

REVIEW PAPER

Action Research in Social Science

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ABSTRACT

Action research is the philosophy and methodology of research generally applied in social science. As people are the central concern in social sciences and it becomes the duty of the social scientist to involve oneself with contemporary problems of people for improving their situation. Action research is a type of social science research that aims at creating a desirable change in the situation as a result of planned action intervention. It is carried out to identify areas of concern, develop and test alternatives, and experiment with new approaches. By conducting action research, researchers are able to make changes in order to improve the settings in which they conducted research, rather than just gathering data and formulating theories, as in conventional research. Considering the significance of action research in social science, it becomes important to have a comprehensive knowledge of it. Thus the present paper has been prepared with the objective to review and explain the concept of action research in social sciences.

Keywords: Action research; Social science;

Social sciences have a human concern. Social sciences cannot be practiced in antiseptic laboratories under controlled conditions. According to *Sachchidananda (2002)*, social sciences cannot be practiced in isolation from what is happening in society. A committed social scientist is interested in what is happening in society as well as what is likely to happen and in what he thinks should happen. His trained observations and interpretation can affect policy formulation. Unfortunately, there is weak link between social research and their application in actual situation. Thus it is essential to get involved in the community work as well to plan and implement actions for change. Action research is the approach that aims for change as a consequence of action intervention.

Action research is a natural way of acting and researching at the same time. It intends finding the solution to local problems encountered by the researcher team. It is executed as a natural cycle, which achieves twin outcomes of action and research. Action research is not what usually comes to mind when we hear the word "research." Action research is not a library project

where we learn more about a topic that interests us. It is not problem-solving in the sense of trying to find out what is wrong, but rather a quest for knowledge about how to improve. Action research is not about doing research on or about people, or finding all available information on a topic looking for the correct answers. Action research is not about learning why we do certain things, but rather how we can do things better. It is the type of research that involves improving the situation of people by the use of research techniques relevant to their situation (*Noffke and Stevenson, 1995*).

Concept of action research :

As the name suggests, action research comprises two components: action and research. It is a research strategy which combines research with action and participation in the field. It is not research-to-be-followed-by-action or research-on-action, but research-as-action.

According to *Dick (1999)*, action research can be described as a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or

understanding) at the same time. In most of its forms it does this by using a cyclic or spiral process which alternates between action and critical reflection, in the later cycles, continuously refining methods, data and interpretation in the light of the understanding developed in the earlier cycles. It is thus an emergent process which takes shape as understanding increases; it is a continuous process which converges towards a better understanding of what happens.

Action research is a form of social research which aims at better insight into the problem by learning from the experience gained in attempt to solve the problems (Ray, 2011). It is a form of social research which aims not only at better insight into the problem, but also tries to contribute in solving the social problem being investigated. The investigation is a mean of action (Pandey et al, 2005). This is a method of trying consciously to find out whether or not certain activities actually lead to the results that were anticipated (Khaparde, 1998). Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1990) stated that action research is a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out.

Origin of action research : Kurt Lewin, a German psychologist, is considered the father of action research. Lewin first coined the term ‘action research’ in 1946 in his paper ‘Action Research and Minority Problems’, characterizing action research as “a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action”, using a process of “a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and evaluation or fact-finding about the result of the action” (O’Brien, 2001).

Action research as compared to conventional research : The normal position of the researcher is detached, scientific, standing outside events and diligently recording them. A number of methods may be used – questionnaire, focus group, interviews, observation, etc. – but it is generally the researcher who controls data gathering for purpose that affect their research rather than the participants’ condition or welfare. In other words, the subjects are passive in research as they may either be unaware of being “watched” or unconcerned about the data used from their interview or survey.

In action research, however, people are not just subjects but partners in the research process. The research arises not out of a question from an external individual, but as a shared process of reflection between the researcher and the participants. The participants or the community members help gather data related to their own problems. The results of the research are shared with the community members for improvement of their situation (Anonymous, 2019).

Application of action research : Action research is used in real situations, rather than in contrived, experimental studies, since its primary focus is on solving real problems. It is chosen when circumstances require flexibility, the involvement of the people in the research, or change must take place quickly or holistically. It is often the case that those who apply this approach are practitioners (like teachers) who wish to improve understanding of their practice and the social change activists trying to mount an action campaign (O’Brien, 2001). Action research approaches have frequently been explored as a means of identifying strategies for curriculum development at an institutional level. Aiming to enhance widening participation, one institution carried out a project that sought to develop a framework that afforded faculty members with the insight necessary to inform effective curriculum design (Millwood and Powell, 2011). In a more confined arena, action research is used to evaluate attempts to introduce critical pedagogies in teaching into higher education settings (Baptist and Nassar, 2008; Wamba, 2011; Mardirosian and Belson, 2009; Taylor and Pettit, 2007). However, AR in the context of teacher education and individual teaching practice is predominantly used in a technical and practical manner, rather than emancipatory, often focusing on first person practitioner research aimed at improving individual teaching practice (Burchell and Dyson, 2005; Chesney and Marcangelo, 2010; Getz, 2009; Gravett, 2004; Greenbank, 2007; Barak, 2004).

Significance of action research : Kumar (2016) said that action research is done for either improvement of any practice or for creating the social change. Carr and Kemmis (1986) call for action research to focus on ‘the development of practitioners’ own practices’. Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt (2008) argue that action research improves teaching, learning and research through inclusive, collaborative processes. Above all,

action research aims at collaboration through participation, empowerment of participants, acquisition of knowledge and social change.

Classification of action research : Various authors have classified action research differently and therefore, have given different types of action research. These classifications are as follow:

Classification I :

Individual research : Individual action research is research conducted by one teacher. This type of research is conducted to analyze a specific task. A teacher may wonder if implementing group activities within an English class will help improve learning. The teacher alone performs research by implementing a group activity for a certain length of time. After the action is performed, the teacher analyzes the results, implements changes, or discards the program if not found to be helpful.

Collaborative research : It involves a group of people researching a specified topic. With collaborative research, more than one person is involved in the implementation of the new program. Typically, a group of students, larger than just one class, are tested, and the results are analyzed. Many times collaborative research involves both teachers and the principal of the school. This type of research offers the collaboration of many people working jointly on one subject. The joint collaboration often offers more benefits than an individual action research approach.

Classification II :

Practical action research : This is intended to address a specific problem within a classroom, school or community. The primary purpose of practical action research is to improve practice in the short term.

Participatory action research : This type of research involves individuals which are called stakeholders. These individuals function as equal partners. The subject and the researcher collaboratively find ways to improve the situation. The focus practical action research is to empower individuals and groups to improve their lives and bring about a social change.

Models of action research process : Various authors have given different models to explain the process of action research differently. Thus the number and name of steps in the action research process explained by each author is different. *David Tripp (2005)* named

his model of action research as the action inquiry cycle. Action inquiry is a term for any process that follows a cycle in which one improves practice by systematically moving between taking actions in the field of practice, and inquiring into it. One plans, implements, describes and evaluates an improving change to one's practice, learning more about both the practice and action inquiry in the process.

Kemmis and McTaggard gave the cyclic model, which has four steps: plan, act, observe and reflect. This shows how reflection leads on to the next stage of planning (*Hopkins, 1985*). Action research model suggested by *Susman (1983)* illustrates five steps i.e., diagnosing (defining a problem), action planning (considering alternative courses of action), taking action (selecting courses of action), evaluating (studying the consequences of an action) and specifying learning (identifying general findings).

John Elliott's model of action research emphasizes constant evolution and redefinition of the original goal through a series of reconnaissance's recurring every cycle. The reconnaissance includes some degree of analysis (*Hopkins, 1985*). *Kumar (2016)* said that research process starts either to improve any practice or to take action to deal with a problem or an issue. Through research, evidence is gathered regarding the importance of an issue and accordingly an appropriate action is taken to deal with it.

Model of action research is prepared after considering numerous model of action research given by different authors (Fig. 1).

Four steps suggested in the above model of action research are explained with the help of an example of conducting a study with the aim to improve household water management practices of a village, with the use of different extension strategies.

Step 1: Planning : It involves identifying the issue or the problem that needs to be changed. Information is gathered from various sources for better understanding of the problem. This is a forward looking phase where you consider:

- What kind of investigation is possible within the realities?
- What potential improvements you think are possible?
- It includes development of research plan appropriate

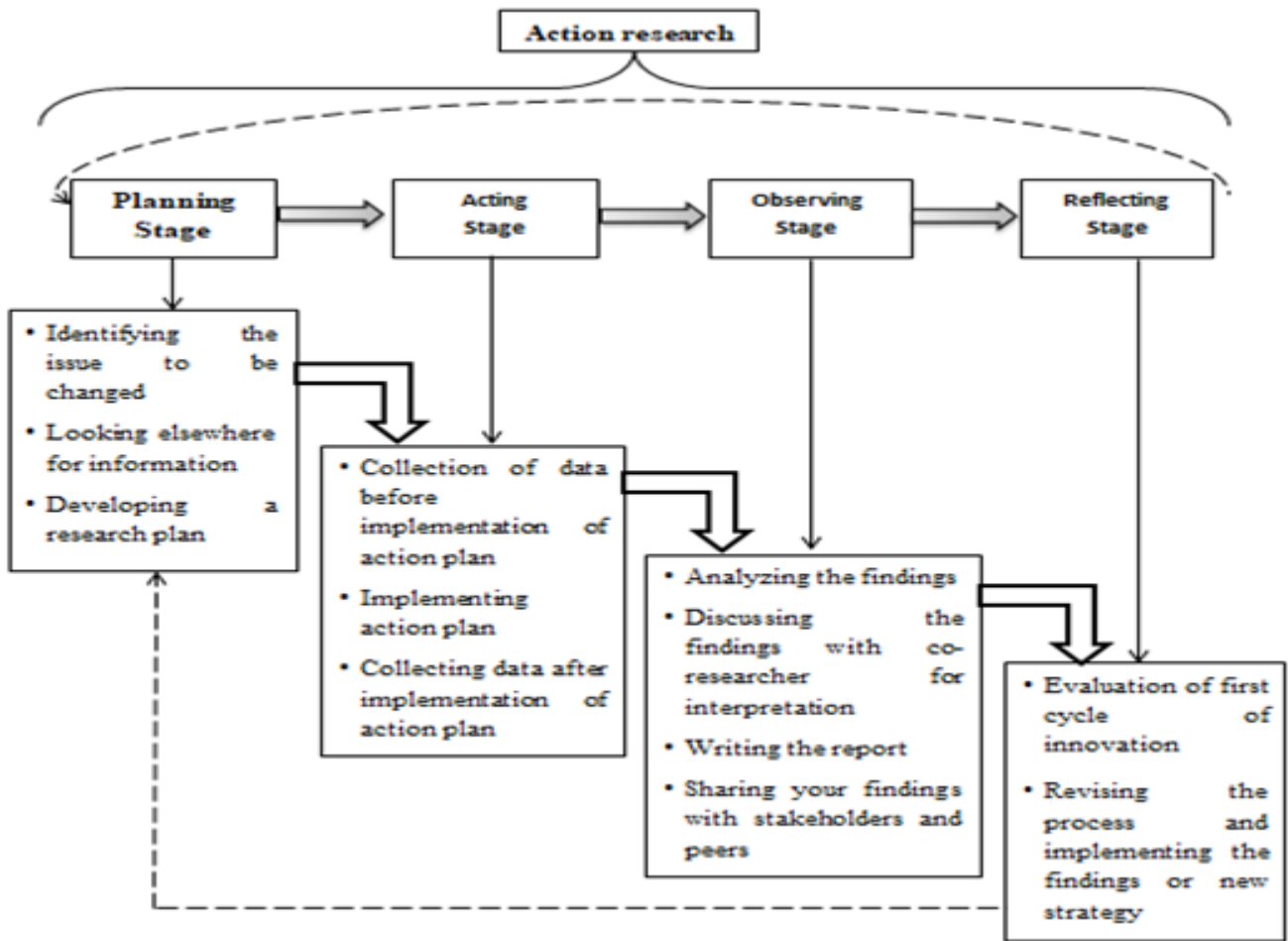


Fig: Model of action research is prepared after considering numerous model of action research given by different authors.

to the situation.

- It also includes making a plan for data collection. What data are you going to look at? How are you going to collect it and how often?
- All of this must be determined before the research begins.

Examples :

Identifying the issue to be changed : Improper water management and unhygienic drinking water practices are local problems and concerns within the community. Thus this serves as an issue of the study.

Looking elsewhere for information : Collecting information from reports of any project and previous study to understand the extent of the problem in that area. Getting a list of water tables of all blocks of the selected district to select the blocks (3) with lowest water table for finalizing sample of the study.

Developing a research plan : This includes, deciding the sample of study (20 women from each of the three

selected village) and the data collection tool to be used (an interview schedule). This is followed by the selection of household water management practices (quality testing of water, cleaning of water storage tanks and use of efficient gadgets to save water at household level) and development of extension strategies that will be used to disseminate the information.

Step 2 : Acting : This step involves collection of data from the subjects before applying actual action plan to get an idea about the existing situation. This is followed by the application of action plan for creating the change. After implementation of the action plan, data is collected for analyzing the effect of the action. Usually used tools of data collection are classified in three categories as follow :

- i. *Data collection tools related to experiencing :* It involves gathering data by researcher’s own experience by the use of observations (non-participant observations and participant

observations), field notes etc.

- ii. *Data collection tools related to enquiring:* Collection of data by questioning or asking the participants. It includes interviews (personal interviews, group interviews and mass interviews), questionnaire (open ended and close ended), interview schedules, attitude scales, group discussions etc.
- iii. *Data collection tools related to examining :* It involves gathering data by examining materials already existing or collected in the settings i.e. by using records, documents, reports, maps, audio and videotape recordings etc.

Examples :

- *Collection of data before implementation of action plan:* Collection of data regarding pre-knowledge and existing adoption status of the subjects with the help of prepared interview schedule.
- *Implementing action plan:* Implementation of the intervention i.e. three planned strategies to each of the selected village. These three strategies are- i) interpersonal extension strategy, ii) ICT enabled extension strategy and iii) combination of interpersonal and ICT enabled extension strategy.
- *Collecting data after implementation of action plan :* Collection of data related to post knowledge and latest adoption status with the help of interview schedule after giving interventions.

Step 3 : Observing : This step involves the analyzing the data collected and discussing the findings with co-researcher for better interpretation and preparation of report of the study. Data can be analyzed through quantitative and qualitative methods.

- *Quantitative method:* Use of descriptive statistics such as percentage, range, frequency, average etc.
- *Qualitative method:* A rich, thick description and logical analysis.

Examples :

- Observing stage in water management study includes analyzing the collected data, related to effect of all three extension strategies, with the help of appropriate statistical tools.
- This step consists of comparing the data related to knowledge level and adoption status of respondents,

before and after implementing the different extension strategies to determine if there was a significant difference between the two. This also includes the analyzing the difference of effectiveness in all used extension strategies.

- This is followed by discussing the findings with other people involved in same kind of research for better interpretation and preparation of the report of the study.

Step 4: Reflecting : In reflecting stage, first cycle of action research is evaluated and the process is revised, if required. Then the new strategy is implemented and evaluated till the desired result is obtained.

Example :

- In the example of water management study, if the intervention has not improved the water management practices at household level then a new strategy is made keeping in view the problems and shortcomings of previously used strategies.
- This change in action plan is implemented again in the real situation till the knowledge level of people and adoption status of the water management practices do not improve.

Roles of researcher in action research : Action researcher needs to be a good planner and leader; catalyzer and facilitator; teacher and designer; synthesizer and reporter; listener, observer and a learner (Mkpado, 2019). A researcher may identify the problem and brings it to the attention of the stakeholders. But it is important that the problem is not just of interest to the researcher but also to the stakeholders. The researcher stands alongside the stakeholders he is not anymore an outsider but is now an internal consultant (Mkpado, 2019 and Mills, 2003). There is a need for capacity building of extension personnel to meet evolving needs of rural people and for their satisfaction (Kumar et al, 2020). Similar suggestions were given by Singh and Jirli (2018).

Problems related to action research :

- Action research is difficult to carry out as compared to conventional research.
- Action research demands the participation of people in the process. But mobilization of people and encouraging their participation is a difficult task. It becomes difficult to work where people are unwilling to participate.
- Different level of motivation and interest of the

participant's can also adversely affect the process of action research. Due to different interests of participants, it is difficult to meet needs and expectations of everyone.

- As action research is planned for a specific area and for specific problem thus the cause, effect and outcomes of it may not be generalized to the wider population.
- Gaining confidence in using action research methods requires more time and preparation.
- In academics, action research thesis is longer than a conventional thesis as it requires more compelling justification for what you do.
- Action research process needs to be flexible as the research has to work with people. Thus it can be

called as a time consuming research project (*Cherns et al, 1976 and McVicaret al, 2012*).

CONCLUSION

Action research can be used to bring about changes in an individual or in a community with the help of participation and collaboration. The action taken is based on direct results from the problem selected for study. The investment of time and energy by the participants provides a sense of ownership and connection to the process and outcomes. It is carried out in the problem area, in real life situation and provides immediate action for leading to the change in the existing situation. For better execution of the action research it is important to understand its process and the role of the researcher in the process.

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