

Action Research: from Theory to Practice

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Abstract

Action Research is a research approach that is constantly evolving in social sciences and management. Although this approach is deemed contentious, many positivist researchers have expressed their dissatisfaction and questioned its validity as a scientific methodology that adheres to rigorous research methods and standards. On the other hand, several researchers, particularly those who are considered practitioners of applied research, have discussed and defended action research as a viable methodology for generating knowledge, developing solutions, and contributing to the knowledge development of one's own, one's organization's, and one's community, while promoting and taking actions to solve business and socio-economic problems in a rapidly changing and unpredictably volatile environment. Historically, the validity of Action Research as a branch of epistemology has been debated in conjunction with the topic of the validity of Action Research in relation to traditional research. This research paper is an attempt to discuss and clarify the ambiguity behind the characteristics of the action research and present its most essential aspects and competitive advantages in different field, with strong emphasize on the role of researchers or practitioners and their active collaboration with organizations to generate sustainable action-based learning and integrated at the individual and organizational levels.

Keywords: Theory; Practice; social sciences; management; Lebanon.

1. Introduction

Historically, descriptive research approaches have been used to study managerial challenges in various businesses, placing researchers as spectators rather than problem solvers and agents of change. Despite the debate about the nature of action research, how researchers carry out their research and for what purposes, there is general agreement that action research has an identity of it and should not be spoken about in terms of traditional forms of research [1]. Action research is a critical approach to social science study that has evolved significantly over the six decades [2]. Numerous organizational scientists are increasingly casting doubt on the most fundamental premise behind their research. This assessment of organizational science's aims, methodologies, and techniques is evident in action research.

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The practitioners of action research require a research process that applies to both the practitioner tasked with resolving a set of problems and the scholar mandated with contributing to the progress of academic knowledge in management research. It is possible that action research will be a useful research tool since it will allow the application of social sciences to organizational life to take place. Due to these developments in numerous industries, action research has been investigated in a more general framework, with the argument that when complicated managerial and administrative obstacles are perceived and understood as social problems, action research can be a useful instrument. Besides that, proponents of action research believe that it is capable of resolving the difficult link that exists between theory and practice.

This paper examines the factors that support the practicality of action research as a way of bridging the divide between theory and practice, as well as the key characteristics, viewpoints, approaches, methods, and tools of action research that contribute to this hypothesis and explains how action research responds to the business requirements of different business and socio-economic field. The remainder of this paper is structured as follow: The first section is a literature review of the history and definition of action research, then the characteristics of action research are presented in the second section followed by a detailed explanation about how action research is considered an effective tool to bridge the gap between theory and practice and finally the conclusion with the main takeaways of this research.

2. The History Action Research

In action research, the term refers to a specific technique for studying the context of a problem through the process of learning. It is a hands-on approach to practice that involves learning via action and reflection. It is used in a variety of industries, including management, education, social science, change management, and organizational development, to promote learning and development. Originated from the field of “Organizational Research” which has been developed into different disciplinaries and particularly in social psychology, sociology and management sciences [3]. It has been determined that the Organizational Research approach is divided into two schools, one focusing on quantitative approaches and the other expanding into a qualitative and constructivist paradigm. Despite the range of qualitative approaches within the Organizational Development discipline, Action Research is included in the second stream.

Alternatively, it is beneficial to split down the term “Action Research” into its constituent parts, Action and Research and describe each of them individually. As defined within this context, Action refers to the activists who identify problems that require a solution and work collaboratively with others to find solutions for the problems. They are motivated to improve the situation in which they find themselves, whether it is within the society, an organization or a firm or a particular business industry. Researchers, on the other hand, perceive connections between events and outcomes, they search for and develop evidence to comprehend the long process of change, and they are motivated to generate new ideas to serve the change in their particular settings. By combining the two terms once again, it becomes clear that Action Researchers plan and research change through both examination of evidence and reflection on their own participation in the process of change, and that they are motivated to develop new ideas to tackle pressing business-related challenges in a constructive approach.

Since 1947, action research has been used as a study approach under several designations, including Action Learning by [4], Participatory Action Research by [5] and Action Inquiry by [6]. However, when looking at the literature from a chronological viewpoint, there was a consensus that the term Action Research was used for the first time by Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist who worked in the United States during World War II; the representation of "action research" was first used in 1944, based on [7] the study encouraged social action through democratic decision-making and active participation of practitioners in the research process and was supposed to be referred to by this phrase. Lewin has believed that through conducting action research, he would be able to develop theory while also bringing about the necessary social transformation at the same time.

The Definition of Action Research

Action Research is a type of applied social research differing from other varieties in the immediacy of the researcher's involvement in the action process [8]. Rapoport distinguishes action research from other research methodologies in the opening statement of his paper by the direct involvement of the research by the action process itself and links the engagement of the researcher of the practitioner and the organization with the change management process.

In addition to the two aspects related to the researcher from the perspective of the knowledge or objective of research and the perspective of the cooperation to change from the organization side, a third dimension was introduced with the main aim to develop the self-help competencies of people facing problem added in 1978 [9]. These three dimensions help in shaping the notion of action research as a type of epistemology that combines theory, practice, and self-knowledge to provide improved theories, practical solutions to socioeconomic issues in organization, along with the contribution to the general knowledge.

3. The Characteristics of Action Research

Action research is a type of in-depth contemplation that entails acting to address difficulties or problems, followed by a methodical procedure for learning from the outcomes of one's efforts. The action researcher deliberately introduces repetitive cycles of change into a social system and, in collaboration with others, evaluates any system modifications, reflects on the process and shares these insights with others. The idea that knowledge is landed in the experience, along with an analytic approach to evidence, followed by reflective integration, is shared by most, if not all, methods of action research. This section will go over the basic characteristics of action research and lay the groundwork for explaining how action research aids in the translation of theory to practice.

A Cyclic Process

The most common definition of action research focuses on the objectives, m, action research can also be viewed as a cyclical process with five phases: diagnosing, action planning, action taking, evaluating, and specifying learning. [9]. By working through a series of reflective stages that enable the development of progressive problem solutions, action research provides a method of learning from and through the researcher's activity. These stages of the cyclic process are as follow: diagnosing, action planning, action taking, evaluating, and

specifying learning [9].

Collaborative, Operational and Practical

One of the critical characteristics of Action Research is the participation of the client or organization in the research process because they are the owners of the problem and because part of the knowledge is located inside the institution itself. Action Research has the characteristics of being operational and practical because the practitioner becomes actively involved in the functioning of the organization and gains access to the organization's institutional knowledge as a result of this collaborative component. When a researcher and an institution work together dynamically, it prevents the researcher from acting as an objective observer. Instead, it compels him to clarify and reflect on their ethics and values so that they, along with those of the institution system, can serve as criteria against which to evaluate the change activities planned in conjunction with them.

Advanced and Foresightful

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As stated in the introduction, Action Research is motivated by objectives and encourages participation, particularly in planning. This engagement in the research process usually ushers in joint development of ideas and the formation of solutions, which in turn leads to the construction of a shared knowledge that can be used for many years in advance via this ongoing re-capitalization of expertise and planning between the researcher and the organization. In other words, action research is relevant to foresight in opening a visioning process to many stakeholders in authentic ways, of making pie in the sky' visions grounded in local context and real practice. [10].

Sceptic and Agnostic

Each new study or a situation requires the action researcher to recognize that their hypotheses and concepts for action are the product of previous work, and as such, they must be revisited, reevaluated and improved. The action researcher also acknowledges that the research's goals, problem, and approach must be developed via the process itself, and that the consequences of selected actions cannot be fully known ahead of time [9].

The Importance of Qualitative Data Collection

Data triangulation is one of the data collection techniques used in action research. It focuses on the collaboration or combining of data from diverse sources, which in this case are the researcher, the context, and the client or organization. This partnership leads to the validation of the data gathered, which provides the researcher with the credibility needed throughout the action phase. However, the conventional research community criticized the emphasis on qualitative data collection, which claims that action research is a soft research method from a scientific perspective [11] As a result, those employing an action research methodology may be challenged by other researchers unfamiliar with this approach to legitimize their research [12] and thus require additional validation through qualitative methods not commonly used in conventional research, such as focus groups discussions, observations and key informant interviews.

4. Bridging The Gap Between Theory and Practice

Positivists were generally of the view that knowledge revealed through science was superior to that produced from values, feelings, or untested experience because of its adherence to scrupulously objective and unbiased methods. [13]. Teaching and Learning are two very different things and discussing the distinction between them is a reasonably simple approach to illustrating the gap between theory and practice. While teaching is the process of passing knowledge and information from the teacher to the students in a classroom, Learning is the process by which this knowledge and information is digested by the students, stored, practiced, and capitalized. Teaching and learning are two process that are connected but distinct from one another; this representation of the distinction lays the groundwork for demonstrating the gap between theory and practice from an organizational perspective. This section aims to describe the most significant manifestations of this gap from the perspective of managers and executives, intending to discuss later how action research, with its characteristics explained in the previous section, can fill this gap.

Understanding the Meaning Vs. Predicting the Results.

A common sentiment among positivists was that scientific knowledge was superior to information derived from values, presumptions, or untested experience since scientific knowledge was based on strictly impartial and unbiased techniques. Because theory provides testable propositions, positivist advised that theory and practice should be kept apart as much as possible. It was thought that occupying the area of cognition that develops connections or causal ties among things theory was a step forward from basic tales and views. In contrast to this concept of epistemology adopted by conventional researchers or positivists, who are primarily concerned with discovering and predicting the correlations between two or more variables in a given situation. Action researchers focus on grasping the underlying meaning and reflecting on it in a participatory manner through the cycling approach described in the preceding section. Hence, the process of action research then becomes understanding the world as the participants have come to understand it [14].

A Perfect Theory Versus An Operational Solution

In their book about applied science, Stephen Steel and Jammie Price explains that all sciences have at least two paths: basic (pure) science and applied science [15] Whereas fundamental and pure sciences are concerned with

the development of "immaculate theories," the goal of applied sciences is to find practical solutions to real-world issues. The application or utilization of any sociological technique or approach to first understand, then intervene, learn while intervening, and finally solve the problem in order to better the position of human beings, societies, or organizations is referred to as applied social sciences.

Through the same lens of applied social sciences, with the goal of solving a real-world problem. Organizational managers and executives have struggled to find solutions to their organizational difficulties through conventional research alone. Therefore, It could be argued that traditional methods of social research are "theory focused" and thus have little value for managers and practitioners.

To address this concern, it is essential to explain that running an effective operation is an ambiguous and continuous challenge for the organization, the executives in charge of the organization, and the researchers. Conventional research has not always provided the complete toolkit to solve this challenge, and many incidental questions are always asked throughout the management journey of researchers and managers, such as what could have been done better? Is it possible to implement a specific solution in a different way than it was originally intended? Most importantly, what did the company, and consequently the broader market, learn as a result of using a particular solution? There is no doubt that the utilization of fundamental research by positivists is crucial to the formation of new knowledge in the academia and the world of business. On the other hand, with its results focusing on learning and action, action research may be more valuable to both managers and researchers in this regard.

Action Research as A Sustainable Approach

Zuber-Skerrit Ortun explains in his book "Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World" how participatory action learning and action research are fundamental approaches to achieving sustainability in action and proposing solutions to business and socio-economic problems in today's rapidly changing world. Participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) offers the most effective approaches to problem solving and sustainable development [16] modern world of business and socio-economic problems. Ortun explains in his book that traditional research methods are insufficient to address complex business problems and that action research provides an innovative set of tools that promotes participation and learning while taking action. Ortun also discusses how traditional research versus action research approaches the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) from a socioeconomic perspective. One of the primary characteristics of action research highlighted in his study is that it is self-driven and does not adhere to the lengthy and rigid requirements of traditional research; rather, it promotes democratic and effective evidence-based decision making through the participator's active engagement with the organization and the accumulation of knowledge through reflection on institutional knowledge and problem-solving.. This approach (participatory action research) requires self directed lifelong learning and ad hoc decision making rather than rote learning and adhering to strict rules that more often than not impede progress and rapid change [16].

Due to the rapid changes nature of problems, aggressive competition on the limited global resources, and unpredictability of the business and socio-economic issues, along with the additional factors of globalization and

environmental issues like climate change that are affecting how organizations react towards their issues and communities, action research as an ontology is becoming a more reliable type of epistemology and is pushed to the front-end given its embracement of participation in planning, leadership and learning at the individual, institutional and community levels.

The Advantages of Action Research During Pandemics

One of the sectors in which Action Research has demonstrated its relevance and efficacy is the medical field mainly in response to pandemics. Within the action research capacity, numerous socio-economic and medical researchers have actively participated in collaborative studies with medical firms and within the population to contribute to the effort of minimizing the devastating impact of the pandemic and improve the efficiency of vaccination. Based on the same approach that have been previously explained, when all parties of a research participate together in the research process and the implementation of a solution, more relevant knowledge will result. During the last two decades, governments around the globe have invested significant efforts and resources to develop effective vaccination strategies. However, participatory action research (PAR) methodology was useful to identify innovative and targeted recommendations for increasing vaccine uptake. [17]. Moreover, one of the primary differences between Action Research and traditional conventional research is the effectiveness of this approach in developing risk reduction and mitigation measures collaboratively with the participation and inclusion of all stakeholders, allowing for the implementation of these measures at the organizational or national level without encountering significant opposition to change. The application of action research during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the impact of this crisis on the different research methodologies, are some of the topics that could be explored in the future within the same scope, in order to add one more layer of validation to the effectiveness of action research in today's context.

The Tension Between Managers and Social Scientists

In his book about Controversies in Management, Alan Berkeley Thomas describes an interesting tension between the interests and needs of managers and the social scientists. [18] Thomas summarized the mismatch between managers and social scientist in three points.

To begin, Thomas (1993) points out a weak to a non-negligible form of integration between diverse social scientific fields, such as sociology, psychology, and economics, among others. It should be no surprise that researchers in these areas face difficulty communicating across disciplinary borders because simply they use different terminology, theories, and research techniques. However, when looking at the curriculum for management programs, this becomes very evident [2]. It is not uncommon to find would-be managers specializing in one or a few functional areas while paying little attention to the theoretical foundations of specific disciplines, such as organizational behavior and finance and accounting. On the one hand, subjects such as organizational behavior and finance and accounting draw heavily from psychological and sociological theories, while topics such as accounting and finance rely heavily on the theoretical foundations of finance, economics, mathematics, and operational management. This continues in their jobs due to the increased level of specialization required by the nature of their work environment. According to [18], this is one of basic

justification and reasons why most executives in the business world do not prioritize or believe that social sciences are practical and helpful in the workplace nowadays.

The second argument advanced by Thomas (1993) is that the issues faced by managers and the difficulties faced by social scientists are opposed. This argument is evolving in many fields. For example the Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) sector where ICT practitioners argue that research in the information management is becoming more irrelevant, unreadable and unreachable [19]. With the same concerns in other disciplines as well, it is reasonable to assert that there is an underlying dialectic difference between social science and practice, or between academics and management practices, because they embody two distinct, focused, self-centered objectives with conflicting targets and priorities. The last argument raised by [18] is that there is a dearth of social integration between social scientists and business executives. The requirements of social scientists and managers are rather different. When it comes to contributing to knowledge in their academic environment, social scientists have a wide range of employment interests and preferences. Managers, on the other hand, have a wide range of career interests and aspirations in their business and industrial environments. Despite this, managers must contend with the pressures of maintaining competitiveness in the rapidly expanding modern commercial and industrial sector, as well as having a limited understanding of the overall situation on the short to midterm.

The difference Between Action Research and Consultancy

The distinction between taking part in or being the practitioner of an action research project and providing consultation is crucial when discussing the comparative advantage of action research in the corporate sector. There may be many experts who are unaware that there is a substantial distinction between the two terms. While the objectives of an action researcher or practitioner are long-term and are integrated into the organization's long-term vision and strategy, those of a consultant are typically more focused on short-term goals, such as finishing a specific assignment or finishing producing a particular report or analysis, rather than long-term goals. A similar focus is placed on knowledge generation and the procedures and processes employed to generate this information and address the problem during the course of the study. However, the consultant does not always prioritize the process; instead, the consultant's attention is focused on the administrative aspects of the consultation, such as a timetable, deliverables milestones, and, most importantly, the cost associated with service delivery during the consultation period. This is not to argue that these parameters are irrelevant to action researchers; instead, they are not prioritized in the learning journey, as is the case with consultants. Furthermore, while action researchers may be seen as consultants, their primary focus is gathering information and finding innovative solutions rather than service delivery. The action researcher seeks to develop and test new approaches and ultimately to establish their validity beyond the research setting [20] while consultants are more tempted to rely on existing techniques rather than creating new ones within their research context.

5. The Comparative Analysis Between Action Research and Conventional Research

The differences between traditional research and action research are summarized in Table 1. Traditional research is a means to an end, which is to obtain a conclusion. A theory is constructed first, statistical analysis is

required, and the researcher does not intervene in the solution's implementation phase. On the other hand, practitioners are frequently and actively engaged with organizations, and the research process relies on this collaboration to develop action-based and sustainable knowledge, as well as effective actions to solve complex socioeconomic problems. Action Researchers are always looking for new ways to improve the context of their organizations and communities, and they emphasize testing novel methodologies and unusual data collection procedures within an integrated package of epistemology and social sciences.

Table 1: Comparison of Action Research and Conventional Research

Criteria	Action Research	Conventional Research
Objective	Contribute towards advancing knowledge on individual, organizational and community level by participating in developing solution for socio-economic and business related problems	Focusing on developing conclusions and predicting results based on testing theories in a laboratory settings.
Scope and Context	The research question is generated from practice and action and consists of institutional parameters	The research question is derived from theoretical proceedings and the literature
Data Collection and Analysis	Mixed data collection approaches with emphasize on qualitative data collection to endorse validity of analysis and findings	Rigid and through statistical data analysis approach
Audience	Collaborative cyclic process between the researcher, the organization and the community	Usually the academia
Knowledge	Generated from practice, more sustainable and coupled with attainable actions.	Generated from testing theories
Researcher Role	Participate in facilitating the researcher as a practitioner, catalyst and collaborate with the organization throughout the process	Directive and often Individualistic approach
Learning Methodology	Mutual Learning (researcher and the organization) with focus on integration between disciplines	Disciplinary oriented
Action on Findings	Mainstreamed and integrated within the institutional process and systems	Actions on findings could not take place or might take place in silo
Ownership of Results	Shared ownership of results	The researcher or group of researchers or the academic institution

6. Conclusion

This paper focuses on establishing the comparative advantage of action research over traditional conventional research as a methodology that can help bridge the gap between theory and practice in various business and socioeconomic fields. The paper highlighted that action research is a research method that does not differentiate between research and action; it addresses the issue of research in action. As a result, in comparison to positivist approaches to study, it is a rapidly changing, ambiguous, and unpredictable activity similar to the type of problems that businesses and societies currently face/. It collects data with focus on cultivate approaches and

triangulation of findings for validity purposes in collaboration with a the organizations, community and other practitioners sharing the same objective of contributing to knowledge while improving the situation of their organizations and societies. Action Research is a novel branch of science distinct from experimental traditional social science and focuses on close observation and analysis of the impact of human behavior on the systems as they manage change. Delivering quality and rigorous participatory action research necessitates a holistic and integrated approach to several key issues, including the collaborative implementation of the planning process, the quality of participation in the organization culture and environment and the development of emergent theory from the action and the contribution to the public knowledge while ensuring continuous learning. Action research focuses on collaboration to bring and manage change in an organization and solve real-world challenges. Organizations are continually in a state of flux, with a constantly changing environment to solve their problems. As a result, the most crucial contribution of action research is to encourage the development of self-oriented competencies so that organization and practitioners along with the academia can continue the learning process in a cyclic model. This would be the most significant contribution of action research closing the theory-practice divide. Researchers now have access to study opportunities that would not have been available otherwise. Professionals have been allowed to collaborate with academic scholars and vice versa to meet their objectives mutually.

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