15.3: Action research

Learning Objectives

- Define and provide at least one example of action research
- Describe the role of stakeholders in action research

Action research is defined as research that is conducted for the purpose of creating social change. When conducting action research, scholars collaborate with community stakeholders at all stages of the research process with the aim of producing results that will be usable in the community and by scientists. We defined stakeholders in Chapter 8, as individuals or groups who have an interest in the outcome of your study. Social workers who engage in action research never just go it alone; instead, they collaborate with the people who are affected by the research at each stage in the process. Stakeholders, particularly those with the least power, should be consulted on the purpose of the research project, research questions, design, and reporting of results.
Action research also distinguishes itself from other research in that its purpose is to create change on an individual and community level. Kristin Esterberg puts it quite eloquently when she says, "At heart, all action researchers are concerned that research not simply contribute to knowledge but also lead to positive changes in people’s lives" (2002, p. 137). As you might imagine, action research is consistent with the assumptions of the critical paradigm, which focuses on liberating people from oppressive structures. Action research has multiple origins across the globe, including Kurt Lewin’s psychological experiments in the US and Paulo Friere’s literacy and education programs (Adelman, 1993; Reason, 1994). Over the years, action research has become increasingly popular among scholars who wish for their work to have tangible outcomes that benefit the groups they study.

Action research does not bring any new methodological tricks or terms, but it uses the processes of science in a different way than traditional research. What topics are important to study in a neighborhood or with a target population? A traditional scientist might look at the literature or use their practice wisdom to formulate a question for quantitative or qualitative research. An action researcher, on the other hand, would consult with the target population itself to see what they thought the most pressing issues are and their proposed solutions. In this way, action research flips traditional research on its head. Scientists are more like consultants who provide the tools and resources necessary for a target population to achieve their goals and address social problems.

According to Healy (2001), the assumptions of participatory-action research are that (a) oppression is caused by macro-level structures such as patriarchy and capitalism; (b) research should expose and confront the powerful; (c) researcher and participant relationships should be equal, with equitable distribution of research tasks and roles; and (d) research should result in consciousness-raising and collective action. Coherent with social work values, action research supports the self-determination of oppressed groups and privileges their voice and understanding through the conceptualization, design, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination processes of research.

There are many excellent examples of action research. Some of them focus solely on arriving at useful outcomes for the communities upon which and with whom research is conducted. Other action research projects result in some new knowledge that has a practical application and purpose in addition to the creation of knowledge for basic scientific purposes.

One example of action research can be seen in Fred Piercy and colleagues’ (Piercy, Franz, Donaldson, & Richard, 2011) work with farmers in Virginia, Tennessee, and Louisiana. Together with farmers in these states, the researchers conducted focus groups to understand how farmers learn new information about farming. Ultimately, the aim of this study was to “develop more meaningful ways to communicate information to farmers about sustainable agriculture” (p. 820). This improved communication, the researchers and farmers believed, would benefit not just researchers interested in the topic but also farmers and their communities. Farmers and researchers were both involved in all aspects of the research, from designing the project and determining focus group questions to conducting the focus groups and finally to analyzing data and disseminating findings.

Many additional examples of action research can be found at Loyola University Chicago’s Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL: http://www.luc.edu/curl/index.shtml). The mission of the center is to create “innovative solutions that promote equity and opportunity in communities throughout the Chicago metropolitan region” (CURL, n.d., para. 1). For example, in 2006 researchers at CURL embarked on a project to assess the impact on small, local retailers of new Walmart stores entering urban areas (Jones, 2008). The study found that while the effect of Walmart on local
retailers seems to have a larger impact in rural areas, Chicago-area local retailers did not experience as dramatic an impact. Nevertheless a “small but statistically significant relationship” was found between Walmart’s arrival in the city and local retailers’ closing their doors (Jones, 2008, para. 3). This and other research conducted by CURL aims to raise awareness about and promote positive social change around issues affecting the lives of people in the Chicago area. CURL meets this aim by collaborating with members of the community to shape a research agenda, collect and analyze data, and disseminate results.

Perhaps one of the most unique and rewarding aspects of engaging in action research is that it is often interdisciplinary. Action research projects might bring together researchers from any number of disciplines, from the social sciences, such as sociology, political science, and psychology; to an assortment of physical and natural sciences, such as biology and chemistry; to engineering, philosophy, and history (to name just a few). One recent example of this kind of interdisciplinary action research can be seen in the University of Maine’s Sustainability Solutions Initiative (SSI) (https://umaine.edu/mitchellcenter/sustainability-solutions-initiative/). This initiative unites researchers from across campus together with local community members to “connect knowledge with action in ways that promote strong economies, vibrant communities, and healthy ecosystems in and beyond Maine” (Senator George J. Mitchell Center for Sustainability Solutions, para. 1). [7] The knowledge-action connection is essential to SSI’s mission, and the collaboration between community stakeholders and researchers is crucial to maintaining that connection. SSI is a relatively new effort; stay tuned to the SSI website to follow how this collaborative action research initiative develops.

Anyone interested in social change can benefit from having some understanding of social scientific research methods. The knowledge you’ve gained from your methods course can be put to good use even if you don’t have an interest in pursuing a career in research. As a member of a community, perhaps you will find that the opportunity to engage in action research presents itself to you one day. Your background in research methodology will no doubt assist you in making life better for yourself and those who share your interests, circumstances, or geographic region.

Key Takeaways

• Action research is conducted by researchers who wish to create some form of social change.
• Stakeholders are true collaborators in action research.
• Action research is often conducted by teams of interdisciplinary researchers.

Glossary

• Action research- research that is conducted for the purpose of creating some form of social change in collaboration with stakeholders

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