a new way (experiential knowledge);
- that after a time in phase three, co-researchers return to their original propositions, reconsider and modify them in the light of experience, reformulating and reframing the question. This phase involves returning with a critical perspective to co-researchers' propositional knowledge (Reason, 1994b) (see Figure 1.2).

Critical examination of Figure 1.2 indicates how action research links insights from participants' real-world experience with a drive to change social situations in a similar fashion to that identified by Lewin (1946) and presented in Figure 1.1 (Reason (1994b) and Heron and Reason (2006)). What neither figure shows is how this circular two-dimensional representation is

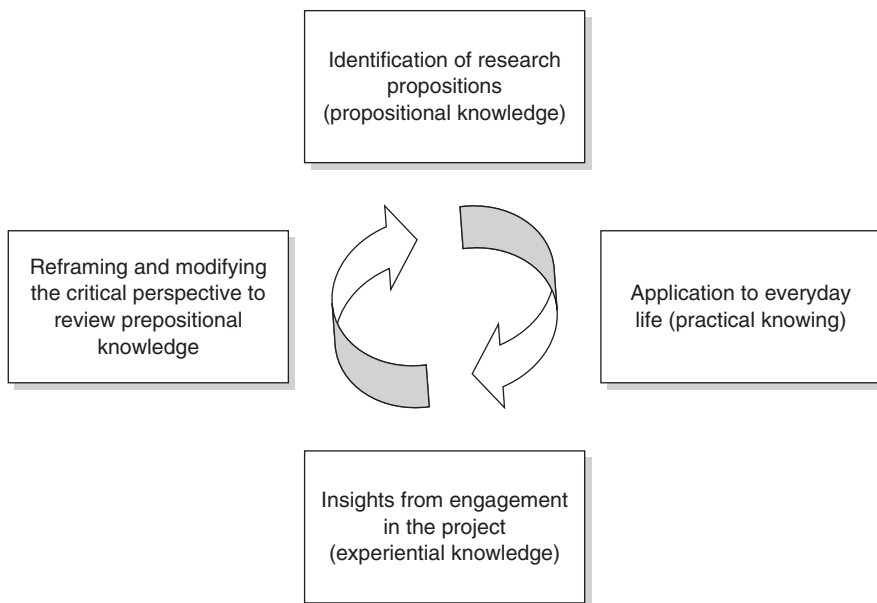


Figure 1.2 Four-phase spiral of action and reflection (adapted from Reason 1994b and Heron and Reason 2006)

actually a three-dimensional spiral in which action researchers can reflect on and revisit their understanding with new insights gained from the project.

Action inquiry and action science

In action inquiry and action science, there is an emphasis on developing effective action to transform organisations, producing greater effectiveness and justice (Reason 1994b). Central to action science are two cognitive theories of action. These are espoused theories, which individuals claim to use, and theories-in-use, which can be inferred from actions (Argyris and Schön 1974). These may be consistent or inconsistent, and the actor may or may not be aware of any inconsistency. In organisations, there are two models of action relating to cognitive theories-in-use. Model I is a defensive and self-protective theory, and Model II encourages free choice and open inquiry (Argyris and Schön 1974; Reason 1994b; Coghlan and Brannick 2010). Overcoming organisational defensiveness is a key element in action science to enable personal learning and practice development.

In action inquiry, organisations create structures to enable learning to take place so that individuals can become self-reflective about their work practices (Reason 1994b). For Torbert (2006), all action is a form of inquiry. Individuals and organisations need to go beyond the single-loop nature of learning from the impact and consequences of immediate actions only, to the more powerful double-loop reconstruction of personal and professional life strategies. However, it can be difficult to be self-reflective, and traditional social science research does not offer a means for doing this. Therefore, action inquiry is required to study both the 'outside' of the external universe as well as the 'inside' of 'territories of experience' (Torbert 2006: 208). There are four of these, which Torbert calls:

- visioning, which is a planning function looking to the future;
- strategising, which is developing ways of moving forward;
- performing, which is about carrying out the strategies; and
- assessing, which is about deciding on successes, failures and future actions.

Thus there is an emphasis on cognitive transformations in the individual, located in a wider organisational context (Greenwood and Levin 1998).

Participatory action research

Participatory action research (PAR) emphasises the emancipatory potential inherent in AR methodology, involving a transformation of some aspect of a community's situation or structures. It focuses on issues of power, the exclusion

of the powerless from decision-making and how they can be included (Coghlan and Brannick 2010), and harnesses the lived experience of oppressed groups (Reason 1994b). It has an explicitly critical stance, which paradoxically seeks to transform the wider social order but is usually most effective in local situations (Healy 2001).

For Koch and Kralik (2006), there is an explicitly transformative agenda in their PAR work (examples of their work are discussed in Chapter 3), one that seeks to liberate, empower and reform situations as well as give substance to the voices of participants, who may previously have been excluded and marginalised. Their overriding concern is with ‘making a difference’ and their methodological approach is informed by critical theory and feminist thought. Thus PAR is a form of action directed towards social change which also includes a strong element of consciousness-raising: enabling participants to see how they may unwittingly contribute to their own oppression through discussion and reflection, and helping them to develop ways of overcoming it. This can be an explicitly political purpose where the intention is to restore power to oppressed groups. PAR is intended to go beyond abstracted ‘scientific’ methodology and narrowly focused Lewin-type AR to lay foundations for change in social conditions which communities themselves fashion. It is critical of ineffective research techniques, exhibits a radical social conscience, and demands **democratic** participation to find better scientific, technical and social ways to improve living conditions (Fals Borda 2006). In healthcare settings, PAR may not be so overtly political but is more concerned with changing practices and understanding of needs; while change is central, generating new knowledge is also an important consideration.

In PAR, researchers and participants systematically work in cycles to explore issues that have an impact on the lives of participants (Koch and Kralik 2006). A simple, three-stage cyclical approach of ‘Look, Think and Act’ (which Koch and Kralik adapted from Stringer’s 1999 work; see Figure 1.3) gives structure as well as flexibility to the work, as it enables researchers and participants to focus on a particular area, reflect on and discuss its characteristics, and then reconstruct these experiences and decide courses of action.

This structure is not rigid or prescriptive and moves along according to the needs and requirements of participants. Research meetings may include Looking, Thinking and Action planning all together or may simply focus on one element. In the Looking phase, a picture is created of the issue in question. In the Think phase, there is a focus on interpreting and explaining things. In the Act phase, action is taken to resolve issues and this action is evaluated. Frequently, more than one cycle is undertaken.

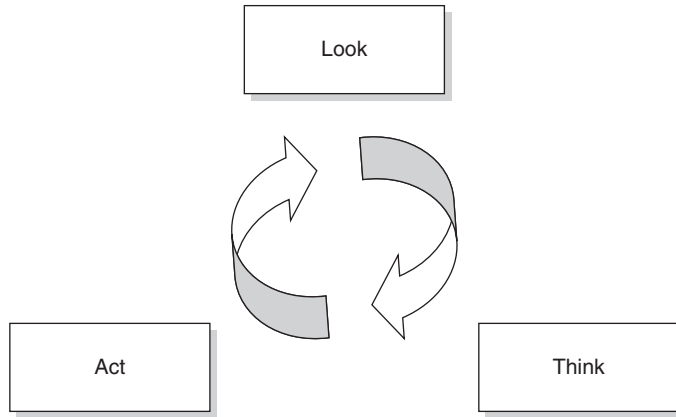


Figure 1.3 PAR cycles 'Look, Think and Act' (adapted from Koch and Kralik 2006: 28)

PAR is a community-based approach in that a community is constructed and maintained in which the researchers and participants are considered to be on an equal level, with the premise that a social situation or organisation ought to change for the better to enhance the lives of its members. Thus (drawing on Stringer's 1999 work) Koch and Kralik (2006; Figure 1.3) describe PAR as:

- **democratic,**
- **equitable,**
- **liberating, and**
- **life-enhancing.**

Critical examination of Koch and Kralik's (2006) framework indicates that, similar to Lewin's (1946) spiral, it would appear to simplify too much what Koch and Kralik (2006) themselves identify as flexible and complex action research processes, and again does not acknowledge fully the spiral nature of action research.

••• REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 1.2 •••

- Identify an area from work life with which you are not content. Explain why you are not content. Are there elements of power and powerlessness in what you identify?