

A REFLECTIVE REVIEW, VALUE SYNTHESIS AND ORIENTATION TOWARDS ACTION RESEARCH IN BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT: A SUMMATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Action research is used in a range of industries, across multiple company divisions and specialties, and inside hierarchically structured organizational systems. This article explores the function of action research in generating knowledge applicable to this specific field and gives the authors' predictions for potential future developments. The reflection examines a limited number of action research studies conducted in a variety of business and management domains and disciplines and presents clear common threads that can direct future study and action as well as facilitate contemplation. In order to form opinions regarding the state of the field and its prospects, readers are encouraged to engage in a comparable reflection through the mode of interiority. Another perspective on the organizational change process is action research. It is an organizational change process built on a research model, specifically one that advances both the understanding of organizations in general and the sponsoring company specifically. The change agent in action research is typically a third party who participates in every stage of the change process, from diagnosis to evaluation. To do organizational research, this person typically enters into a contract with the sponsoring organization, as opposed to the standard change agent, who is hired to implement a specific change. A scientific approach to managing planned change is provided by action research in organizational development.

Keyword: change agent Action research, mode of interiority, business and management domain

INTRODUCTION

Action research operates in the world of plans, doable tasks, and organized hierarchical organizational structures in the business and management context. In a variety of industries, including manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, media, and food, challenges to improve customer service, technology management, human resource management, supply chain management, and organizational change may arise. These industries each have their own unique business environment, competitive environment, key success criteria, and technologies. A few examples of how the business and management context is changing include the impact of new alternative work and organizational designs integrated with design thinking and agility orientations, the role of new alternative work and organizational designs, the growing emphasis on innovation leadership and leadership capabilities, the impact of the emerging role and potential impact, and the growing global emphasis on sustainable development and sustainable organizations. On the basis of our personal experiences as seasoned members of the organization development (OD) tradition, authors, and editors of publications in these fields, we have been thinking about the state of action research in

business and management. Unlike a third-person review method (like Chen, Huang, & Zeng, 2018), we are using an interiority approach to the state of the field. Interiority is defined as paying attention to both the data pertaining to our consciousness and the data pertaining to our senses (as seen in the action research literature) (how we are experiencing, understanding, and judging the outputs of action research in business and management). Interiority is a philosophical concept that describes how to hold both our involvement with the outer data of our senses, such as what we see and hear, and the inside data of our awareness, such as our thoughts and feelings (Coghlan 2010, 2017, 2018, 2019). We want readers to engage in a similar meditation on their presumptions, queries, and discoveries in order to form an opinion about the current status of the field and its prospects through the mode of interiority. We discuss our thoughts on how action research has contributed to the creation of knowledge that may be applied in this particular area, as well as our outlook on upcoming changes. This reflection gathers a number of action research projects that were carried out in a variety of business and management domains and disciplines, and it introduces clear common threads that can direct future research and action as well as facilitate reflection. The following is the breakdown of the article. In order to provide our reflective review context, we first give a brief overview of action research and introduce a thorough framework. Using the comprehensive framework, we then go over a few examples of action research in the realms of business, management, and functional areas. Third, we encourage readers to consider how some of these published action research studies illustrate action research features in the conversation. Finally, we discuss a few trends that we believe will present action research possibilities in the future.

ACTION RESEARCH

With the aim of tackling significant organizational, community, and social challenges alongside individuals who encounter them, action research has come to be viewed as a global family of connected techniques that integrate theory and practice (Bradbury, 2015; Brydon-Miller & Coghlan, 2014). By mixing action and reflection in continual cycles of cogenerative knowledge, it focuses on the development of spaces for collaborative learning as well as the design, implementation, and assessment of liberating activities. It is used in a variety of organizational sectors and communities and manifests itself in many modalities. An action research initiative's conception, design, and implementation, as well as its contributions to theory and practice, are determined by the context in which it is conducted. We are using a definition of action research that Coghlan and Shani (2014, p.535) adopted from Shani and Pasmore (2016/1985), which encapsulates the key ideas of action research. Action research is an emergent inquiry approach that combines organizational expertise with information from applied behavioral sciences to address actual organizational problems. It is concurrently focused with bringing about change in organizations, helping organizational members develop their own self-help skills, and advancing scientific understanding. Lastly, it is a fluid process that is carried out with a spirit of cooperation and joint inquiry. The comprehensive action research framework developed by Shani and Pasmore (2016/1985), which derives from this definition, serves as the foundation for this reflection. Four variables make up their framework, which is based on an extensive examination, analysis, and synthesis of the available literature as well as a number of empirical field investigations conducted in various companies. Action research is described as "a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment" in *The Handbook of Action Research* by Reason and Bradbury (2006). In collaboration with others, it aims to bring together action and thought, theory and practice, with a

focus on the general flourishing of individual individuals and their communities. Action research, according to French and Bell (1995), is the "process of systematically gathering research data about an ongoing system with respect to some objective, goal, or need of that system; feeding these data back into the system; taking actions by changing certain system variables based on the data and on hypotheses; and evaluating the results of actions by collecting more data." According to Shani and Pasmore, "Action research can be characterized as an emergent inquiry process in which information from applied behavioral science is combined with organizational expertise and used to address actual organizational issues. It is concurrently focused with bringing about change in organizations, helping organizational members develop their own self-help skills, and advancing scientific understanding. In conclusion, it is a fluid process carried out in a spirit of cooperation and inquiry.

CONTEXT

Understanding the context is essential because action research produces localized theory through localized action. The external corporate, social, and academic environment as well as the internal local organizational/discipline environment of a certain company is referred to as the context of the activity. Another requirement understands the scholarly background of earlier study in the area of the specific action planned and to which a contribution is intended.

QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIP

Relationships between members and between members and researchers must be of the highest caliber. As a result, relationships need to be managed through trust-building, enabling open communication, caring about others, equality of influence, using a shared language, and other methods.

QUALITY OF THE ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS ITSELF

The intertwined dual focus on both the action and the inquiry processes is the foundation for the quality of the action research method itself. The inquiry process is organized, exacting, and contemplative in order to help people of the organization gain a better knowledge and significance of a pressing problem or occurrence.

OUTCOMES

The dual goals of action research are to provide new information from the investigation while also achieving some amount of sustainability (in terms of the human, social, economic, and ecological realms).

Because they capture the essence of action research and the complex cause-and-effect interactions both within and between the aspects, these four components make form a full framework. The criteria, whether or not they are expressly stated, provide a unifying lens into a variety of published studies in the literature and provide as top level advice for the action researcher. It makes each study more valuable and helps the unique character of each action research project come through. How did we arrive at using this action research definition and methodology as the foundation for our reflection? First off, it complies with our assessment that it has a solid foundation because it was the result of an empirical study conducted by one of us (Shani & Pasmore, 2016/1985). The second reason is that each of us has used it for more than 30 years, and based on our collective reflections, it has proven to be a framework that can withstand the demands of rigor, reflection, and relevance

in research design, execution, and assessment, teaching, and doctorate examination (Pasmore, Woodman, & Simmons, 2008).

ACTION RESEARCH IN THE CONTEXT OF BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

As mentioned above, action research addresses issues such as customer service, innovation, globalization, financial management, human resource management, supply chain management, and organizational change in the context of business and management. Action research operates in the world of strategies, operational tasks, and structured hierarchical organizational systems. There are different business contexts, competitive dynamics, crucial success criteria, and technology in various company sectors. Kurt Lewin's work serves as the foundation for action research in industrial settings (1890–1947). Lewin (1944) presented his own narrative of participating in organizational change as an external action researcher (without using the phrase), and two of his closest friends, Alfred Marrow and John French, discussed how they participated in action research to facilitate change in a manufacturing plant (Marrow & French, 1945). According to Burnes (2007), Coch and French's engagement in the Harwood pajamas factory in 1948 is regarded as the foundational action research project in a factory and the creation of OD, with Shepard and Katzell's action research project in ESSO in 1960 as a notable advancement. In OD, a rich tradition of action research emerged over the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Clark, 1972; Coghlan, 2015; Cunningham, 1993; Foster, 1972; French & Bell, 1999; Frohman, Sashkin, & Kavanagh, 1976). The idea that organizations are systems and the development of the socio-technical systems theory of organizations and management, which gave rise to the practice of change and development, are two foundations of organizational development (Mohrman & Winby, 2018; Pasmore, 2001). This foundation gives a wide range of players the context and orientation necessary for high levels of involvement and collaborative effort. An essential part of any transformation effort is action research. This approach is problem-focused. The change agent searches for issues and bases his change action decisions on those issues. The resistance to change is decreased since employees are actively involved in the change process. Both the organization and the researcher can benefit from the examination of the organization and any improvements made to it during a period of change.

There have been several strategies, interventions, and studies in numerous sectors and business disciplines during the course of the past 70 years of action research initiatives in industrial settings. Agriculture, biopharma, business and information, construction, education, energy, fashion design, food, defense, health care, automotive, telecommunication, fish farming, mining, pharmaceutical, and public service are just a few of the industries that use action research. In order to increase organizational effectiveness, it is used in business functions such as accounting, e-marketing, e-commerce, e-learning, finance, information systems (IS/IT), lean operation management, management, consulting, customer service, marketing, human resource, and sales. It investigates the interactions between organizations, including mergers and supply chain management. Action learning, action science, appreciative inquiry, collaborative management research, intervention research, and learning history are used to convey it under the umbrella of OD. There are numerous instances of action research implementation in the business and management literature. This section serves as an example of the diverse action research initiatives and viewpoints that have contributed to both addressing particular organizational difficulties and improving our knowledge of business and management. We have grouped examples by industry sector in order to adequately represent

the wide range of action research projects and insights. Action research has been used extensively over the years in a wide range of industries, including manufacturing (Pace & Argona, 1989; Pasmore & Friedlander, 1982), agriculture (Meister & Gronski, 2007), biopharmaceutical research (Roth, Shani, & Leary, 2007), business and information, construction, energy (Baker & Jayaraman, 2012), fashion design (Cirella, Canterino, Guerci, & Shan Electronics (Huber, 2010; Stebbins & Valenzuela, 2015) (Fredberg, Norrgren, & Shani, 2011; Schuiling, 2014). Action research has also been used in a variety of corporate disciplines and activities. For instance, Coughlan and Coughlan (2002, 2016) have developed the theoretical underpinnings for the use of action research in the field of operations management (e.g. Zhang, Levenson, & Crossley, 2015). Action research has been the focus of special issues of some journals in the business disciplines, including the European Journal of Marketing, Human Resource Management, and the Journal of Information Systems. Avital, 2005), information systems (Avital, 2005), research and development (R&D) (Hildrum, Finsrud, & Klethagen, 2009), lean management (Wyton & Payne, 2014), operations management (Rytter, Boer, & Koch, 2007), supply chain management (Coughlan & Coughlan, 2015), and mergers and acquisitions (M&A) were some of the additional functions and disciplines (Canterino, Shani, Coughlan, & Bruneli, 2016). Some action research studies were carried out in accordance with a particular modality, such as action learning (Coughlan and Coughlan, 2015; Ystrom, Ollila, Agogue, & Coughlan, 2019), action science (Beer, 2011), appreciative inquiry (Avital, 2005), clinical inquiry (Stebbins & Shani, 2009), collaborative management research (Canterino et al., 2016), intervention research (Raedelli e (Roth & Kleiner, 2000). The action research endeavor and the attempt to change the company into a more innovative company were allegedly impacted by the distinctive Danish cultural milieu within which the company formed, according to Lund's (2008) work, although the study is published with few information. The majority of the research analyzed in this article introduced and briefly explored the quality of the relationships, but they fell short in illustrating their depth and influence, according to an analysis of the quality of the relationships parts. For instance, Williander and Styhre (2006) mention that they had a combined action research team with insider and outer action researchers, but they don't go into detail on the dynamics of the team or how it affected the project. Similar to this, Ystrom et al. (2019), in their study of the ABC network in the automotive industry in Northern Europe, composed of six partner companies and initiated by the Vehicle and Traffic Safety Centre (SAFER), suggest that the working relationships were important but provide little information about the quality of the relationships that were developed and how they impacted the outcomes. Most action research processes, though not all, make an effort to document their processes, mechanisms, and cycles. Action research is broken down into four activity cycles by Ngwerume and ThemesslHuber (2010) and two and a half by Canterino et al. (2016). While Bhatnagar (2017) and Williander and Styhre (2006) allude to the action research mechanisms but offer little information about them, Shani and Eberhardt (1987) present the details of the specific action research mechanism, its composition, and its dynamics. The emphasis and amount of detail that capture the action research process itself varies greatly throughout the analyzed studies. While some studies (like Pasmore & Friedlander, 1982) are quite explicit on the precise action research stages, activities, data collection methods, and data interpretation, others (like Lund, 2008) pay attention to the phases and prefer to concentrate on the methodology (such as Bhatnagar, 2017). Some choose to concentrate on the cycles, while others prefer to concentrate on the mechanisms (Naslund, Kale, & Paulraj, 2010) (such as Shani & Eberhardt, 1987). This result implies that in order to generate deeper level appreciation, greater systematic rigor needs to be applied in scientific reporting. Each of the studies that have been analyzed claims to have obtained important findings as a result of its own

action research project. Depending on the study's particular goal, different practical outcomes are given. While some report on increased performance and productivity, process improvement, and innovation (Lund, 2008), others have focused on the creation of new capabilities for innovation (e.g. Kocher et al., 2011), leadership development, and new work procedures (Shani & Eberhardt, 1987). We find it intriguing that while most discussions focused on the firm's actual accomplishments, there was little mention of the development of new information. This result shows that greater systematic rigor needs to be applied so that the process of creating new knowledge is built into action research. As a starting point for the investigation of potential steps that can be incorporated into the action research process that are likely to improve new knowledge creation, Von Kroch, Ichijo, and Nonaka's (2000) five knowledge creation steps - sharing tacit knowledge, creating concept, justifying a concept, building a prototype, and cross-leveling knowledge - can be used. Furthermore, according to Mohrman and Lawler (2011), efforts to produce knowledge that can be put to use will probably lead to the production of new knowledge.

TECHNOLOGY, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND SOCIAL TOOLS

As technology advances at an ever-rapid rate, it opens up new learning opportunities for the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, enhancing human development and capabilities (Birkinshaw, 2018). Sometimes, technology is taking the place of people. This drastic change offers action researchers the chance to direct the process of reimagining work and organizational structures that will promote human growth. Additionally, technology enables stronger connections between groups of people and organizations. More people can be involved in collaborative work and new forms of collaboration thanks to the new forms of connectivity. For instance, new social media platforms and applications driven by growing technology (like Slack, Yammer, and Chatter) enable innovative forms of employee communication. Action researchers have the chance to help individuals and organizations build new capabilities as a result of the emergence of hybrid virtual functioning social systems. This is one of the major contextual variables that drives today's corporate environment and places new expectations on the effectiveness of partnerships and the action research process. Some research disciplines have a tougher time evaluating and demonstrating impact than others. The impact agenda is in keeping with some disciplines' norms and practices, particularly those that are more applied, as well as some researchers' intrinsic motives, which justifies their time and effort investments in the quest of impact (Watermeyer, 2019). There is evidence, though, that other researchers (particularly in the arts, humanities, and pure sciences), whose work may not have obvious or concrete applications or immediate or obvious public interest, are concerned by expectations that their work should generate impact and feel that their academic freedom is threatened by the increasing evaluation (and especially metricization) of impact (Chubb et al., 2017; Bulaitis, 2017; Chubb and Reed, 2018). With this in mind, it is vital to emphasize that we strive to give a holistic and adaptive framework within which to think critically about a varied range of consequences from research from any discipline, rather than legitimizing a narrowing and instrumentalization of impact through evaluation. A fundamental point of departure for OD theory and practice is provided by socio-technical system theory, a design and planned change process that was one of the early theoretical frameworks upon which the area of system-wide change and development was formed (Pasmore, 1988; Trist, 1981). Using and furthering their convergence within the framework of the emerging technology is likely to improve practice and produce new knowledge, even if action research and socio-technical systems have been intertwined since their creation (Pasmore, 2001). As a result, the socio-technical mindset must be firmly ingrained in the

design of the action research method as well as the caliber of interactions.

NEW ALTERNATIVE WORK AND ORGANIZATION'S DESIGNS EMBEDDED IN DESIGN THINKING AND AGILITY

Changes in technology, society, and the environment lead to the birth of new work design orientations that aim to simultaneously increase productivity and flexibility. The possibility for action research initiatives that center on fresh thinking about design principles and planned change processes and technologies is created by mergers, acquisitions, globalization, and virtual organizations (Repenning, Kieffer, & Repenning, 2018). Implementation and action can be sparked by including an action research orientation into the discovery phase of the investigation of suitable concepts. One of the methods for innovation that is expanding the quickest worldwide is design thinking (Verganti, 2017). Such a focus fosters innovation, rapid prototyping, and the creative process, which opens up opportunities for personal growth and boosting organizational capacity. The action research process can be used with the burgeoning new agile work design techniques to give employees collaborative ways to investigate and create the best balance between oversight and autonomy.

INNOVATION LEADERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES

Innovation and leadership are connected by innovation leadership. As the need for more innovation grows, this new phenomena is receiving more and more attention. As a result, building an environment that encourages innovation within enterprises offers a special potential for the discipline of action research. It takes a strong leader to promote and direct innovation processes. Key factors in business growth and change include integrating design thinking and innovation (Verganti, 2017). Leaders are expected to produce both innovation and design value, and this expectation is growing. Processes, procedures, and instruments are needed for each. Nevertheless, including people at all levels is the most crucial element to spur innovation. How to spread the design of numerous agile innovation teams across the organization from one or two agile innovation teams in a particular business sector is one of the problems that leaders must overcome (Rigby, Suthetland, & Noble, 2018). Through collaborative action research procedures, the field can have a significant impact and produce new knowledge by fostering an innovative culture-by-design.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATIONS

Organizational and economic challenges are today seen to revolve around the well-established context and field of sustainability and sustainable value, with its complexity in organizational, environmental, and social expressions. Action research has a chance to interact with and make a difference because of the resurging interest in sustainability and sustainable value around the world. Impacting sustainable value, a newly identified critical factor in determining a company's competitive advantage, creates a significant opportunity for the field to make a difference (Mohrman & Winby, 2018). Sustainability is a multifaceted phenomenon that cuts beyond institutional and geographic borders and involves numerous stakeholders. There are few models of organizing, modifying, and learning now in existence. This argues that in order for learning to occur at all levels, learning and change must be continuous, core, and practiced (individual, collective, organizational, networks, coalitions, and systems). A field of opportunities is shown by the use of an action research orientation, as shown by a few recent studies (Mohrman & Shani, 2011; Williander & Styhre, 2006). A further platform and opportunity for the field to have significant effects on practice and knowledge

can be provided by the field's knowledge base in the development and maintenance of a tapestry of learning methods and tools.

EMERGING COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITIES OF INQUIRY

The emergence of organizations and work shows that social systems are becoming more complex. Communities of practice were one such new system (Coughlan, Hargaden, Coghlan, Idris, & Ahlstrom, 2018; Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice, at their most basic level, are associations of people working in companies who are interested in advancing new insights, knowledge, and solutions to a particular problem. Such communities appear to be a joint effort of engaging in action, investigation, and development that developed as a response to the growing complexity of systems (Coghlan & Shani, 2008; Mohrman, Pasmore, Shani, Stymne, & Adler 2008). While the idea of communities as a business construct is still relatively new, action research as a practice has long since developed a philosophy, professional orientation, and approach to social action, as well as an orientation to inquiry through rigorous inquiry methodologies and a wide range of action research modalities. As a result, the focus on cooperative communities of inquiry in various forms and forums has been at the core of action research's history over the past 70 years. The knowledge and practice of action research that has been gathered can aid the new complex corporate situation (Coghlan & Shani, 2016). Action research processes give excellent prospects for future growth in relevance and impact as we continue to deepen our understanding of these communities and their effects. As a result, it is believed that the opportunity and deliberate decision to design the action research community of practice around a particular project may be an essential component of the action research context within which the caliber of the relationships begin to develop that are likely to affect the caliber and outcomes of the effort. Marvin Weisbord (1977) developed a paradigm in his famous book *Productive Workplaces* that illustrated the evolution from experts to everyone solving organizational challenges over time. Parallel to this, we propose that action research has to recapture its distinctive collaborative research philosophy, which is at the core of the OD heritage, in the next decades (Coghlan, 2012, 2017; Coghlan & Shani, 2018; Schein, 2010). This concept is defined by teamwork while researching change projects, as in the collaborative management research described by Shani, Mohrman, Pasmore, Stymne, and Adler (2008) and the dialogic OD described by Bushe and Marshak (2015). Such methods integrate participation in research-in-action with pertinent stakeholders in cooperative cycles of shared action and shared inquiry, as well as the co-generation of useful information in a particular context.

CONCLUSION

After reflecting on action research in business and management, we identified several significant commonalities, numerous variances, and some significant gaps. The majority of the variances and gaps are related to the learning mechanism designs, the important action research aspects, and the unsystematic use of acceptable quality criteria. Despite the fact that studies are often reported selectively, we were able to draw the conclusion that certain characteristics, including context, relationship quality, the effectiveness of the action research phases and activities, the collaborative design of the inquiry, and the configurations of the learning mechanisms, were frequently used across the studies. The need to pay closer attention to systematic and thorough reporting of the action research effort is one of the many lessons learned from this review, and it's likely the most significant. By doing so, a better understanding of the context, phases, mechanisms, relationships, outcomes, and the impact that they have can be generated. We believe that discussing just one of the

four factors—context, quality of connections, quality of the action research method, and outcomes—are insufficient. Rather, each aspect must be explicitly articulated, both in isolation and in relation to the others. The increasing issues that systems and organizations encounter can potentially be met through action research, but as it is now applied and researched in business and management, the promise has scarcely been realized. The backdrop for the action learning project and the characteristics of the work environment are crucial components in comprehending the antecedents in the beginning of action learning. The composition of action learning teams and stakeholders is a crucial aspect of the context for action learning that may be looked at from a variety of angles. Future action learning studies should also take into account the intervention's key characteristics.

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