FIFTH EDITION

ACTION RESEARCH

ERNEST T. STRINGER • ALFREDO ORTIZ ARAGÓN

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Fifth Edition

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Ernest T. Stringer

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PREFACE: MAKING A DIFFERENCE: RESEARCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the fifth edition of this text! Our sincere hope is that you find within these pages the ideas and practices that will enhance your professional life and enable you to more effectively serve the people with whom you work. We come to the task conscious that we live in an era that, while challenging, provides the potential to engage a changing world that seeks the reassurance of processes that provide more equitable and effective professional practices.

In this text we seek to engage the dynamics that define the 21st century, where alienation between people is becoming increasingly evident, where inequity between the rich and the poor continues to expand, and where grave social issues are ignored in the interest of wealthy and powerful groups and individuals. In this edition we therefore present professional practitioners and community members in all spheres of life with a set of practices and processes that engage truly human and ethical procedures that instill life and energy into their work. We believe the following features of this text provide the means to accomplish these worthy aims:

> Research that engages diverse groups of people in collaborative processes that produce practical, effective, and sustainable outcomes to real-world problems they experience in their work, community, organizational, or institutional lives
>
> Practice frameworks that clarify the step-by-step procedures presented in the text
>
> Contemporary theory that builds on past knowledge to assist readers to understand the complex dynamics now evident in

social life at all levels—organizational, local, state, national, and international

An integration of research processes with social and digital media that have become a central feature of modern life

A clear description of the developmental processes needed to accomplish social change

ENRICHING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

This edition builds on the now extended experience of its authors by presenting an approach to action research that clearly acknowledges the dramatic changes now taking place in our everyday lives. Developments in information technology and social media fuel radical developments in our homes, workplaces, and communities. Rapid change in almost all sectors of our social lives require constant adaptation to the operational requirements now instilled in our agencies, institutions, and commercial operations that accompany economic and political developments in both government and industry at local, state, and national levels. Grave issues such as climate change, ongoing military conflicts, and the consequent displacement and mass movements of populations threaten to unhinge the very institutions created to provide order and coherence to social life on this planet Earth.

In these circumstances we speak to the many practitioners who, in all corners of life, continue to provide programs and services in education, health, justice, welfare, and a wide range of other human services. Often hampered by overly restrictive organizational mandates or poorly resourced programs, they consciously work to overcome the sometimes difficult circumstances they confront to provide for the well-being of the people they serve. The first sections of the text present researching practitioners with well-tested, practical processes that provide a tool kit of skills that enhance their professional capacities as well as a body of theory that enables them to understand more clearly the complex dynamics of the social and organizational environments in which they work.

The practices and processes we present in these pages therefore seek to provide moral and ethical approaches to professional life that have real impact on people's lives. We present an approach to research that not only seeks to extend people's understanding of the issues and problems that they confront in their daily lives but also resolve those issues by taking practical steps to deal with them effectively.

While our own experience has been significantly enriched by the rich body of theoretical work embodied in much of the literature, we believe that the ultimate end of this process must be the active engagement of theory and practice. Theory, for us, is not a process of abstract and disengaged intellectual activity, though at times that has a purpose, but a process of discovery that engages people in communities, agencies, social groups, organizations, and institutions in collaborative processes that assist them to resolve the complex issues they sometimes face. As becomes evident in this text, a primary purpose of action research is not just to gain knowledge but to put the knowledge emerging from research to practical use.

In an age where the publish-or-perish dynamics of university life tend to lock people ever more firmly into the ivory tower, our experience suggests academic life can become more purposefully fulfilling by engaging the social realities of the people we serve. Publication by itself, we suggest, has become increasingly irrelevant in an age of "fake news," and there is an urgent need for the resources of the university to become more directly relevant to the crucial issues now emerging in all spheres of social life. Recent political events have made it clear that unethical and self-interested elites are able to harness the angst of the disenfranchised using ignorance and violence to serve their own political ends. Research, we believe, can no longer be considered the purview of an intellectual elite but should be embedded in the everyday lives of ordinary people to counter these reprehensible purposes.

IN SEARCH OF MEANINGFUL METHODOLOGY

The practices presented herein emerged from extensive experience in the field, each of us engaging in research activities in a wide variety of contexts for extended periods. Ernie's experience initially focused on his search for more effective approaches to education for Australia's Indigenous people. As he has indicated elsewhere

(Stringer, 2015), after he had experienced years of fruitless search for ways for Aboriginal people to gain entry to Australia's universities, he became involved in a community-led action by Aboriginal people:

> The situation eventually resolved itself when I was asked by two Aboriginal men to help them set up a Centre for Aboriginal Studies at the university at which I worked. Almost no Aboriginal people, at that stage, were employed in any academic capacity in any university in my state and Aboriginal people rarely entered a university program. In the following years, working within a set of principles eventually defined as "Aboriginal Terms of Reference" and learning practices defined within what was then known as community development, I worked under the leadership of Aboriginal people to institute university programs and services specifically designed for the personal, social, cultural, and educational needs of the people.
>
> In that wonderfully rich and collaborative environment, I experienced the joy and satisfaction of assisting Aboriginal people to achieve wonderfully effective results that transformed their place in the academic life of the nation. Aboriginal faculty worked in partnership with non-Aboriginal faculty to present unique and demanding programs derived from extensive consultation with Aboriginal communities. In following years, the number of Aboriginal graduates soared exponentially and the number employed in senior agency and organizational positions likewise increased dramatically.
>
> The processes, practices, and theory developed in this context extended the depth and extent of my own capacities, eventually becoming encapsulated in the family of methods known initially as "community-based research" and became the basis for the action research that I have now practiced and taught in a variety of contexts for many years. The principles and practices that worked so well with Aboriginal people, I discovered, were at least as effective in other contexts, including developmental work in East Timor, middle-class schools in Australia, a variety of health and welfare projects in other states of Australia, and community

projects in Texas, New Mexico, Oregon, and New York in the United States.

Although I have occasionally been prevented from achieving my goals by the obstinacy of rigidly fixed bureaucratic procedures, the overall view as I look back is one of great satisfaction. Many of the friendships I have developed help sustain me, but fundamentally I receive regular feedback that gives me a sense that I have made a significant difference to the lives of the people I have served. It is a feeling that reflects the words of my Aboriginal friend Darryl Kickett: “I take my hat off to them! THEY’RE the ones who did it. THEY did it. No one else did it for them. To see them graduate and go out into the world and conquer the environment around them—in a good way—is so important.” Action research, for me, makes all things possible.

Although Alfredo’s pathway has been somewhat different, his experiences in the field employed for 9 years in a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Latin America eventually led him to question the effect of the organizational capacity-building services for which he was responsible:

Over time I became a frustrated capacity-building facilitator, believing that I was engaging in change processes that were only scratching the surface. This frustration was a major motivator behind my decision to pursue a PhD in search of a more meaningful and impactful capacity-building methodology, which led me to action research.

I first learned of action research during my PhD process at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), in large part because many members of the Participation, Power and Social Change research team to which I was assigned were action research (AR) proponents. As I became more familiar with AR concepts early in my research design, it became clear to me that AR was my only pathway to get a PhD, primarily because I had not really done formal research before as a practitioner. I had a lot of work experience and had produced a lot of written materials along the way, but my main strength was not going to be in learning formal “scientific” research methods and putting them to use for the first time as a PhD researcher. Partly out of intimidation of who I wasn’t (scientific researcher), and partly in vindication of who I was (experienced capacity-building practitioner), I decided that my research process had to build strongly on the things I knew how to do well—namely design and facilitate capacity-building change processes but now using action research! My research ended up doing just that, although in a much more critical, reflective, and participatory way than I had done before.

Action research principles and practices have helped me to approach shared capacity-building spaces such as workshops more slowly and emergently, engaging in more open questioning, reflection, active listening, and systematic documentation of the active stories in the room, which are found in the conversations, patterns of behavior, energy, and power relationships that emerge in real-life interactive drama of which I am a part. Action research has made me more aware of who participates, whose knowledge counts, and who calls the shots or decides what to do in different moments of the process. I am more aware of the deep connections between culture, identity, and methodology. And I am cognizant of the power of knowledge as an input into purposeful action and action as a powerful source of knowledge. Through this book I am excited to share more about how all practitioners can become action researchers and leverage action and knowledge in new and transformative ways.

Building from a “politics of hope,” we therefore present practical procedures that more clearly illuminate the dynamics embedded in social settings but, in addition, define clear steps to take action to ameliorate the impact of many of the more onerous issues emerging from the impact of the ineffective and sometimes obfuscating narratives now embedded in the public arena. We trust that in working through the procedures suggested, you experience the joy and fulfillment that comes with work that is truly satisfying and effective, providing tangible ways in which you improve the well-being of the people you serve.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT

Although this edition provides the basic materials including the original text, we have altered the layout of contents somewhat. The text is organized in three main sections, each of which provides explanatory notes related to the issues included:

Section I: **An Introduction to Action Research** provides a general orientation to the first two chapters.

Chapter 1: **Understanding Action Research** introduces readers to action research, including the principles that provide the foundation for our particular orientation to the field and examples drawn from the wide range of contexts where it has been applied. In the process it introduces the Look–Think–Act framework that guides data gathering, analysis, and action.

Chapter 2: **Theoretical Foundations of Action Research** explores the philosophical and theoretical foundations of action research to assist readers to understand how the application of practically grounded research procedures distinguishes it from other approaches to investigation.

Section II: **Action Research Practices and Processes** provides an overview of Chapters 3 through 6, which provide detailed procedures and practices for engaging real-world environments in ways that make a difference in people's lives.

Chapter 3: **Initiating an Action Research Process** presents detailed procedures for initiating a research project.

Chapter 4: **Look: Generating and Gathering Data** guides readers through a set of practices for generating and gathering data.

Chapter 5: **Think: Reflecting and Analyzing** focuses on data analysis that enables research participants to develop an extended understanding of the issues and dynamics effecting the issues under investigation.

Chapter 6: **Act: Implementing Practical Solutions** suggests how knowledge emerging from the process of investigation provides the basis for taking practical and effective action to resolve the issues and problems that were the focus of investigation.

Section III: **From Local to Global—Action Research for Social Change** is intended to enrich and extend the capacities of experienced researchers. It first provides an extended discussion of the complex issues now facing the global community, recognizing the need to reframe the work of the university to counter the impact of the disturbing ideologies increasingly evident in many parts of the world. It introduces strategic developmental processes through which action research might provide a "politics of hope" that counters the impact of socially divisive knowledge production.

Chapter 7: **Reporting: Informing Stakeholders and Other Audiences** describes formal and informal procedures using traditional reporting processes and creative multimedia presentations for disseminating research information, not just to academic and professional communities but to the populace at large. Research information, we suggest, can no longer be considered only the purview of elite audiences.

Chapter 8: **Developmental Approaches to Social and Organizational Change** presents strategic developmental processes, moving from personal reflection through micro and mezza levels of practice at the small-group level to macro processes of organizational change that are the basis for meta-level institutional change.

Chapter 9: **Action Research and Digital Media** brings action research into the 21st century. With digital media so rapidly becoming a dominant force in public and private life, we provide detailed descriptions of practical ways these technologies can be used to enhance the power and reach of action research.

ENRICHING THE LEARNING PROCESS

Reflection and Learning activities presented at the end of each chapter are intended to capture the spirit of action research. They seek to assist people to learn from experience by reflecting on their use of the procedures we present in real-life situations. In doing so we hope to extend the power and application of abstract ideologies and theories, illuminating the way they apply to the realities of people's own experience. In this respect they may be interpreted as processes of action learning—learning not just from the literature or lectures of "authorities" but from reflection on their engaged experiences.

Each chapter finishes with a Chapter Review that summarizes the key issues presented to assist readers to understand and actively engage the simple procedures of action research in the grassroots work of their everyday professional and community lives.

This edition takes a giant leap into the 21st century by acknowledging the changing world in which we now live, where information technology and social media have transformed our lives, providing multiple ways of communicating and opening us to an incredible array of resources. In this edition we now complement the array of information included in this text with a range of interesting and useful internet sources and other materials provided on a website directly associated with our book. Please visit https://www.actionresearch5.com/

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After an early career as a primary teacher and school principal, Ernie was a lecturer in education at Curtin University of Technology, in Western Australia. From the mid-1980s, based at Curtin's Centre for Aboriginal Studies, he worked collaboratively with Aboriginal staff and community people to develop a wide variety of innovative and highly successful education and community development programs and services. His work with government departments, community-based agencies, business corporations, and local governments assisted them to work more effectively with Aboriginal people. In recent years, as visiting professor at the University of New Mexico and Texas A&M University and as visiting scholar at Cornell University, he taught research methods courses and/or engaged in projects with African American and Hispanic community and neighborhood groups. As a UNICEF consultant, he recently engaged in a major project to increase parent participation in schools in East Timor. He is author of *Action Research* (Sage, 2007), *Action Research in Education* (Pearson, 2008), *Action Research in Health* (with Bill Genat; Pearson, 2004), and *Action Research in Human Services* (with Rosalie Dwyer; Pearson, 2005). Until recently, he was a member of the editorial board of the *Action Research Journal* and past president of the Action Learning, Action Research Association (ALARA).

Alfredo Ortiz Aragón

Alfredo is an action researcher who designs and implements change processes to address pressing social and environmental concerns in support of equitable development. In the field he seeks to help organizations and movements that support processes of social change and environmental stewardship in order to be more effective and reflective in their work. In all of his work he uses methods that appeal to diverse learning styles but that also challenge dominant ways of seeing, knowing, and acting in the world that uphold unjust social rules and structures. He encourages all of his collaborators to reflectively "put themselves into the picture" and consciously participate in the changes they seek for others. He is willing to lead but also be vulnerable and open about what he and we know, and how we all might use our leadership and vulnerability to engage in honest conversations that help us support people in need in ways that are culturally relevant and potentially transformative. He is an associate professor at the Dreeben School of Education Graduate Studies Program at the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas, where he teaches qualitative and action research methods and design. His PhD is from the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, in the United Kingdom.

IN MEMORIAM: EGON GUBA

For Ernie, Egon's gentle friendship, insistent mentoring, and keen intellect provided the impetus to write this, his first book. Now in its fifth edition, it is a tribute to the man who helped him frame and shape his rough ideas into a form that has now provided a significant resource for scholars, students, and practitioners for many years. Egon's contribution to the world of research and evaluation will last through the ages as people construct and support their research on the foundation he and his wife, Yvonna Lincoln, laid down for many decades. Thank you, Egon Guba, for the wonderful gift you gave us all.

SECTION I AN INTRODUCTION TO ACTION RESEARCH

This section introduces action research as an action-oriented, systematic approach to investigation and reflective practice that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives. Unlike experimental and quantitative approaches to research that seek only to provide generalizable explanations about the nature of problems, action research seeks to directly engage the complex dynamics of specific social contexts to discover practical solutions to problems people experience in family, community, organizational, and institutional settings.

Common approaches to academic research focus on experimental and quasi-experimental processes in which researchers deliberately exclude themselves from active participation in the research setting. Action researchers, however, take quite a different stance, which highlights their desire to work collaboratively with participants to achieve practical solutions to issues and problems they experience in their everyday lives. In this light, action researchers might be heard offering advice such as *“Don’t limit yourself to passive approaches to research. Take action—you can learn much more if you get engaged!”*

This approach to investigation is particularly relevant to practitioners—people in fields such as nursing, teaching, engineering, law enforcement, social work, and so on. Practitioners are task-oriented people whose main job is to do things—to get things done for or with specific groups of people. They are usually prepared with relevant knowledge in their field through formal or informal training and apply practices and procedures related to their respective professions. Unlike academic researchers, however, their main job is not to generate knowledge, to develop theory, or to publish the results of their research but to engage in forms of inquiry that enable them to improve their practice or resolve the complex issues they sometimes face.

Traditionally, academic research commences with a review of the literature that enables researchers to learn what is known about the issue to be investigated. This often provides significant and useful information for readers to understand much about the issue and the factors affecting it. Much of the research literature, however, speaks in terms of abstract language that presents only a limited picture of the rich and sometimes puzzling complexity of social life and fails to provide the types of insight that enable a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of events that comprise people's lives. Research participants, we propose, gain greater understanding by actively engaging in actions that reveal the complex network of issues and events embedded in the contexts they study. By acknowledging and understanding these issues, research participants greatly increase the potential of their research to resolve the problems at the heart of their investigations. We therefore suggest that the highest forms of knowledge are those that provide the basis for practical action. The chapters in this section offer concrete steps for engaging in this type of research.

Chapter 1: **Understanding Action Research** describes continuing cycles of observation, reflection, and action that enable research participants to construct practical solutions to issues and problems experienced in specific situations and localized settings. Action research may be applied in schools, businesses, health and human services agencies, community organizations, and many other settings, enabling research participants to extend their understanding of issues and events and increase their capacity to deal effectively with the problematic issues at the heart of their research. Research is envisaged as a collaborative process in which the professional researcher's knowledge is combined with the knowledge and experience of local people to engage in inquiries with the intent of finding practical and effective solutions to their issues.

Chapter 2: **Theoretical Foundations of Action Research** presents action research as a legitimate and professionally acceptable approach to investigation by exploring its philosophical and theoretical groundings. As the chapter indicates, traditional approaches to investigation, usually seen as the purview of professionally and academically trained experts, often provide but a limited understanding of the complex dynamics at work in any social setting. Collaborative processes, the chapter suggests, provide the means to engage the deeper understandings embedded in the experience and knowledge of people who inhabit the settings investigated. Chapter 2 also reveals the extent to which action research processes are particularly relevant in contexts where professional practitioners are asked to work with diverse cultural groups that are often part of the setting. Finally, the chapter describes how action research is appropriate to the diverse cultural settings of modern society and especially relevant to contexts involving racial, Indigenous, migrant, and other marginalized or alienated groups.

REFLECTION AND ACTION

At the end of each chapter you will find a Reflection and Action section that provides opportunities for reflecting on the issues presented and engaging in activities that can help you make sense of and better understand the content of the chapter. The activities are based on the assumption that we learn better by doing rather than just reading, thinking, talking, or listening. Individual readers may relate the issues covered in the chapter to their own experience to ensure that they understand the concepts, procedures, and techniques described. This process of clarifying and understanding will be enhanced, however, if you engage in conversations around these issues with friends, colleagues, or classmates.

The activities we have included also provide opportunities for you to practice some of the techniques and procedures presented. Practice the activities suggested, reflect on what you have done, and have others observe you, if possible. The process of reflecting and obtaining feedback on your actions will be informative. The activities themselves are best applied to a real-life situation to which you have access. It can be your own workplace or a community context where you can spend time over a period of weeks. You will be asked to explore a simple issue or problem that you or others are experiencing in this place. If you cannot find such a place, then perform the learning activities as best you can, possibly in your own home or with friends and neighbors. The learning activities can also be enacted in a “strange” place—a place with which you are not terribly familiar but to which you have access. In these circumstances you may be less comfortable, but you will probably learn more about a process of investigation.

1 UNDERSTANDING ACTION RESEARCH

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?[1]

1. A box at the end of each chapter provides a summary of the material presented therein.

Unlike experimental research that looks for generalizable explanations related to a small number of variables, action research seeks to directly engage the complex dynamics of given social contexts in order to accomplish practical solutions to issues affecting people's lives. Action research involves the use of analytic frameworks and reflective processes to investigate real-life issues that have an impact on people's lives and threaten their well-being. It is an approach to investigation that uses continuing cycles of observation, reflection, and action to reveal effective solutions to issues and problems experienced by people in their everyday lives or in times of crisis. In the process, action research provides the means by which people in schools, businesses, government, health and human services agencies, and community organizations may increase the effectiveness and efficiency of their work and community activities. Action research also seeks to build a body of knowledge that enhances professional and community practices and increases the well-being of the people involved.

As described in the opening sections of this book, the authors have engaged in exciting and fulfilling research projects that have made a significant difference to the lives of the people with whom they worked. While many smaller projects have had impressive outcomes, some have resulted in wide-ranging and long-term developments that became national in scope. The application of the principles and practices we describe below has not only provided participants with immediate results from the action they have taken but also provided them with the capacity to continue to enhance and improve their occupational, organizational, and community lives. Years later, we still meet people who speak proudly of the accomplishments emerging from their action research. Frequently, they say that "it was life-changing," "it empowered me personally," "it changed my world view," "it inspired me to work for social justice for my people," or express themselves in many similar ways. One woman said of her participation in a program emerging from and sustained by action research processes: "it was groundbreaking work; the best of all the work I've done in my life! It was incredibly stimulating. It was a really exciting time. It was amazing. The bigger issue of social justice seemed to be what anchored everybody.. . . You were actually doing stuff that was about practical engagement that was delivering stuff back to the communities."

The passion and commitment evident in these comments provided the energy and enthusiasm to continue to work through sometimes difficult issues and to develop the meaningful relationships that are the basis for truly effective work. Action research therefore is often professionally fulfilling at a deeply personal level, especially for those who seek to challenge continuing issues that threaten the well-being of people in current times. It is, we suggest, an essential approach to research in the current era, providing the means to conduct professional life in ways that serve the causes of liberation and social justice.

Professional and service occupations—teaching, social work, health care, psychology, youth work, and so on—thus have the potential to provide meaningful and fulfilling work that is intrinsically rewarding. Increasingly, however, people in these sectors find their work to be more demanding and less satisfying as they struggle to balance growing demands on their energies from increasing workloads and time-consuming requirements of increased reporting. These pressures are exacerbated by tensions inherent in contemporary society, the complexity of people's everyday social lives providing a fertile seedbed for a proliferating host of family, community, and institutional problems. Professional practitioners and agency workers are increasingly held accountable for solutions to issues that have their roots in the deeply complex interaction between the mandates of central authorities and the realities of people's everyday social and professional lives: stress, unemployment, family breakdown, alienation, behavioral problems, violence, poverty, discrimination, conflict, and so forth. In the current context, for example, teachers are often held accountable for the poor performance of their students, politicians and education authorities blaming teacher practices for low test scores, when academic performance is far more affected by factors outside of the classroom and school.

Although adequately prepared to deal with the technical requirements of their daily work, practitioners often face recurrent crises outside the scope of their professional expertise. Teachers face children disturbed by conflict in their homes and communities, youth workers encounter resentful and alienated teenagers, health workers confront people apparently unconcerned about life-threatening lifestyles and social habits, and social and welfare workers are strained past their capacity to deal with the impossible caseloads spawned by increasing poverty and alienation. In the business world, the sometimes overwhelming corporate demands to reduce costs and increase profit limit the possibilities for workers to provide more effective service or durable goods.

Typical responses to these and other crises invariably involve the use of a teacher, social worker, youth worker, counselor, or similar service professional whose task it is to address the problem by applying some intervention at an individual or programmatic level. In many situations, however, these types of response have failed to diminish growing social problems that have multiplied faster than human and financial resources available to deal with them. Moreover, evidence suggests that centralized policies and programs generated by "experts" have limited success in resolving these problems. In education, for instance, billions of dollars invested over four decades in special programs and services has failed to close the gap in educational performance between mainstream and marginalized social groups (Cole, 2010; Sarason, 1990). More broadly, in recent decades wages for workers have stagnated, while the wealth of those in higher managerial classes has increased significantly (Piketty, 2014). Further, despite clear evidence of the catastrophic outcomes of human-induced climate change, governments have been largely unwilling or politically unable to take the strong steps necessary to diminish the continued reliance on heat-inducing fossil fuels (Apgar et al., 2019; Bradbury et al., 2019).

To effectively address these proliferating social problems, centralized policies and expert models need to be complemented by creative action of those closest to their sources—working people, service professionals, agency workers, students, clients, communities, and families who face the issues on a daily basis. The daily work of these "practitioners" provides many opportunities for them to acquire valuable insights into the social worlds in which they live and work by providing them with the means to formulate effective solutions to problems that permeate their lives.

Action research works on the assumption that those closest to the impact of the above issues are "experts" in understanding many of the realities of their own lives and should therefore be directly involved in addressing them. Where centralized policies, programs, and services consistently fail to provide answers to social problems, we suggest, service practitioners should engage the human potential of all people who contribute to the complex dynamics of the contexts in which these occur. Centralized programs that dictate specific actions, procedures, and interventions should be replaced by flexible responses and actions that are appropriate to particular places and social groups.

Action research processes suggest the need for people to change their vision of professional practitioners from directive technicians to creative inquirers. This new vision rejects the unthinking application of predetermined procedures across all settings and contexts and instead advocates the use of contextually relevant processes to modify and adapt practices according to the realities of the particular contexts in which they work. The pages that follow describe some of the ways in which professional and technical workers in agency, organization, and community contexts can hone their investigative skills, engage in systematic approaches to inquiry, and formulate effective and sustainable solutions to deep-rooted problems that diminish the quality of their work. This volume presents an approach to inquiry that seeks not only to enrich professional, community, and business practices, but also to enhance the understanding of all people affected by the issues investigated.

As becomes evident in the following sections, action research is not merely a tool for applying standardized procedures to professional, organizational, or community settings, nor an occupation intended as the sole provenance of trained researchers. Neither is action research a superficial set of routines or fixed prescriptions that legitimate professional practices, but an approach to inquiry and investigating that provides a flexible set of procedures that are systematic, cyclical, solutions-oriented, and participatory, providing the means to devise sustainable improvements in practice that enhance the lives and well-being of all participants.

Action Research: Systematic and Adaptive Processes of Participative Inquiry

A primary purpose of action research is to provide people with the capacity to engage in a systematic inquiry and investigation to discover effective ways of resolving problems and issues experienced in their work or community lives. As becomes evident, however, practitioners are most effective when they do not work in isolation but engage in participative and collaborative relationships with people previously designated as subjects, clients, customers, or students. Action research works best, we assert, when all people affecting or affected by issue(s) of concern are included in the processes of inquiry. Practitioners, as research facilitators, assist those affected by the issue—stakeholders—in systematic explorations that, in very direct ways, enable them to resolve complex issues in their individual, group, community, or organizational lives.

Action research therefore is a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to generate the knowledge needed to resolve specific problems. It is not a panacea for all ills and does not resolve all problems but provides a means for people to more clearly understand their situations and to formulate effective solutions to problems they face. A basic action research routine provides a simple yet powerful framework—Look–Think–Act (see Box 1.1 on p. 9)—that enables people to commence their inquiries in a straightforward manner and build greater detail into procedures as the complexity of issues increases. The terms in parentheses in Box 1.1 illustrate how the phases of the routine relate to traditional research practices.

General

Box 1.1

A Basic Action Research Routine in Relation to a Specified Issue or Problem

Look

- Observe what is going on (Observe).
- Gather relevant information (Gather data).
- Describe the situation (Define and describe).

Think

Explore and analyze: What is happening here? (Analyze).

Interpret and explain: How or why are things as they are? (Theorize).

Act

Define a course of action based on analysis and interpretation (Plan).

Implement the plan (Implement).

Assess the effectiveness of actions taken (Evaluate).

General

Reflection 1.1:

Ernie—Learning From Experience

As a young teacher, I had the rare experience of being transferred from the relative security of a suburban classroom to a primary school in a remote desert region of Western Australia. My task was to provide education for the children of the Aboriginal people who, at this time, still lived as they had for millennia, moving through the land in small family groups, hunting for their food, and sleeping in leaf shelters. On my first day in class, I was confronted by a wall of silence that effectively prevented any possibility of teaching. The children refused to respond verbally to any of my queries or comments, hanging their heads, averting their eyes, and sometimes responding so softly that I was unable to hear what they said. In these discomfiting circumstances, I was unable to work through any of the customary routines and activities that had constituted my professional repertoire in the city. Lessons were abbreviated, disjointed, and seemingly pointless, and my professional pride took a distinct jolt as an ineffective reading lesson followed an inarticulate math period, preceding the monotony of my singular voice through social studies.

The silence of the children in the classroom was in marked contrast to their happy chatter as we walked through the surrounding bush that afternoon, my failing spirits leading me to present an impromptu natural science "lesson." In this and following lessons, the children taught me a great deal about the living bushland that was their natural home—the small animals and birds that, though unseen by my city-bred eyes, were everywhere; the plants, fruits, roots, and berries that were edible; the places where water could be found (a precious commodity in this desert environment); and how to survive when the weather was very hot. My "teachers" were a mine of information, and they reveled in the opportunities to demonstrate to me their knowledge about the environment and their skill in being able to move so easily in what I saw as a hostile setting. I discovered that I was able to make use of this knowledge and interest in the classroom, fashioning a range of learning activities related to literacy, mathematics, social science, and natural science.

In small ways I was thus able to accommodate my approach to teaching in this unique educational environment, but the experience endowed me with an understanding that the regular routines of teaching were unsuited to my current circumstances. All the taken-for-granted assumptions of my professional life rang hollow as I struggled to understand the nature of the *problems that confronted me and to formulate appropriate educational experiences for this vibrant, independent, and sometimes fractious group of students. Texts, curricula, teaching materials, learning activities, classroom organization, speech, interactional styles, and all other facets of classroom life became subjects of inquiry and investigation as I sought to resolve the constant stream of issues and problems that emerged in this environment. To be an effective teacher, I discovered that it was necessary to modify and adapt my regular professional routines and practices to fit the lives of the children*.

The legacy of that experience has remained with me. Although I have long since left school classrooms behind, the lessons I learned there still pervade all my work. I engage all professional, organizational, and community contexts with a deep sense of my need to explore and understand the situation. An attitude of inquiry enables me to engage, examine, explore, formulate answers, and devise responses to deal more effectively with each context I engage—and the diverse experiences and perspectives of the people within it.

In these situations, I now cast myself as a research facilitator, working with and supporting people to engage in a systematic investigation that leads to clarity and understanding for us all and to provide a basis for effective action. In many places in the United States, Canada, Australia, East Timor, and Singapore, I use techniques and procedures that have been fruitfully applied to the day-to-day work of people in agencies, organizations, and community settings. I am now a practitioner–researcher.

The Look–Think–Act routine is but one of a number of ways in which action research is envisaged. For example, Hendricks (2016) presents as similar model to our own based on continuing movements through a reflect, act, evaluate routine. Kemmis and McTaggart (2014) present action research as a spiral of activity: plan, act, observe, reflect. Calhoun (1993), in a similar vein, suggests cycles based on steps commencing with selection of area of study, followed by collection of data, organization of data, analysis and interpretation of data, and finally “taking action.” Models by Wells (1994), Coghlan (2019), and Mills (2017) provide similar processes that include observation, interpretation, planning, and action, each having feedback loops at each step.

Different formulations of action research reflect the diverse ways in which the same set of activities may be described, although the processes they delineate are similar. There are, after all, many ways of cutting a cake. What is important to note for practitioners is that you are already “acting” in your day-to-day work. All models of action research provide some form of “looking” and “thinking,” suggesting the need for practitioners and other participants to more consciously question what is often taken for granted—the “normal” way things “are supposed” to happen. Throughout this book we will focus particularly on how practitioners can more consciously add more “looking” and “thinking” to their “acting” to become more effective practitioner-researchers.

Although the Look–Think–Act routine is presented in a linear format in sections of this book, it should be considered as a continually recycling set of activities. As participants work through each of the major stages, they explore the details of their activities through a constant process of observation, reflection, and action. At the completion of each set of activities, they review (look again), reflect (reanalyze), and re-act (modify their actions). These cycles can sometimes be framed as phases of a research process so that planning, implementing, and evaluating, for instance, can be seen as cycles of a project (see Figure 1.1). As experience shows, action research is not a neat, orderly activity that allows participants to proceed step by step to the end of the process. People will find themselves working backward through the routines, repeating processes, revising procedures, rethinking interpretations, leapfrogging steps or stages, and sometimes making radical changes in direction. Because new actions are based on learning that occurs at each step of the way, action research often is not a linear process (Burns, Harvey, & Ortiz Aragón, 2012; Ortiz Aragón, 2012; Pettit, 2012; Scharmer, Pomeroy, & Käufer, 2021). The steps and cycles of an action research process, however, provide a compass or map that assists participants to track their progress, wherever and however they proceed.

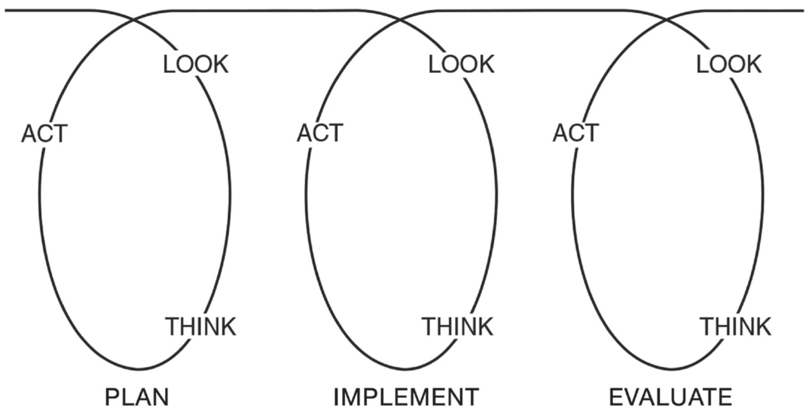


Figure 1.1 Action Research Interacting Spiral

Action research, however, is not merely a technical routine. As will become evident, the procedures presented are designed to take into account the social, cultural, interactional, and emotional factors that affect all human activity. “The medium is the message!” As will become evident throughout the book, the implicit values and underlying assumptions embedded in action research use a set of guiding principles that can facilitate a democratic, liberating, and life-enhancing approach to research.

Making a Difference: Practical, Solutions-Oriented Inquiry

Ernie’s colleague’s statement in Reflection 1.2 characterizes, for us, one of the significant differences between action research and traditional research. Traditionally, research projects are complete when a report has been written and recommendations presented to the contracting agency or published in an academic journal. An action research project can also have these organizational or academic outputs that provide the basis for developing rich theory and informative knowledge, but its primary purpose is to enable research participants to achieve practical solutions to significant problems (Bradbury, 2015a; Bradbury, Glenzer, et al., 2019; Bradbury, Waddell, et al., 2019; Coghlan, 2019). If an action research project does not *make a difference,* in a specific way, for practitioners and other stakeholders, then it has failed to achieve its objective. The analogue of hypothesis testing in action research is some form of change or development tested by its ability to move toward the resolution of the problem under investigation. In the words of Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), success in action research can be seen when participants “have a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their practices, their understandings of their practices, and the situations in which they practice.”

General

Reflection 1.2:

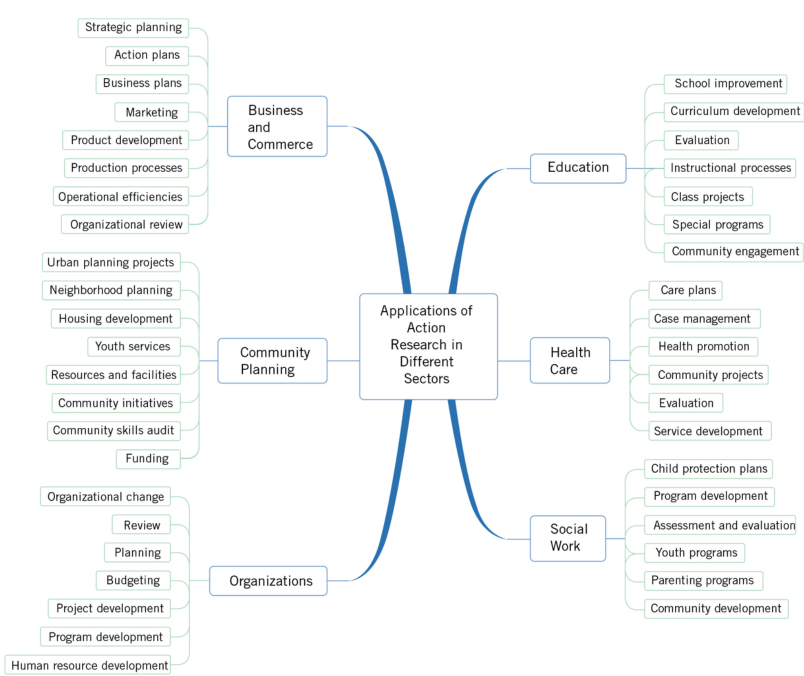
Ernie—Outcomes of Action Research

A colleague approached me after listening to my report on one of the action research projects in which I had been involved. “You know,” she said, “the difference with your work is that you expect something to actually happen as a result of your research activities.” Her experience of research, common to much university research, is that a project is complete when the report has been written, with no other actions contemplated other than a publication in a research journal. Action research projects, however, engage participants in ongoing actions to resolve the problem or issue that was the focus of the research.*

Action research has been employed successfully in many settings—schools, hospitals, health clinics, community agencies, government departments, rural communities, urban and suburban organizations, churches, youth clubs, ethnic groups, extension services, and many other situations. Factory workers, agency staff, school students, youth groups, young mothers, senior citizens, economically poor people, unemployed people, community groups, people with disabilities or illness, and so on have participated in action research studies to resolve issues that have impacted on their work, education, personal or community lives. Service professionals—social workers, community workers, teachers, nurses, doctors, managers and administrators, urban and community planners, and agency workers in a wide range of social contexts—likewise apply action research processes in the conduct of their everyday work.

People at all levels, therefore, may engage in action research projects for a variety of purposes. Health professionals, for example, may wish to investigate and remediate poor health conditions or practices (e.g., smoking, drinking, low birth weight, or inappropriate medication) within a particular community group to develop appropriate remedial strategies. Teachers may investigate strategies for dealing with low student achievement levels, poor attendance, student disinterest, or disruptive behavior. School principals may formulate programs for increasing community participation in their schools. Welfare workers may seek to act on the prevalence of child abuse or neglect among client groups. Community workers may wish to develop programs and projects to deal with the problems of neighborhood youth. Those involved in business may use action research procedures to improve organizational efficiency or effectiveness or to work more effectively with client groups. All will benefit from the use of procedures that enable them to explore systematically the conditions that operate in their specific contexts and that help them develop practical actions for dealing effectively with the problems that confront them.

Figure 1.2 indicates a wide array of situations in which action research processes can be used to more clearly understand sometimes complex issues and reveal practical steps that enable people to move toward their resolution.



[Description](#)

Figure 1.2 Applications of Action Research in Different Professions

WHO DOES ACTION RESEARCH, AND WHY DO THEY DO IT? STORIES FROM THE FIELD

The following accounts provide but a few examples of the many ways in which action research provides the means for people to work collaboratively to solve significant problems in their work, education, or community life. Each is distinctive in its own way but describes how systematic, participatory processes of investigation enabled participants to achieve outcomes that resolved significant problems in the social environment in which they were placed.

Education[2]

2. A full description of this project may be found in Stringer (2007).

A teacher in an eighth-grade language arts class engaged the students in a voluntary research project concerning a school issue. In doing so she wished to cover a range of skills relevant to the state-mandated curriculum. A preliminary discussion with a group of girls identified sexual harassment as the number one issue facing them at school on a daily basis. It was a pervasive fact of life that was played out in classrooms, locker rooms, hallways, the cafeteria, and school buses, with one girl indicating that "nowhere is safe at school."

In following sessions the girls extended their understanding of their experience of sexual harassment, detailing ways and places that it happened and describing particular incidents that illustrated their concerns. They also reviewed literature from magazines and other sources, discovering that it was a widespread issue across the nation. The group wrote letters to their parents, asking their permission to participate, and to the school administration, explaining the nature of their study.

The group investigations, in which each of them and other students and adults were interviewed individually, revealed the many ways harassment had occurred, including some incidents that were quite shocking to them all. Conversations with the school counselor indicated he dealt with issues of sexual harassment on a daily basis and was concerned that lack of student awareness of what constituted sexual harassment led many to feel confused.

At the end of the year the girls decided to write a performance piece titled "Speaking Out," based on the key elements emerging from their investigations, to bring the issue to the attention of students and teachers. The script included information about ways to protect oneself when harassed and how to contact help when needed. They also constructed a triptych, a three-paneled piece where students could write down their ideas after the performance. They also wrote an article for the school newsletter that went to all students and their parents, checking with the school administration that it was OK to do this.

When "Speaking Out" was performed at the school's Student Forum, there was a standing ovation, and the three panels of the triptych were covered with statements of strengths and affirmation. In the following months, the School Police Officer reported that sexual harassment complaints had fallen *from four to five per week to one every two weeks, a testimony to the power of the action research in which the teacher and the girls had been involved*.

Business/Health

Barbara Horner, an experienced health professional, engaged the Senior Management Team (SMT) of an aged care community as partners in an action research project that would assist their plans for redevelopment of the facility. Over a period of 2 years the outcomes of her research were integrated into the SMT's plan for the changes required to take account of changing circumstances of aged care funding. A particular concern of the SMT was that the need for changes to their operations resulting largely from financial concerns should not negatively impact on the well-being or quality of life of residents.

The study included two cycles of an action research process based largely on qualitative methods—participatory observation and semistructured interviews—as well as additional data from two quality of service surveys for residents and a staff satisfaction survey. One of the major purposes of the action research process was to communicate and explain the processes of change to residents and to monitor and manage the impact of changes on their well-being.

An initial review of literature related to the social and organizational dynamics of aged care revealed many issues to be addressed by the SMT as they planned the changes to their organization. This was complemented by a review of relevant documents and records that provided further information related to the operation of the facility. This assisted the research team to clarify the broader arena of aged care and the key issues to be taken into consideration as they moved forward. At this stage the research facilitator also attended meetings of the SMT, gaining an understanding of the facility's history, current situation and its challenges, issues and aspirations. In addition a period of reconnaissance also enabled the research facilitator to develop positive relationships with other staff and with residents.

In order to understand how residents were feeling about the impending changes, the facilitator engaged in interviews with a sample of residents from the low- and high-care centers and the independent living units. These interviews provided guidance for the development of a survey that explored issues related to administration services; village services such as assistance, security, and maintenance; and contracted services such as medical, podiatry, pharmacy, and hairdressing. Other questions sought to determine the levels of satisfaction with lifestyle services and facilities and with dissemination of information.

The study proved a great success, providing a continuing body of information that assisted the SMT to take into account a wide range of issues emerging from the study. These not only provided a resource for this facility but also suggested actions that might benefit other institutions and facilities affected by changing policies and circumstances of aged care. The positive impact of the study was also demonstrated by the formation of a Resident's Advisory Council that maintained an ongoing forum for residents to interact with the facility's management.

Economic Development

Jeremy Prince worked with a group of Pacific Island villagers who were concerned about the ongoing depletion of fish stocks that threatened their livelihoods. He first listened to their stories that told of times when there were plenty of fish, including those highly valued that were now in exceedingly short supply. He continued to gather information from them about their current fishing habits and discovered that where as the villagers had previously fished mainly for larger fish that at one time were highly valued, they now talked of smaller fish as being more available and "sweeter."

With their help, he then started collecting data about the results of their fishing, the analysis revealing that the smaller fish making the major part of their catch were caught before they reached reproductive age. When this analysis emerged, it became easy for the villagers to understand that soon there would be no fish to catch. They then developed a plan to limit the size that fishermen could catch and the season when they could be caught.

This project became so successful that Jeremy was asked to extend his work to other villages and islands, working with each group to provide them with the methods of gathering and analyzing data related to their fishing activities.

Social Work

Youth crime became a major concern in Graceville, where police, social workers, school authorities, parents, and the courts were frustrated at continued occurrences of burglary, petty theft, vandalism, and drug and alcohol abuse, especially among young males. Casework interventions by social workers and continuing punitive measures by the courts failed to stem the tide of offenses that threatened family and community life. The situation was exacerbated by unemployment emerging from the economic downturn that had affected the city and by alcohol and drug abuse and violence that was common in the homes of offenders.

The continuing cycle of juvenile offenses created problems between agencies in the town, with police, welfare agency workers, schools, and parents criticizing each other and local parents for failure to curb the actions of youth. After abortive attempts to deal with the situation through casework and more punitive means, including placing offenders in care of the state, a coalition of workers from the city's human services agencies met to develop a plan of action for dealing more effectively with a situation that had reached crisis point.

Participants in the first meeting focused on a number of areas in which they thought they could take action. Their initial investigations revealed useful family networks in the community, including aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, and cousins of repeat offenders. Meetings with family groups of each offender built a picture of the situation, analyzing the problematics of their situation and exploring possibilities for action. Both agency workers and family members gained a clear picture of the situation and an understanding of the immediate and long-term harm likely to arise from its continuation. They were also able to devise actions at the family level that began to alleviate the issues with which offenders were faced.

The monthly interagency meetings then broadened their activities to include community leaders in an effort to extend their understanding of the broader issues impacting on community life and to identify the assets of skills and experience within the community. Using these assets, the group commenced an expanding series of activities that included regular social events and functions, a program that provides leisure time activities for *young people that improved problem-solving skills, enhancing self-confidence and acquiring practical life skills*.

The outcome of these activities has seen many young people engaging in positive activities and the development of a community spirit in the sections of town where they operated. They also enable people to come together to develop their capacity to deal with issues in an ongoing way. A further outcome has been for agency workers, police, health professionals, teachers, and others to increase their understanding of the place and the people in the city and to develop a greater awareness of the need to work collaboratively and holistically to create positive and healthy changes for the young people involved.

The literature is replete with many other examples of the different ways and contexts in which action research has been applied. A limited list includes three editions of the *Sage Handbook of Action Research* (Bradbury, 2015b; Reason & Bradbury, 2001, 2008), the *Wiley Handbook of Action Research* (Mertler, 2019), *The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research* (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014), the action research "cookbooks" (Bradbury et al., 2017; Bradbury, Gerónimo, & Castillo, 2019), and many of the sources referenced in this text. Useful additions to this list may be found in the website associated with this text: https://www.actionresearch5.com/

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ACTION RESEARCH

In the preceding sections of this chapter, we have described the general qualities and characteristics of action research, a simple set of procedures that guide the processes of inquiry, and a range of contexts where it can be usefully and effectively applied. This section speaks to three central principles that distinguish action research from other approaches to inquiry, suggesting how practitioners and other research participants might more systematically acquire knowledge that will better inform their actions. The three central principles are learning through (and for) action, acting informed by learning, and participation by those who know—that is, those with intimate knowledge of the context.

Learning Through Action

The primary purpose of action research is to commence with an *attitude of inquiry*, to collaboratively construct a preliminary understanding of the issues involved and then to instigate actions that further enhance participant insights into the issues investigated. Continuing cycles of the Look–Think–Act routine provide the basis for a rich and more thorough understanding of the sometimes complex dynamics of the situation. The actions emerging within the research process provide the primary source of knowledge that fuels the main purposes of action research. Thinking, reflecting, and analysis alone will not provide the means to achieve the ultimate ends of an action research process.

Two ideas underlie this principle: First, when we try to affect, improve, or change something, the "real world" responds in ways that enable us to learn about the context and the people concerned. This idea is at the very heart of the oft-cited idea from Kurt Lewin (1948) that if you want truly to understand something, try to change it. Taking action generates knowledge in a dynamic manner and is therefore a powerful research method! Second, with action research the very purpose of research is to develop a better understanding of the issues we investigate and to utilize that knowledge in pursuit of worthwhile practical purposes. The example in Reflection 1.3 illustrates how small actions taken in learning processes might be used to support further actions.

General

Reflection 1.3:

Alfredo—From Reflection to Action

Recently I was speaking to a friend who is a professor at a local community college. She told me that she was trying to get students in her psychology courses to understand the roles elderly people play in society, and why it is problematic that some people get "assigned away" to homes or other very reduced areas of public and social life once they reach a certain age. She wanted students to see how elderly people could continue to play important roles in society and remain a bigger part of our everyday interactions.

We quickly brainstormed how an action research approach might help her students better understand the realities of elderly people. We started by clarifying how a traditional university approach might include reading textbooks and other literature on the role of older people in different societies, including the United States. We could break the analysis down by regions where there are significant cultural differences. We could also include out-of-class research activities such as interviewing elderly people and those who engage with or work with elderly, including family members and workers in assisted living facilities. We thought those interviews were likely to yield helpful insights into the realities faced by elderly people, which would complement the readings.

Importantly, my friend wanted her students—most of whom are at an age where they are particularly unaware of realities elderly people face—to not only learn and become more aware but eventually engage differently with elderly people in the future. In other words, she is not content with them only increasing their understanding but for new understanding to lead to new behaviors—action.

We thought about different ways action-oriented activities could help students learn about realities elderly people face. For example, helping them shop for their groceries at a store, taking them to a doctor's appointment, or participating in organized social activities with them. In doing active things with elderly people—becoming part of their regular lives, seeing the things that they enjoy, and experiencing the things they struggle with—students would learn a lot more about their situation than by just reading about it.

Part of the problem my friend wished to address was the social isolation and marginalization of a group of people who are often relegated to remain within their own social group and have little use in other spaces. The actions the students would take to learn about the situation would also help improve the situation, because by engaging with elderly people they would start to break down barriers through their action. Through acts of volunteering in ways that help elderly people, they would generate insights about their lived experiences, what works and what doesn't, and what potential exists for improvement. They would understand the realities elderly people face in ways not possible through readings and discussions alone, and their activities would not only generate greater understanding but also help improve the situation through meaningful interactions with elderly people over a period of time.

The novelty of this first principle of learning through action may be slightly more geared toward academics and researchers, many of whom have been trained to observe the world in very prescribed ways. Traditionally, academic research was based on experimental processes in which researchers deliberately excluded themselves from participation in research processes. For many purposes, this is still a necessary aspect of experimental research. The researcher's role is to passively observe and analyze the processes and outcomes of their investigations. While action researchers believe we too can learn a lot by reading and by observing things, we believe we can learn even more by trying to change or improve them. Action researchers take quite a different stance, which might be characterized as *"Don't limit yourself to traditional passive ways of learning. Take action—you can learn much more if you get engaged!"*

Learning through action—by trying to change or improve things—reveals complex dynamics about everyday social life and highlights the fact that the purpose of learning (and of generating knowledge) is to provide better understanding of a situation to enable people to take appropriate and effective action to resolve their issues and problems.

Acting Informed by Learning

This second principle speaks to the importance of reflection in developing deep-seated insights that better inform our actions. This is about using the processes of investigation to derive understandings that enable more informed decisions as practitioners. This principle is particularly relevant to practitioners—that is, people in the field, such as nurses, teachers, engineers, law enforcement officers, social workers, and so on, whose main job is to get things done for or with a specific group of people. They are usually prepared with relevant knowledge in their field through formal or informal training, and they may apply frameworks of ideas from their respective professions. Unlike academic researchers, however, their main job is not to generate knowledge, to develop theory, or to publish results of research but to engage in forms of inquiry that enable them to resolve the complex issues they sometimes face. In their day-to-day work, *professional practitioners are always taking action*, learning as they go and making improvements to what they do.

It is our contention that if practitioners are able to pay a little more attention to how things are actually happening, they can be more effective in their work. By more consciously taking an *attitude of inquiry* (Marshall & Reason, 2007), they can engage their day-to-day work more thoughtfully and achieve better outcomes. *We can all become more effective practitioners if we more consciously learn from the experience we gain through the actions we take*.

General

Reflection 1.4:

Alfredo—Reflective Practice

As a practitioner, I experienced a "lack of learning culture" working for many years in nonprofit management in the international development sector, where we often repeated the same ways of working year after year, largely because we were always in "doing" mode and had no systematic way of generating deep insights into our practice. For example, we continued to use methodologies based on somewhat outdated management's "best practices" for many years. Today I see the need to take time to reflect on my work, and my message to practitioners is this: "You could be a little bit more reflective in the way you do your work. Don't remain in 'doing' mode all day long. Carve out time, even half an hour, to just think about what you're doing, what is and isn't working, and why. Share your insights with others. If you were to be a little more reflective, document a little bit more, share what you're learning, re-plan, and do it again, you could really leverage knowledge for your practice in powerful ways that other people aren't doing."

Collaborating in Participative Research Processes

The third action research principle acknowledges that the people who are actively engaged in the on-the-ground challenges of any social context have deep levels of understanding about their own situation and might therefore be seen as “experts” and should therefore be directly involved in addressing those challenges. A fundamental premise of action research is that it commences with an interest in the problems of a group, a community, or an organization. Its purpose is to assist all people affected by a particular issue to build a greater understanding of their situation that enables them to resolve significant issues or problems they experience. Put another way, action research provides a model for enacting local, action-oriented approaches to inquiry, applying small-scale theorizing to specific problems in specific situations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Action research therefore envisages a collaborative approach to investigation that engages those previously called “subjects” as equal and full participants in the research process.

General

Reflection 1.5:

Ernie—Collaborative Approaches to Learning

A colleague of mine once had the task of presenting training programs on alcohol and drug abuse. Most of the participants were enrolled under court order, as part of their sentences for drug- or alcohol-related offenses. The program, which included information about the physical and psychological effects of alcohol and other drugs, was presented to an audience that was, from my colleague’s accounts, almost completely unreceptive. “You could tell that they didn’t want to be there and that they wouldn’t believe anything I said to them anyway,” he commented. “It was a real waste.”

I previously had been involved in a workshop given by a senior academic to a community group that had requested a program that would help them better understand the devastating effects of alcohol consumption. The workshop included exploration of a complex three-factor model of drinking behavior that taxed my intellectual capabilities and required considerable concentration on the part of the other participants. As the workshop progressed, they pointed out that the model was inadequate relative to some of the realities of their community life and suggested modifications that would improve it. All participants worked energetically throughout the afternoon, to the extent that the facilitator commented that he was able to cover more ground in that afternoon than he could in 3 weeks of coursework with his postgraduate students. The energy, involvement, and motivation of the participants reflected their orientation to the processes of the workshop. It made sense from their perspective and spoke to issues that concerned them.

Action research is always enacted in accordance with an explicit set of social values that have the following characteristics:

- It is *democratic*, enabling the participation of all people.
- It is *equitable,* acknowledging people’s equality of worth.
- It is *liberating,* providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions.
- It is life *enhancing,* enabling the expression of people’s full human potential.

Action research works on the assumption, therefore, that all stakeholders—those whose lives are affected by the problem under study—should be engaged in the processes of investigation. This may include children and other groups who are often overlooked as participants, even as their interests and knowledge are central to the process (see Lit Corner 1.1). Stakeholders participate in a process of rigorous inquiry, acquiring information (collecting data) and reflecting on that information (analyzing) to transform their understanding about the nature of the problem under investigation (theorizing). This new set of understandings is then applied to plans for resolution of the problem (action), which, in turn, provides the context for testing hypotheses derived from group theorizing (evaluation).

General

Lit Corner 1.1:

Children as Key Knowledge Holders in Developing Play Areas for Their Own Benefit

Nah and Lee (2016) were seeking to generate tangible benefits in children's learning by inviting their participation in the development of outdoor play areas in a childcare center in a city in South Korea. The action research project involved the two researchers, a teacher, and her 25 students who ranged in age from 5 to 6 years. The researchers worked with the teacher and her students to improve an outdoor play area during a 9 month project designed to respond to their expressed needs for better outdoor play opportunities. Children participated in planning through weekly classroom activities in which they shared ideas about how to organize and manage future classroom activities (to develop a more democratic classroom environment), visited nearby playgrounds, and watched videos of playgrounds in other countries. Photos taken of and by the children, as well as interviews and reflective writing, contributed to discussions and to children creating and trying out various ideas, such as a mini golf course, in their play area. Children also selected some of the data generation methods, such as photographs taken by them, while the educator facilitated ongoing reflection in various ways, including by role-playing a journalist when she interviewed her students as they examined their photographs. These and other actions yielded multiple data sources, which were analyzed by the researchers using a grounded theory open-coding approach. "The project was therefore open-ended, essentially representing the product of continuous collaboration among the educator, the children, and the researchers, with a particular focus on the reflections of the children's perspectives" (Nah & Lee, 2016, p. 339).

The action research process showed that child-centered methods allowed young children to express their opinions and participate in decisions in ways that led them to become more assertive as learners, which also created disruptions to traditionally held views of power among various actors in the childcare center's community. The use of child-centered methods allowed the young students to become not only knowledgeable participants but also co-creators of their environments. This led to a profound change in the teacher's perception of her students as "teachers got to examine their deep beliefs about who has, and should have, voice, which leads to a deeper inquiry about children's rights and capacities. In turn, the teachers begin to enact different practices than those they have been conditioned with from birth and through their own education" (Bradbury, Lewis, & Embury, 2019, p. 8). The process also created a move toward more wide scale nature-based learning in the teacher's pedagogical approach.

Collaborative exploration assists research participants to develop increasingly sophisticated understandings of the problems and issues that confront them. In reflecting on their situation together, they can repudiate social myths, misconceptions, and misrepresentations and formulate more constructive analyses of their situation. By sharing their diverse knowledge and experience—expert, professional, and lay—stakeholders can create solutions to their problems and, in the process, improve the quality of their community life.

To the extent that people can participate in the process of exploring the nature and context of the problems that concern them, they have the opportunity to develop immediate and deeply relevant understandings of their situation and to be involved actively in the process of dealing with those problems. The task in these circumstances is to provide a climate that gives people the sense that they are in control of their own lives and that supports them as they take systematic action to improve their circumstances.

Participation is most effective when it

- enables significant levels of active involvement,
- enables people to perform significant tasks,
- provides support for people as they learn to act for themselves,
- encourages plans and activities that people are able to accomplish themselves,
- deals personally with people rather than with their representatives or agents.

It is important to note that the very quality of knowledge that is gained through action or through traditional research methods largely depends on the sources of that knowledge. Whose knowledge is included? By having clients, students, colleagues, and other stakeholders involved as participants and co-researchers, action research processes can widen access to their knowledge and increase their ownership of the change processes in which we engage. Participation by those with local knowledge is the key ingredient to effective understanding and sustained improvement.

General

Reflection 1.6:

Ernie—Empowering Participation

The ability of ordinary people to engage in complex organizational work usually deemed the province of professionals has been demonstrated many times. One of the most striking examples I have seen was a community school set up by an Aboriginal group in a remote region of Australia. Weary of sending their young children 150 miles away to the nearest town for schooling, members of the community asked a young teacher to assist them in developing their own school. Untrained for this specialized task, she nevertheless worked with members of the community for some months to build the school from the ground up. Together, they formulated the curriculum and timetable, acquired teaching materials and equipment, secured funding, learned how to satisfy legal and bureaucratic requirements, and built a large, grass-covered hut for a school building. When this small school commenced operation, all classes were taught in one room, with community members helping to teach academic subjects, art, music, and language. The cultural style of the classroom was distinctively Aboriginal, with children happily and busily interacting in small groups, their work supervised by community *members and the non-Aboriginal teacher. It was the most successful Aboriginal school I have seen in regard to the enthusiasm and engagement of the children and the sense of energy and excitement that typified the school's operation. Most striking, however, was the sense that community members considered it to be their school and the degree to which they continued, through an extended period, to invest their meager financial resources and considerable time and energy in its operation*.

Since I saw that school in operation, I have come across many other contexts, including those in the United States, where teachers collaborated with their students, parent groups, and colleagues to make deep-seated changes in their schools and classrooms. I have seen striking work in an urban classroom, a successful school comprised largely of Hispanic high-school dropouts, and transformative processes enacted by a neighborhood group in an elementary school in a poor, largely Hispanic community. What I initially saw in rural and remote Australian contexts seems to have applications in many diverse contexts.

The payoffs for this approach to research are potentially enormous. Not only do research participants acquire the individual capacity to engage in systematic research that they can apply to other issues in other contexts, but they also build a supportive network of collaborative relationships that provides them with an ongoing resource. Solutions that emerge from the research process therefore become more sustainable, enabling people to maintain the momentum of their activity over extended periods of time. Links established in one project may provide access to information and support that build the power of the people in many different ways.

Participation is not only about expanding our knowledge but also about being more realistic about who can actually change things and who can't. It's about recognizing that people need to want to change their own situation for it to change and that we have very limited abilities as individuals. We need to connect knowledge, experience, and effort—to generate positive change and deeper understanding. Although this flies in the face of individualistic ways of thinking about research and professional practice, participation by those who have extended experience and understanding of the settings and issues investigated is an ethical, practical, and strategic imperative in action research (Ortiz Aragón & Hoetmer, 2020).

PRINCIPLES OF PRACTICE

The three central principles presented previously provide the basic philosophical foundation for effective action research. Each, however, requires translation into the processes and practices whereby we are able to achieve the practical and ethical improvements that are the desired outcomes of our research activities. This section reveals principles of practice designed for these purposes.

Relationships

This is perhaps the most important principle of practice. The type, nature, and quality of relationships developed in an action research project have direct impacts on the quality of people's experience and, through that, the quality of outcomes of the process. Action research has a primary interest, therefore, in establishing and maintaining positive working relationships.

Relationships in action research should

- promote feelings of equality for all people involved,
- maintain harmony, when possible,

engage conflicts openly and dialogically in ways that broaden perspectives and increase empathy,

accept people as they are, not as some people think they ought to be,

encourage personal, cooperative relationships, rather than impersonal, competitive, conflictual, or authoritarian relationships,

be sensitive to people's feelings.

Key concepts: equality, harmony, acceptance, cooperation, sensitivity

General

Reflection 1.7:

Ernie—Engaging People's Potential

There are many examples of the way this can operate. I've seen highly effective classrooms where teachers organized students into collaborative work groups to investigate ways to clearly define their learning goals and formulate strategies to accomplish them. I've seen community nurses engage people with chronic health conditions to assist them in establishing ways to live more comfortably and deal effectively with issues confronting them in their day-to-day lives. I've seen youth workers accomplish wonderfully effective programs for marginalized youth that have transformed the communities in which they lived. At the heart of all these activities has been a process of discovery involving the people themselves—clients, students, local youth groups, and so on. In each case the people acquired the capacity to become self-directed and self-sufficient, acquiring a supportive group of peers who could assist them and support them as they engaged the tasks before them.

The effect on the people themselves often has been quite dramatic. At the completion of one action research project, I asked the women in the participating neighborhood group about their experience. One burst out excitedly, "It was such an empowering experience!" As they explored this comment further, it was clear that the women had really appreciated that people had listened seriously to their viewpoints, that they had learned so much, and that they had been actively involved in the research. Originally this project was to have been carried out by research consultants, but with assistance from a local university professor, the members of the neighborhood group had engaged in a "survey" of parent and teacher perspectives on a school issue. The result not only provided the basis for ongoing developments within the school but provided members of the neighborhood group with the capacity and desire to apply their newfound knowledge to a project in a local high school, where they opened a community-based student support center. This was clearly a case where participants had built their capacity to engage in research as well as increased the capability of the school to engage in much-needed changes to procedures for communicating with parents.

In my professional life, I have often seen programs that isolate people from their families or communities. I have seen services that demean the recipients and organizations and agencies that operate according to rules and regulations that are shamelessly insensitive to the cultures of their clients. I have seen young children isolated from their families for months, sometimes years at a time, in order to be given a "good education." I have seen police fail to act on violence against women because the women were drunk. I have seen millions of dollars wasted on training programs that were purportedly designed to serve community needs but that failed to reach the people for *whom they were formulated. I have seen health clinics that were incapable of serving rural community needs because they operated according to practices common in city hospitals. In one community, I was shown the boys' and girls' hostels for high school children, isolated from each other by the length of the town, with the girls' hostel protected by a barbed-wire fence. The administrator who showed me these institutions was proud that "we haven't had an illegitimate pregnancy in years" and seemed unaware of the potential for enormous damage to family and community life inherent in the situation*.

The list goes on and on, reflecting the failure of centrally controlled social, educational, health, welfare, and community services to adapt and adjust their operations to the social, cultural, and political realities of the specific locations where they operated. I grieve for the people who have been damaged in the process, including those workers who have become hardened to the plight of the client groups they serve.

I have seen other situations, however, in which administrators, professional practitioners, and workers engaged the energy and potential of the people they served to develop highly effective programs and services. I have seen women's groups that provided for significant needs within their communities, police initiatives that greatly enhanced the peacekeeping mission of the department, and health programs that greatly reduced the incidence of trachoma. I have also seen education and training programs traditionally shunned by marginalized groups become so successful that they were unable to accommodate the numbers of people requesting entry. I have also applauded community youth programs that were able to unite hostile community factions to diminish the problems of young people in their town. I rejoice in them. They have in common a developmental process that maximized the participation of the people they served.

I have written elsewhere of the success of an independent school started by the community in which it operated. It stands in stark contrast to another school I visited. The principal, hired by an outside agency, proudly related the story of the new high school he had set up. With little assistance or support, he had organized the renovation of the school building, bought the furniture and equipment, designed the curriculum, and hired the teachers. "I have only one major problem," he confided. "I can't get the parents to show any interest."

The force of this type of event is to sensitize us to the need to be consciously aware of the nature of relationships in our everyday professional lives. It suggests the need to reject styles of interaction that emphasize status and power and to move to more consensual modes of operation. It implies the need to develop cooperative approaches to work and harmonious relations between and among people and to reject the aggressive, impersonal, and manipulative relations characteristic of many bureaucratic systems. It emphasizes collegial relationships, rather than those based on hierarchy, and leadership roles that help and support people rather than direct and control them.

When we seek to organize any set of activities within an organizational or community setting, we need to examine the type, nature, and quality of relationships among clients, practitioners, administrators, and other stakeholders. At the base of a productive set of relationships is people's ability to feel that their ideas and agendas are acknowledged and that they can make worthwhile contributions to the common enterprise. This ultimately is at the core of the processes of a democratic society.

General

Reflection 1.8:

Ernie—Relationships Matter

A new manager was appointed to supervise the work of a group of social workers with whom I was acquainted. Having little experience in the work of these experienced practitioners, and being ambitious, this manager set out to impress her superiors with her efficiency and effectiveness. She embarked on projects that her staff considered inappropriate and put great pressure on them to work in ways that she perceived to be efficient. In the process, she tried to have them act in ways that were contrary to their previously effective work routines and constantly referred to her superior, the director, when they disputed her direction.

Within a short time, work conditions deteriorated dramatically. The social workers struggled to maintain their operation and, in the process, experienced great frustration and stress to the extent that they started to experience both physical and emotional problems. One staff member took a series of extended leaves, another began visits to a psychiatrist, and another transferred to a different section, her position being filled by a series of temporary workers. Eventually, the manager, also under stress, left the agency, and the entire section was disbanded.

This situation is, unfortunately, not an isolated one. Practitioners who have worked in organizational or institutional settings for any length of time will find the scenario all too familiar. Relationships matter.

General

Reflection 1.9:

Ernie—Important Mentors

I am reminded of one of the really fine school principals with whom I served. He was, to me, a leader in the fullest sense of the word. Knowledgeable and skillful, he provided me, a young teacher then, with suggestions for ways to improve my teaching that did not imply that I was not already a capable teacher, suggesting or indicating the areas of weakness in my teaching without making me feel put down; he enhanced my feelings of competence and worth by praising my strengths. He was Dick to us teachers much of the time but became Mr. Filmer when the occasion warranted our serious attention or in the more formal moments of ritualized school activities. The words gentleman *and* scholar *in their best older senses come to my mind. He was a leader of stature and capability who still provides me with the touchstones by which I evaluate my relationships with colleagues, students, and clients. I still cherish the memory of the time I spent with Dick Filmer*.

Including Stakeholders

Participatory process is a foundational principle of action research, but a special feature of its practice is to ensure that all stakeholders are included. Further, the issues about which they are concerned are likewise incorporated into the processes of investigation. Where investigation is driven by people in positions of power—“representatives,” “leaders,” “supervisors,” “managers,” or “experts”—the voices of the most powerless groups tend to go unheard, their agendas ignored, and their needs unmet. Organizational procedures often operate according to administrative priorities and fail to accommodate the social and cultural imperatives that dominate people’s lives. Problems proliferate as practitioners struggle to cope with escalating crises that result from the failure of programs and services to cater to client needs. Moreover, these pressures are sometimes exacerbated by political or community demands that “something be done.” All too often, superficial solutions provide the semblance of immediate action but in effect can actually exacerbate the situation.

Action research seeks to enact an approach to inquiry that includes all relevant stakeholders in the process of investigation. It creates contexts that enable diverse groups to negotiate their agendas in an atmosphere of mutual trust and acceptance and to work toward effective solutions to problems that concern them. When we wish to engage in action research processes to resolve issues or problems in any given situation, we need to ask whose knowledge or experience will increase our understanding and our ability to help address specific needs?

A useful way of determining answers to this type of question is to ask, “Who *affects* or *is affected by* the issues about which we are concerned?” Who, in other words, has a stake in this issue in this setting. We might think in terms of the primary stakeholders, that is, those whose lives are principally affected (in the above case in Reflection 1.3, elderly people in the setting) as well as those directly affecting their lives (family, professional service providers, etc.); those responsible for managing, funding, or otherwise influencing them directly; or people who have no direct presence in the setting but are responsible for directing policies and plans related to the situation. We can think of this broad view of stakeholders as “thinking inclusively” in action research.

Thinking inclusively involves

- maximizing the involvement of all relevant individuals,
- including all groups affected by the issue(s) or problem(s),
- including all associated issues—social, economic, cultural, political—rather than focusing on narrow administrative or organizational agendas,
- seeking cooperation with other groups, agencies, or organizations,
- ensuring that all participating groups benefit from the activities.

It is important to note that to think inclusively is to think strategically. By including people in decisions about the programs and services that serve them, practitioners extend their knowledge base considerably and mobilize the resources of the community. Including more people in the process may seem to increase the possibilities for complexity and conflict, but it also enables practitioners to broaden their focus from one that seeks the immediate resolution of specific problems to more encompassing perspectives that have the potential to alleviate many interconnected problems.

Giving Voice: Honoring Stakeholder Perspectives

Action researchers recognize human diversity as a key source of potential solutions to problems generated by economic inequality, health crises, and other challenges that remain intractable, often due to narrow ways of seeing the world. As we will see throughout the book, action researchers see people’s diversity as a strength that can expand our ways of knowing and increase the angles through which we can understand and solve our greatest challenges.

In many spheres—health, education, politics, economics, and so on—research has provided significant bodies of knowledge that have led to improved social conditions and individual well-being, as well as the technological wonders that are now part of people’s lives. Many significant problems remain, however, and governments and social institutions struggle to find solutions to many of the issues that threaten the stability of our societies and the well-being of the people within them. Issues of poverty, violence, and other social problems continue despite sometimes massive funding directed to the solutions to specific issues.

The problem often lies in the inability to resolve the often complex interacting issues that are part of any social setting, associated research often identifying only immediately visible key issues that need to be addressed. The problem of much of the research, however, is that these key issues often vary considerably among subsets of the population from which the research sample was drawn, and even when partialed out to take account of some of the major differences—socioeconomic, gender, race, ethnicity, and so on—they fail to reveal the diversity that runs across each of these factors. Programs based on the research therefore are based on identifying “best practices” that take account of “key issues” in the research but fail to realize the need to modify and adapt practices, procedures, and programs according to the particular needs of the various subsets within the population. Centrally devised solutions to major social problems therefore often have a poor record of success despite the application of major interventions directed at their resolution.

Action researchers start from the assumption that people know a great deal about their own lives, and in fact have the “capacity to create knowledge and generate theory” (McNiff, 2017, p. 2). We agree with McNiff’s (2017) assertion that

> If a main criterion for being a knowledgeable and worthwhile person is the capacity to create knowledge and generate theory, then everyone is able to do so. A basic condition of being human is that we accept life as meaningful, so we seek to understand and understand better; we generate descriptions and explanations for these processes as theories of everyday living. (p. 2)

If we can help people share and reflect on their experiences, we can honor and make use of the deep expertise that resides in each of us regardless of our backgrounds. This belief in practical wisdom is closely aligned with the perspectives of adult educators and critical theorists such as Miles Horton, Septima Clark, Paolo Freire, and Antonio Gramsci (Brookfield, 2013; Charron, 2012; Freire, 2000; Gramsci, 2008; Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1997; Horton & Freire, 1990; Orlowski, 2019) who highlight the unique perspectives and experiences that are part of the diversity that exists in modern societies (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; hooks, 1994). An essential feature of action research is the need to include the knowledge embedded in people’s lives as an integral part of the research process rather than focusing solely on the theoretical or administrative texts that organize the narratives of academic or bureaucratic agencies and organizations.

Working Developmentally

Action research acknowledges implicitly that providing effective services to marginalized or troubled people is not merely a technical issue but one that needs to more holistically accommodate the deeply felt human characteristics and qualities that comprise people’s daily lives. The inclusive nature of action research therefore requires research facilitators to engage approaches to research that are culturally and emotionally safe and provide all participants with feelings of competence and ownership that instill energy into their work (Ortiz Aragón & Glenzer, 2017). In these circumstances, evaluations need to take into account these types of quality that are likely to have a significant impact on the outcomes of a project. Tony Kelly and Russell Gluck (1979) proposed that programs be evaluated not only according to their technical or functional worth but also according to their impact on people’s social and emotional lives. Their evaluative criteria investigate the effects of our research activities on the following:

Pride: people’s feelings of self-worth

Dignity: people’s feelings of autonomy, independence, and competence

Identity: people's affirmation of social identities (e.g., woman, worker, Hispanic)

Control: people's feelings of control over resources, decisions, actions, events, and activities

Responsibility: people's ability to be accountable for their own actions

Unity: the solidarity of groups of which people are members

Place: places where people feel at ease

Location: people's attachment to locales to which they have important historical, cultural, or social ties

These concepts echo features described by Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1989) in their book *Fourth Generation Evaluation*. Their hermeneutic dialectic process, or meaning-making dialogue, requires interactions that respect people's dignity, integrity, and privacy through

full participatory involvement,

political parity of those involved,

consensual, informed, sophisticated joint construction,

conceptual parity,

refusal to treat individuals as subjects or objects of study.

The assumptions delineated earlier dramatically change the role of the person traditionally called "the researcher." In past eras the primary aim of researchers was to be as unobtrusive as possible in order to not influence the outcomes of their investigations. Action research, however, requires practitioners to actively participate in the research process, not as an expert who does research *on* people but as a resource person who does research *with* people.

A group of community workers characterized their community-based work in this way (Kickett, McCauley, & Stringer, 1987, p. 5):

You are there as a *catalyst*.

Your role is not to impose but to *stimulate people* to change. This is done by addressing issues that concern them *now*.

The essence of the work is *process—the way things are done*—rather than the result achieved.

The key is to enable people to develop their own analysis of their issues.

Start where people are, not where someone else thinks they are or ought to be.

Help people analyze their situation, consider findings, plan how to keep what they want, and change what they do not like.

Enable people to examine several courses of action and the probable results or consequences of each option.

After a plan has been selected, it is the worker's role to *assist in implementing* the plan by raising issues and possible weaknesses and by helping to locate resources.

The worker is not an advocate for the group for which they work.

The worker does not focus only on solutions to problems but on *human development*. The responsibility for a project's success lies with the people.

This bottom-up or grassroots orientation uses stakeholding groups as the primary focus of attention and the source of decision making. It is an approach that requires research facilitators to work in close collaboration with stakeholders and to formulate "flat" organizational structures that put decision-making power in stakeholders' hands.

General

Reflection 1.10:

Ernie—Insulting Consultation

I have been present at many meetings at which "representatives" have been asked to provide information intended as the basis for significant changes to community life. In one instance, I attended a community consultation meeting with senior politicians and government bureaucrats who wished to gain input on government policy initiatives. It was held at a time when most people in that town were unavailable, so two vocal young women with little standing in the community became the focus of the consultative process. The only other participants were retired people who were given little information about the nature of the processes in which they were involved and appeared to be puzzled by the discussions that took place.

The politicians and bureaucrats who flew into town about noon flew out less than 3 hours later, apparently happy with their "community consultation." I have little doubt that any action that resulted from that visit was not well received by people in the community. They almost certainly would have been insulted by the paucity of the consultation process and would have perceived any actions as the imposition of outside authority on their lives.

In many situations, people tend to react negatively to authoritarian processes. Having been subject to the well-intentioned but often misguided attentions of people in official positions, they protect themselves in the only ways available to them. Thus, when outside authority is imposed on their lives, they often respond with

aggression, directed at those who are perceived as controlling their lives;

apathy, which sucks away their vitality and leaves them with feelings of hopelessness or helplessness;

avoidance, which isolates them from the source of authoritarian control.

The implicit assumption in these ideas is that procedural matters that directly affect the quality of people's lives need to be taken into account, not only for humanitarian or ethical reasons but also for underlying pragmatic purposes. As Guba and Lincoln (1989) put it so succinctly, attention to these properties is likely to "unleash energy, stimulate creativity, instill pride, build commitment, prompt the taking of responsibility, and evoke a sense of investment and ownership" (p. 227).

The developmental nature of action research has an associated set of protocols that are particularly useful to research participants, assisting them to understand more fully important features of development practice. These are articulated clearly in Chapter 8, in which practical and informative frameworks that guide their practice are presented, as they face the personal challenges inherent in their work, as well as the sensitive and demanding issues required to negotiate pathways between the multiple personalities and social agendas associated with group and organizational work in any context. As will later become evident, the developmental nature of action research requires researchers to acquire a set of skills not normally associated with more traditional approaches to research—some even say action researchers wear 500 hats (Brydon-Miller & Ortiz Aragón, 2018)! The imperatives noted in the issues presented above signal the need for practices that take into account the very human nature of our endeavors and provide the means to achieve effective outcomes that make a real difference in people's lives.

Communicating Effectively

Action research requires all participants to engage in communication that facilitates the development of harmonious relationships and the effective attainment of group or organizational objectives. German scholar Jurgen Habermas (1979) suggests that positive change originates from communicative action that provides people with the capacity to work productively with each other. His formulation of the "ideal speech situation" suggests four fundamental conditions for communication to be effective:

Understanding: The receiver can understand what is being communicated.

Truth: The information is accurate and is not a fabrication.

Sincerity: The communicator is sincere in their attempts to communicate and has no hidden agendas.

Appropriateness: The manner, style, and form of communication are appropriate to the people, setting, and activity.

Institutional and bureaucratic arenas, because of the nature of their organization and operation, provide many examples in which these conditions are not met. Understanding, for instance, is often inhibited by the use of jargon, complex language, or esoteric subject matter. Professional workers sometimes use technical language that clients either cannot understand or cannot relate to their experience. Academics frequently speak in an idiom that mystifies practitioners and laypersons alike. In these instances, understanding is limited, and communication is faulty.

Manipulation through the use of distorted information or failure to make covert agendas explicit is so common that it is often accepted as an unfortunate but necessary part of social, organizational, and political life. Damage to communicative action through untruthfulness, however, often leads to more general problems. When people have been tricked or duped, they are frequently unable to continue to work harmoniously with those they feel have cheated them, and the chances of productive and effective work taking place are diminished accordingly.

Effective communication in action research is achieved when one

listens attentively to people,

accepts and acts on what they say,

can be understood by everyone,

is truthful and sincere,

acts in socially and culturally appropriate ways, regularly advises others about what is happening.

Key concepts: attentiveness, acceptance, understanding, truth, sincerity, appropriateness, openness

In many situations, communication is jeopardized when people feel that the manner or style of communication is inappropriate or that the person involved is not the appropriate person. When a person from the majority culture speaks for the interests of a minority group in the absence of an appropriate spokesperson, when an administrator makes decisions about a program or service without consulting their staff, and when academic experts with little field experience are responsible for professional training, effective communication is difficult to achieve.

General

Reflection 1.11:

Ernie—Who Will Represent Us?

I once argued with one of my female colleagues about the need for members of minority groups to speak for themselves in public forums and to be in control of their own affairs. I was unable to make my point clearly until I asked the question, "Would it be right for a man to act as head of the National Organization for Women?" with the implication that a man could control the affairs of that organization, represent the interests of women, and present papers on women's needs at conferences. She saw the point immediately.

Apart from these basic conditions of communication, however, the manner, style, and organization of communicative activity provide many cues and messages that can have significant impacts on people's feelings of well-being and their orientation to activities and agendas. When people feel acknowledged, accepted, heard, and treated with respect, their feelings of worth are enhanced, and the possibility that they will contribute actively to the work of the group is maximized. Communication is key to the effective operation of any process of inquiry, providing the means to ensure that people are fully informed of events and activities and have all the information they need to accomplish their work together.

Emergent Research Processes

Much research is based on carefully articulated procedures that prescriptively define the terms of the research and stipulate the steps to be taken at each stage of the research process. Research questions are stipulated with precision, the variables to be incorporated are named and their relationships carefully defined, and steps toward a solution to the problem inherent in the research questions articulated. All this is based on the assumption of the fixed and invariant processes that are the hallmark of much of the modern understanding of the physical universe.

The social universe, however, is comprised of much more complex and sometimes chaotic dynamics that are continually constructed and reconstructed within the many contexts of the social world. Another way of saying this is that action research practice is intimately bound up in people's lives and work (Reason, 2006, p. 189) and actual change emerges from the interplay of the desires, intentions, and actions of all the people in a given social setting (Ortiz Aragón, 2012, p. 40; Stacey, 2007, p. 303). To provide fixed definitions of the features and dynamics of any social context flies in the face of the realities of social life!

Action research, we suggest, is more realistic about what we can know in advance of a real-life situation. It works on the assumption that the first task of a process is to investigate the nature of the problem as experienced by people in a particular social setting and the personal, social, and cultural dynamics that make up the reality of everyday life in that context. These and other factors will provide information that will guide the ongoing direction to be pursued by research participants—the research process emerging from the knowledge gained in the continuing cycles of investigation. We use the knowledge that we generate along the way to change directions in ways that accommodate the actual lived experience of the people in the setting. This doesn't mean that planning isn't important or that it isn't a good idea to have vision and think forward. Rather, we wish to highlight that real-life contexts rarely fit the way our plans are laid out, because we can't actually control all the actors and factors involved. Just as the map is not the territory, the plan does not represent or control reality. Action researchers are more concerned with following leads, learning along the way, and adapting their actions to find practical solutions to important challenges. Action research design, therefore, must be flexible and allow for the possibility that questions and purposes may change as new knowledge and situations emerge (Reason, 2006, p. 197). This requires methodology that is designed emergently along the way rather than predesigned linear algorithms with "hard and fast methods" (Reason, 2006, p. 197, cited in Ortiz Aragón, 2012). Action research, after all, is more about openness and criticality than certainty and closure! (McNiff, 2014, p. 1).

THE PRACTITIONER RESEARCHER—A NEW WAY OF WORKING

We conclude the chapter with some thoughts on the implications of these key action research ideas on the roles of academic or professional practitioners, which necessarily become more facilitative and less directive. Research is often assumed to be the province of academic or professional practitioners with specialized training that qualifies them to engage in the functions associated with a commonly accepted definition of the term "research." This aligns with common perceptions that professionals have levels of expertise in fields associated with their roles that provide the technical capacities to operate the services and programs in which they are employed. Clients exist in a relationship in which the professional-as-expert provides a diagnosis and treatment of problems and issues experienced by a client/student/customer. Treatments, care plans, learning activities, and so on often are determined within a set of procedures or practices prescribed by the organization, agency, school, clinic, or business. The assumption in these circumstances is that experts are in a better position to devise interventions or other activities than their clients.

This is unproblematic in many cases—well-trained and experienced professionals providing services that resolve issues and provide people with services that maintain their continued well-being. We all enjoy the services of schools and teachers that enable students to enjoy their education and progress scholastically; doctors and nurses that heal our wounds and combat illness; police who maintain peace in our towns and neighborhoods; and so on.

There are circumstances, however, when this common mode of operation does not achieve the outcomes required of the service, something that is often especially noticeable in contexts where cultural, racial, gender, socioeconomic diversity exists. Many of these circumstances are notable for the continuing failure of programs and services to achieve outcomes that are required to maintain the health and well-being of these populations. Professional practitioners and the agencies and organization in which they work have limited understanding of the social and cultural realities of the people they serve and continue to implement ineffective practices. In many such contexts, the planned operations often prove ineffective and, in some cases, are quite damaging.

General

Reflection 1.12:

Ernie—Accommodating Diversity

In Australia, the federal government in recent years determined that welfare services in rural and remote locations could more efficiently be served through telephone conversations between agency staff and their clients. Many clients in these settings are Aboriginal, have limited understanding of English, the only language employed by the agency, and in consequence are unable to communicate effectively. The end result has been that many have had badly needed services denied to them and some communities have experienced increased levels of poverty as a result.

In order to develop effective programs and services, therefore, or seek to solve problems that threaten the efficacy of services for which they are responsible, practitioners need to take into account the impacts of those developments and solutions on the lives of the people they serve. These are not merely technical issues, however, since the impact of the obdurate decisions of an unfeeling bureaucracy is deeply felt by the people concerned. For many years, marginalized people in sometimes dire circumstances have indicated the need to modify and adapt programs and services to take into account the social and cultural realities of the contexts in which they live. For some decades, Aboriginal people in Australia have through their own organizations and agencies requested governments to consult with them more effectively to overcome the rather dismal statistics that continue to haunt the nation (First Nations National Constitution Convention: Uluru Statement From the Heart, 2017).

Professional practitioners are currently becoming more aware of the limitations of their expertise, however, and there is an increasing tendency to engage clients, patients, consumers, and students in decision-making processes. We have also become more sensitive to the view that an army of experts is unlikely to be able to meet people’s needs if the people themselves remain merely passive recipients of services. As practitioners in many fields now realize, unless people come to understand procedures and practices by participating in their development, any program or service is likely to have limited effects on their lives. Patients who fail to maintain appropriate health practices, passive and disinterested students, recalcitrant welfare recipients, disorderly youth, and families in crisis will often not respond to the authoritative dictates of the “experts” whose task it is to “solve” their problems.

With action research, knowledge acquisition or production proceeds as a collective process, engaging people who have previously been the “subjects” of research in the process of defining and redefining the corpus of understanding on which their community or organizational life is based. As they collectively investigate their own situation, stakeholders build a consensual vision of their life-world. Action research results not only in a collective vision but also in a sense of community that operates at social, cultural, political, and emotional levels.

Action research is a collaborative approach to inquiry that seeks to build positive working relationships and productive communicative styles. Its intent is to provide a climate that enables disparate groups of people to work harmoniously and productively to achieve a set of goals. It links groups that potentially are in conflict so that they may attain viable, sustainable, and effective solutions to problems that affect their work or community lives through dialogue and negotiation. To think and act this way, however, requires us to challenge existing dichotomies such as expert and nonexpert, academic/practitioner, and researcher/researched; to get all people involved and for primary stakeholders to work in participatory relationships with those who have previously been designated the “experts.” In other words, we negotiate relationships over time in which we come to see each other as co-participants taking action to improve situations and learn together.

Action research therefore changes the social, organizational, and personal dynamics of the research so that all who participate not only have significant inputs into the processes of research, but also benefit from its outcomes.

REFLECTION AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Reflection

1. Which of the ideas presented in this chapter did you particularly like, find relevant, or even find puzzling?
2. How were these ideas different from what you already knew about research before reading the chapter? Note these for further discussion.
3. The accounts presented in the "Who Does Action Research, and Why Do They Do It? "Stories From the Field" section provided a few simple examples of action research projects. Comment on aspects of these stories that appealed to you. Comment on aspects that you found puzzling or that seemed to contradict your own experience or perspective of research.
4. Action research differs in significant ways from standard approaches to research. From your current understanding, how does action research differ from other approaches to research?
5. Does the Look–Think–Act routine seem relevant to your personal, professional, or organizational reality? Does it resemble anything you currently do?

Action

1. Reflect on the above questions individually, taking notes as you go that speak to the issues presented.
2. With a small group of classmates, colleagues, or friends, discuss these issues and present your perspective on them. You might form a "learning circle" that continues to work together. If you have difficulties or limited time to meet with others, set up an online chat group with Messenger or WhatsApp (see Chapter 9), with the group deciding what issues you would like to discuss and a schedule for contributing. If you're in class, you might ask the instructor to allocate time for this process.
3. What questions and issues emerge from these discussions that you would like to learn more about? Note them down to see whether they emerge in the coming chapters.
4. In Chapter 3, we will ask you to engage a "cultural setting"—a place where you can engage in a small action research study. It might be your place of work, a local organization or club, a local café, or other public venue. Start thinking about where you might do your small study, and visit it if necessary. You might tell people there what you will be doing as a course assignment.

CHAPTER REVIEW

Action research is an **action-oriented**, **participatory,** and **reflective** approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their professional practice and their everyday lives.

A basic action research routine includes three major steps:

LOOK: Gathering and generating information (data)

THINK: Analyzing and interpreting the data

ACT: Taking action based on that analysis

The outcomes of research are **practical solutions** to the problems on which the research was focused.

Action research is relevant to people's experience in **agencies, organizations, institutions, families, or the community**—schools, clinics, government agencies, businesses, churches, clubs, and so on.

Three central principles provide the philosophical foundations for action research:

Learning From Action: People engaged in action research take an **attitude of inquiry** to **learn from actions** emerging from their inquiries.

Acting Informed by Learning: Continuous reflection provides the means to develop deep-seated insights and understanding that better inform actions.

Action research requires the **collaborative participation** of all **stakeholders**—those affected by or affecting the issues under consideration.

In doing so, they enact the **principles of practice**:

Establishing and maintaining positive **relationships** with all stakeholders

Participatory processes that include all stakeholders

A central focus on the **experiences and perspectives** of **key stakeholders**—those subject to the problems and issues on which the research is focused

Working developmentally to accommodate the needs of the diverse participants and build their capacity to engage in research processes

Communicating effectively to ensure all stakeholders are fully informed of ideas, actions, and events emerging from the research

Emergent processes in which details of direction and procedure evolve continuously rather than being determined in advance

Action research is organized according to **facilitative processe**s that sometimes are at odds with the **directive practices** common in many agencies and organizations.

Researching practitioners need to negotiate **new ways of working** that acknowledge the wisdom often inherent in people's everyday lives.

The ultimate end of action research is to engage **equitable processes** to achieve **social justice** and **enhanced well-being** for **key stakeholders**.

Descriptions of Images and Figures

Back to Figure

Data shown by the image are tabulated as follows:

The center of the letter X is labeled "Applications of Action Research in different sectors"

The left arm of the letter X lists the following:

- Business & Commerce
  - Strategic planning
  - Action plans
  - Business plans
  - Marketing
  - Product development
  - Production processes
  - Operational efficiencies
  - Organizational review
- Community Planning
  - Urban planning projects
  - Neighborhood planning
  - Housing development
  - Youth services
  - Resources and facilities
  - Community initiatives
  - Community skills audit
  - Funding
- Organizations
  - Organizational change

Review

Planning

Budgeting

Project development

Program development

Human resource development

The right arm of the letter X lists the following:

Education

School improvement

Curriculum development

Evaluation

Instructional processes

Class projects

Special programs

Community engagement

Health Care

Care plans

Case management

Health promotion

Community projects

Evaluation

Service development

Social Work

Child protection plans

Program development

Assessment and evaluation

Youth programs

Parenting programs

Community development

2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ACTION RESEARCH

SITUATING ACTION RESEARCH

The past few decades have seen the emergence of a wide variety of approaches to research, each with a particular set of intents, purposes, and philosophical groundings. Whereas social research, following the lead of the physical sciences, was initially framed in experimental and quasi-experimental terms, the emergence of qualitative research as a legitimate approach to academic inquiry has in recent times seen a proliferation of research methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Leavy, 2017; Saldaña, 2014), each seeking to overcome the seemingly intractable problems associated with the rather messy realities of human social life. Thus, we see the emergence of a variety of methodologies associated with the need to take into account the particular circumstances, experiences, and perspectives related to gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, colonialism, and so on. These include applied research, action research, practitioner research, and mixed methods research that focus on more pragmatic outcomes required by the human service professions—health, education, welfare, justice, business, and so on. Together with a variety of approaches to quantitative research, they make up the great panoply of methodologies and approaches to research that comprise the current academic and professional context.

The boundaries between these varieties of research is contentious because of the widely diverse philosophical orientations used to define both the purposes and processes of different forms of inquiry. These are explored in detail in many research texts, including the continuing dialogues mapped out in the *Handbooks of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) and the *Encyclopedia of Action Research* (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). From a practitioner's perspective, these discussions often become mired in the complexities of philosophy itself and the obfuscation resulting from the search for a set of "foundational assumptions" that would provide the basis for a theory-of-everything upon which to base the "true" definition of research.

What has become increasingly evident is that research methodologies will be chosen according to the particular issue investigated and the forms of knowledge required to emerge from investigations. Within the physical sciences, for instance, the formulations of Einstein's general and special theories of space and time are incommensurable with the robust theories of quantum mechanics that define the nature of infinitesimally small features of the universe. The scientific world therefore accepts the necessity of formulating theory in diverse ways, according to the particular conditions for which it wishes to account.

The search for a robust set of foundational assumptions that can be applied to theories of human social and cultural life presents a particular set of problems, because human social life presents a dynamic and perplexing set of forms and processes that defy attempts to formulate the fixed principles characteristic of scientific analysis. We therefore propose that, like the physical sciences, theories and methodologies to be applied within the social sciences might be chosen according to the particular phenomena or conditions to be subject to investigation and the type of outcomes desired by those who formulate the study. These may range from large-scale studies providing highly generalizable information about the topic under investigation to small-scale investigations focusing deeply on the complex worlds of a relatively small group of people.

Action research is itself based on an inherent pragmatism that seeks to apply the tools of science in ways that enable research participants to work toward resolving significant issues and problems within their family, community, work, or institutional lives (Bradbury, 2015; G. Coleman, 2015; Greenwood & Levin, 2006; Pedler &

Burgoyne, 2015). As is revealed in the coming chapters, action research has a particular "flavor" and style that applies the rigor of science to a flexible set of procedures designed to solve deeply embedded problems in any human environment.

APPROACHES TO SOCIAL RESEARCH

Most research in the human sciences incorporates methods associated with what has been termed either *quantitative* or *qualitative* research, their differences emerging in terms of quite different philosophical assumptions and the procedures, techniques, and practices. In the following sections, we present a brief explanation of these two major approaches to research and then explore the terrain of those approaches compared to research more generally associated with pragmatic outcomes—action research, applied research, practitioner research, and mixed methods research. In doing so we hope to clarify the similarities and distinctions between them and provide a more coherent and appropriate basis for engaging in each.

Quantitative Social Research

Historically, social research emerged through the application of scientific method developed initially within the physical sciences. Purely descriptive research based on the numerical observations was followed by experimental research methods involving the precise description of the research problem, the development of a research hypothesis suggesting the solution to the problem, the defining of variables, the measurement of those variables, the experimental manipulation of variables, and the analysis of the relationships between them. Factories, for example, might measure whether different levels of lighting, changes in temperature, or scheduled rest periods influence the productivity of workers. Educators might assess the degree of influence of different teaching styles on student achievement. Outcomes of these procedures enable researchers to test the robustness of the hypothesis—tested in the course of the research. Quasi-experimental research explores the relationship between variables through statistical analysis rather than direct manipulation of variables. In circumstances where experimental manipulation of the variables is not possible, as in large-scale studies of social class, race, and so on, researchers test hypotheses through statistical manipulation of variables. At the base of much statistical analysis is correlational analysis, often attributing causal connections between variables. Underlying much of this type of study is the assumption of a form of positivism that assumes a fixed, stable, and ultimately knowable universe. Measurement is also a predefined characteristic based on the assumption that "if it exists, it exists in quantity," and therefore can be measured.

Quantitative researchers seek generalized statements about social phenomena that provide the means to predict and control those variables in all contexts and times. These types of studies have particular appeal in contexts where large populations require centralized services from government and other agencies. The broad application of the outcomes of quantitative studies is thought to provide the means for more effective and efficient delivery of services within the large social systems making up the modern social world. Bureaucracies require statistical information providing a clear picture of, among other things, the various attributes of the populations they serve, the resources available, and the outcomes of services provided. Within the human services, including health, education, and welfare, quantitative research provides the means to understand the distribution of a wide range of attributes within a population, including mental abilities, work performance outcomes, intervention effects, and so on.

Within the field of education, tests of mental and other personal attributes have provided information used to determine how individuals are placed in appropriate parts of the system as workers or clients. Student performance on the range of tests has enabled educators, for instance, to direct individuals to particular programs or courses (e.g., college entrance tests and/or exams, or indicate the need for remediation). Large-scale landmark studies by J. Coleman (1966) and Jencks (1981) demonstrated the power of quasi-experimental studies to illuminate the impacts of organizational and operational issues within education. Within the business world, application of quantitative techniques provided the basis for improvement in business, commercial, and industrial procedures, which continue to be the basis for more effective and efficient delivery of services and resources.

One of the major problems with quantitative research, however, is that despite its power in relation to physical phenomena, it can be a rather blunt instrument when applied to human attributes and social processes. Measurement of intelligence, for instance, is confounded by the cultural basis on which most measures rest, the processes of measuring this as a fixed attribute relying on particular formulations of the problems involved and the cultural skill set required to take the tests. Further, studies purporting to provide generalized results across a large population generally are based on central tendency scores that fail to reveal the wide variation of subgroups within the population studied. In addition, the assumption of a stable context rarely takes into account the changing dynamics associated with most social situations. Within bureaucracies and large organizations, people change jobs or are promoted; organizations are restructured in a variety of ways; changes in government or personnel result in different approaches or directions in organizational life; broader economic conditions or changes in governmental policies create movements in the economic and political environment, as do severe weather and climate changes, and national and international conflicts. Overall, human social life is so dynamic that the decisions based on conditions operating at one time cannot be taken as valid at another.

An underlying issue is the stance of the researcher as an objective investigator, socially and politically neutral and standing outside and above the research context. As numerous commentators have described, however (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Dick, 2015; Dick & Greenwood, 2015; Guba & Lincoln, 1989), the research is formulated and implemented according to the particular point of view and lifeworld of the researchers, who frame the research according to their own perspective, often further limited by the boundaries and outcomes mandated by those who control or fund the research.

Despite the power of quantitative research to provide significant information about the social world, the dynamic nature of social life limits the stability and therefore the validity and reliability of quantitative information related to problems associated with interaction between people. This is particularly evident when meaning and purpose, an inherent aspect of human social life, often defy valid or reliable measurement, a hallmark of quantitative research. Quantitative research therefore provides significant information about relatively fixed properties of large populations. Its weakness, however, lies in the limitations that fail to accommodate the complexities of human social and cultural life.

Qualitative Social Research

Qualitative research has emerged in response to the inability of quantitative research to provide robust and meaningful understanding of the dynamic operations of human social life. Where quantitative research provided reductionist processes that sought to identify the complex variables comprising human behavior, qualitative research provided the means to understand the largely cultural features of human social settings, incorporating meaning, purpose, values, and propensities as well as organizational and operational patterns of people’s lives. Nonquantitative research has been part of the social sciences for many years, emerging particularly in response to anthropological attempts to describe the human condition through the study of cultural diversity among people from widely differing national, regional, political, tribal, and religious contexts. After World War II, however, and probably consequent upon the dramatic changes in social life emerging in this period, qualitative research became an increasingly effective means for exploring and understanding the wide range of issues and problems emerging from complexities within the modern social world.

Driven significantly by the needs to resolve the broad and diverse array of problems and issues within increasingly large and complex human social environments, much of qualitative research became focused on the need to better understand the nature and dynamics of social life. In health, qualitative research emerged to assist practitioners such as nurses to better understand the distinctively human nature of health and medical issues. This was particularly significant when formulating effective approaches to chronic health conditions or when providing ongoing care or treatment for patients. In education, qualitative research studies started to explore the complexities of classrooms and schools in order to resolve the problems associated with the education of students from different social backgrounds and to differentiate between traits associated with the diverse social and cultural contexts comprising student family, neighborhood, city, and regional contexts. In business, qualitative studies became increasingly directed to seeking more effective and efficient approaches to the operation of organizations, the dynamics of technical production, the provision of goods and services, and needs of customers, clients, management, and workers.

Although quantitative information and analysis were often important aspects of these types of study, a central component was the need to understand the human dimensions of social experience. Qualitative research enabled description of social process in terms of *how* things happen, as well as *what* happens, something not easily incorporated into a table of statistics. Although thematic analysis still provided an understanding of some of the underlying issues within a social setting, narrative text provided a better means of conveying the realities of the lived experience and perspective of research subjects. Thus essentially phenomenological, interpretive processes focusing on the subjective nature of human experience became an important tool for social researchers.

An essential part of these changes was the change in the nature of the research process and the change of status of researchers. Rather than positioning themselves as the neutral observer of human events, positing or hypothesizing explanations in terms of theoretically derived variables, researchers took on the role to seek emic, insider perspectives that provided accounts of subjective experience of research subjects. This required recasting the researcher as a primary instrument in qualitative research (Barrett, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Merriam, 2015; Xu & Storr, 2012) rather than devolving all power to supposedly objective instruments of measurement. To become an “insider” in the research context requires researchers to engage empathetically with others and cocreate the conditions for deep knowledge exchange, which simply can’t be done when the researcher is connecting with participants solely through instruments of measurement.

In more radical attempts to diminish the power of researchers to impose their own boundaries and interpretive schemes onto research subject experiences, participatory research emerged, in which those previously framed as “subjects” became an integral part of the research team, having the power to frame the research in meaningful terms that “made sense” from their emic-insider perspectives.

The move toward “empathetic understanding” of participant experience (Denzin, 1997) resulted in more diverse ways of presenting research outcomes, so textual descriptions became complemented by a range of means to represent experience, incorporating presentations, drama, role-play, simulation, dance, song, music, art, and poetry. Although these forms of representation provided richer and more informed understanding of the subjective experience of research participants, they diminished the possibility of generalizable results more easily incorporated into the services and programs of large-scale enterprises like corporations or government departments.

The impact of qualitative research, its expanded role in helping professional and commercial practitioners understand issues related to the provision of goods and services, is particularly evident in the explosion of qualitative research in the latter decades of the 20th century. Particularly in the professions such as health, education, human services, business, and so on, a wide array of qualitative research studies provided rich material for planners, practitioners, managers, and policymakers—an abundance of journals, texts, and other publications to disseminate this type of knowledge.

Despite the progress in these fields, underlying problems became evident. As indicated above, the limited generalizability of much of this research restricted its more general use. Attempts to provide more generalizable results by use of survey methods undermined the phenomenological basis of qualitative research, and its subjective nature continued and continues to be problematic for some. Self-report provided much of the data of qualitative research through means of interview of participant accounts and narratives, and research had already established the fact that what people did was sometimes at odds with what they said (Argyris, 1977; Argyris & Schön, 1995). Their actions and behaviors were sometimes contrary to their expressed values or ideals, so the validity of studies was questionable. Changing conditions or temperaments likewise created instability in both the data and the analysis of data so that validity and reliability issues continued to attract criticism.

The dynamic nature of social life therefore became particularly problematic when one-off or single studies often failed to accommodate the constant flux of human organizational life. Further, researchers from within the disciplines often failed to understand how their research might be usefully applied in concrete social terms. At a symposium in the 1989 national conference of the American Anthropology Association, leading anthropologists seemed unable to provide participants with explanations of "how anthropological research can be applied within the business world." Recent times, however, have seen the emergence of action research that has the intent of more directly applying research processes to particular problems and issues within health, education, business, youth studies, justice studies, and other human service contexts (Figure 2.1).

	QUANTITATIVE	**QUALITATIVE**
Paradigm	Positivist / Postpositivist	Constructivist
Purposes	Objective study Hypothesizes relationships between variables of interest	Understanding subjective experience Explores individual or group perspectives
Processes	Precise measurement of variables Careful control of events and conditions within the study Statistical analysis of quantitative data	Descriptions of experience and perspective Study of naturally occurring events Interpretive analysis of qualitative data
Outcomes	Precise analysis of relationships between variables Describes relationships in terms of causal connections Generalizes findings to sites and people not included in the s tudy	Extended understanding of events and behaviors Detailed descriptions and presentations of experience and perspectives of actors Findings are setting and group specific
Rigor	Established by measures of validity and reliability	Established through processes of trustworthiness

Description

Figure 2.1 Characteristics of Qualitative and Quantitative Social Research

Action Research

The major difference between action research and other forms of research is the expected outcomes of the study. Other approaches to inquiry seek outcomes that provide researchers and their audiences with knowledge relevant to the issues or problems investigated. Action researchers, however, not only provide understandings emerging from their research but consciously work with research participants to apply that knowledge toward a resolution of the issues investigated, cycling through a continuing set of research procedures until an effective outcome emerges. If quantitative research is research *on* people, and qualitative research is *about* people, action research is *with* and *for* people in support of meaningful change (Heron, 1998).

In some circumstances, action research may incorporate experimental or quasi-experimental research procedures to obtain particular types of information. Statistical procedures, for instance, may provide useful information for those studying the effect of investments in school texts, learning equipment and materials, staff and student support, and so on. A business may likewise wish to understand the degree of association between particular aspects of a marketing strategy and sales as part of an organizational change process. Health professionals may need to monitor the effects of particular interventions as part of a treatment strategy for a group of people suffering a specified condition. In each of these cases, carefully designed quantitative research procedures may provide information directly relevant to the ongoing resolution of the research problem.

More particularly, however, action research uses qualitative techniques to enable participants to develop more extended understandings of how and why things happen as they do. The emerging information provides participants with the capacity to plan and implement pragmatic strategies required to bring the study to a successful conclusion. Continuing cycles of action research reveal a body of information that effectively tests the validity of the emerging research outcomes. Action research outcomes, therefore, are not just information that extends knowledge related to particular issues but are practical activities and interventions that result in a resolution of the problem under study.

Applied and Mixed Methods Approaches to Research

Applied Research

Disciplinary approaches similar to those of action research are found in a number of fields. Applied anthropology has been defined as “anthropology put to use” (Van Willigen, 2002) or as the application of the theory and methods of anthropology to the analysis and solution of practical problems. Different forms of the practical approach to anthropology include development anthropology, which refers to the application of anthropological perspectives to development studies related to international development and international aid or more broadly action anthropology, practical anthropology, or advocacy anthropology.

Similarly, applied sociology refers to the utilization of sociological theory, methods, and skills to collect and analyze data and to communicate findings to clients to assist them to understand and resolve pragmatic problems. As with applied anthropology, applied sociologists work within a multidisciplinary field in a wide range of contexts—government, private industry, nongovernmental organizations, community groups, and so on. Like anthropology, disciplinary associations such as the American

Sociological Association have relevant interest groups incorporated into their organization.

Applied psychology is based on the use of the methods and findings of scientific psychology to solve practical problems associated with human behavior and experience. It is commonly seen as the application of psychological knowledge to practical issues in the lives of individuals or groups by practicing psychologists within services such as education, health, aged care, and so on. Community psychology, on the other hand, involves the study of how individuals relate to their communities and the reciprocal effect of communities on individuals.

All the above fields of study have similarities with action research so that, as with other approaches to research, there are no clearly defined boundaries to distinguish them from each other. As part of a family of approaches to investigation, they are used differentially according to the needs of the situation and the particular orientations of people who classify themselves as researchers. Social and political pressures also play a part in determining the use of particular research methodologies according to issues of ideology, institutional orientations, funding requirements, and the need for individual professional advancement. As the sections that follow indicate, research is not always applied scientifically but according to philosophical, social, cultural, and political pressures at play in any social setting.

Mixed Methods Approaches

Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) suggest that mixed methods research is a methodology that involves philosophical assumptions that guide the collection, analysis, and interpretation of a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data in a single study or series of studies. Mixed methods research assumes that a researcher collects and analyzes data, interprets the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods, which provides a better understanding of research problems than when either approach alone is employed (Ivankova, 2015, p. 22). Approaches to mixed methods studies include those that start with a quantitative study examining the relationships between variables, and using additional qualitative investigations to provide increased understanding of how and why those variables interact as they do. Conversely, another common form of mixed methods research commences with a qualitative study to reveal features of the issues/problems under investigation, using a follow-up quantitative study to verify major outcomes of the initial study or its application to a much larger sample of subjects.

Ivankova has identified several features that mixed methods and action research have in common (paraphrased from Ivankova, 2015, p. 53):

- Both follow the principles of systematic inquiry in designing and implementing research endeavors.
- Both seek to provide comprehensive information: Mixed methods seeks to provide comprehensive answers to study research questions, whereas action research seeks to provide comprehensive solutions to practical problems.
- Both engage in reflective practice so that knowledge from action can inform future action.
- Both apply a transformative/advocacy lens aimed at seeking social justice.
- Both are cyclical in nature.
- Both seek to apply a collaborative approach to research because they seek knowledge about “what works” in practice.

> Both combine insider–outsider perspectives: in mixed methods due to a changing researcher's role and in action research due to its participatory nature.

Most importantly, perhaps, is the underlying pragmatic worldview that both mixed methods and action research share, which rejects the idea that quantitative and qualitative approaches are incompatible (Ivankova, 2015, p. 53).

WAYS OF KNOWING/SYSTEMS OF KNOWLEDGE

In this age of "fake news," large sections of the population now are influenced by "news" or "knowledge" from a wide range of sources. While this has been part of the social landscape since the beginning of human social life, the technological resources now providing powerful and unscrupulous figures with the means to twist and distort information presented to the public has reached dangerous proportions. At a societal level, the organization of social life, and indeed the well-being of the planet itself, is threatened by this proliferation of "news" sources. The carefully articulated processes of scientific inquiry that previously provided the basis for solidly grounded knowledge is now given short shrift by unscrupulous individuals and groups who present simplistic and self-serving misrepresentations and distortions that serve their own self-interests.

How then, we need to ask, can we base our trust in the knowledge that comes to us? On what basis can we judge the merit of the information derived from this complex array of sources from news media, social media, educational and religious institutions, and a wide variety of other sources? And from within the university, how can we ensure that the well-grounded and authenticated knowledge embodied in the institution becomes trusted and respected by the public at large?

In approaching these fundamental issues, we believe it to be essential for those within academic and professional life to understand the underlying issues involved in making judgments about the worth and value of the knowledge that gives purpose and meaning to our lives. As the following pages reveal, we need to understand more clearly the way knowledge is derived, organized, and circulated, realizing there are few, if any, ultimate "truths" and that science itself is subject to philosophical, social, cultural, and political influences that suggest the need for systematic and rigorous processes of investigation. The following pages therefore discuss the different systems of knowledge circulating in the research arena and the philosophical and cultural influences that permeate the field. As we argue later, action research emerges as a powerful and effective approach to research that navigates the complexities of social life to generate profound understandings that make a difference to people's lives. Action reseach does this not merely by generating knowledge enabling us to understand *about* an issue or problem but also knowledge about *how to* resolve it.

General

Reflection 2.1:

Ernie—Measuring Human Attributes

I sometimes wonder whether couples will be required to provide quantifiable evidence of their love for each other in order to access social services. . . . I suspect the determinants would fail to capture the essence of this ultimately human experience. It further reminds me of a presentation given by an international management consultant, where he explained the systemic difference between a bicycle and a frog. A faulty bicycle, he explained, can be taken apart piece by piece, the fault repaired, and the bicycle reassembled. If you use the same method on a frog, the result would be a dead frog!

Simple, Complicated, Complex, and Chaotic Systems of Knowledge

As noted above, research may take a number of forms, each chosen according to the nature of the problem explored and the type of knowledge required to resolve the problem on which the research is focused. Snowden and Boone (2007) suggest the need to understand this process of choice in terms of the degree of difficulty of the issues involved, some problems being simply and easily resolved, while others are characterized by almost unfathomable complexity. They propose four main types of system relevant to this project:

> Simple systems—The working of a bicycle that can be understood by simple description of the component parts and the way they work. If a bicycle malfunctions, it is relatively simple to take the bicycle apart, discover the cause of the problem, and repair it.
>
> Complicated systems—A passenger aircraft that, though vastly more complicated than a bicycle, can still be understood by describing the component parts and their operation and the way they work. This type of knowledge follows the same logic as simple systems and is sufficient even to build and operate rockets that fly to the moon.
>
> Complex systems—These are much more dynamic and provide less certainty than other systems. Weather systems can be described with a degree of certainty but the constant change and fluctuation of patterns of the makeup of weather limit the extent to which precise predictions can be made. Human behavior is complex rather than complicated because not only does it depend on the effects of a very large number of factors but also is dynamic, changing according to circumstances, individual reinterpretation of events, or cultural factors that are difficult to measure or determine with any degree of certainty.
>
> Chaotic systems—These relate to events that are apparently random and cannot provide the basis for making robust predictions. Though there may be patterns of organization, a small change in one state of a deterministic, nonlinear system can result in large differences in a later state. An analogy often used describes the movement of a butterfly's wings in China as a precursor to a tornado in the United States. Widely diverging outcomes for such dynamical systems render long-term fixed predictions limited to statements of probability.

The problem with much of current research is that it assumes that, though human behavior is complicated, complex, and sometimes chaotic, it is still predictable, when the reality is that it is rarely so. Human behavior ebbs and flows between all of these dynamic states, requiring something more akin to the assumptions of complex adaptive systems that require feedback loops and the ability to modify and adapt as conditions change, an essential aspect of action research. Often, however, research projects are framed in terms of simple or complicated systems of knowledge, with pressure from funding agencies for researchers to define specific features/variables that become the basis for interventions designed to solve the research problem. Invariably, the issues are also framed in terms of existing theory that determines the scope and operation of the project.

The result, as acknowledged by Greenwood and Levin (2006), is the tendency for academic research to focus on generalized theoretical knowledge that is largely divorced from particular social contexts. Action research processes therefore acknowledge the differences between texts and narratives associated with large-scale institutions, agencies, and corporations and those associated with smaller, more localized agencies, organizations, or businesses. Larger agencies and organizations tend to seek more generalized terms relevant to the large populations for which they are responsible, while smaller entities are more likely to focus on more specific issues pertinent to their particular circumstances (Lincoln, 2018; Mullett, 2015). While both incorporate, sometimes implicitly, theories and assumptions that underpin their general perspectives, the texts they produce tend to differ in content, nature, and style. Action researchers therefore need to be aware of the different types of knowledge that exist in these contexts to ensure the texts, narratives, and actions emerging from their activities speak clearly and sensibly to the diverse stakeholding audiences associated with their research projects.

Knowledge and the Primacy of the Practical

The different systems of knowledge indicated above require further elaboration since they tend to interact with each other in many circumstances. Heron (1996, 1999) and Heron and Reason (2008, 1999) suggest a pyramid containing four fundamental human ways of knowing: experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical. At the base is *experiential knowledge*, which speaks to the way we as humans live, move around, get things done, and so on. Experiential knowing is prelinguistic in that it does not depend on formalized verbal language and accounts for how life is experienced through our bodies and sensibilities. In their early lives, babies accomplish a great deal of understanding through actions they learn prior to the development of speech. A fundamental basis for learning and understanding events and behaviors emerges prior to the development of the types of rationality we associate with language. The child learns to behave in particular ways without being able to rationally explain why they behave and act in certain ways. This process continues throughout life, where much human action, behavior, and response remains autonomic or responsive, rather than rationally deliberate.

At the next level of the pyramid, *presentational knowing* describes how we move experience into verbal and other communications, which might include conversations, presentations (even visual slides), debates, and other ways in which we describe experiences that facilitate our ability to accomplish activities together. *Propositional knowledge* then emerges as higher-level reflection that provides the basis for formalized explanations, making assertions that “this is the case”—that is, stating we’ve learned something and explaining what it means. At the top of the pyramid is *practical knowing*, which, as applied knowledge, is the highest form of knowing. This is because the most well-framed theory or abstract thought (i.e., propositions) take on a higher form when applied and made subject to real-life reaction. When propositional knowledge (including theory) is applied, it becomes much more complex than in its propositional form because all of our human capabilities interact in the process of taking action (Karlsen & Larrea, 2016, p. 105).

Heron and Reason note that it is a radical practice to extend knowledge generation processes to include action, in part because positivist-oriented academic institutions tend to focus narrowly on propositional knowledge (e.g., assertions that “this is the case”) and narrow empiricism (Heron, 1999, p. 122; Heron & Reason, 2008, p. 367, in Ortiz Aragón & Giles Macedo, 2015, pp. 681–682). This may explain the failure of many carefully prepared policies and plans to accomplish their intended outcomes, because these generalized propositions are often mistaken as the purpose of the research. What Heron and Reason suggest is that if you observe humans closely, you will see that *action* is the highest form of knowledge, because the application of propositional knowledge to inform actions that comprise our ongoing social life is always more complex than the *knowledge* itself. For Heron and Reason, the very purpose of knowledge is action and not just knowledge for its own sake. For this reason, Karlsen and Larrea (2016, p. 105) suggest that “ideas, theories and plans can only be judged in terms of their usefulness, workability and practicality.”

We highlight three lessons from these propositions that are relevant to action research. First, we use action as a primary way of learning because it is the highest form of knowledge—it applies even the most elaborate of concepts and generates new knowledge in the reactions it generates. Second, action comes in myriad forms, so we should mimic and expand these forms of action in our research processes, effectively extending what is accepted as valid scientific knowledge (Ortiz Aragón & Giles Macedo, 2015). This leads us to expand our knowledge by engaging in actions that are an integral part of the research process, generating more profound understanding by interacting with people's diverse ways of knowing. Third, we should ensure that our research processes authentically support practical improvements by using actions to improve people's well-being, rather than merely providing propositional knowledge that has little impact in real-life in practical terms.

Passive and Active Learning

We continue to build on the idea of action as a way of knowing, which is well captured by Burns, Harvey, and Ortiz Aragón (2012):

> Perhaps the most basic but bold claim made by action researchers is that effective learning comes through the process of trying to change things. Action is a way of knowing because life itself is conducted through action—people come to know of the world as they interact with it every day. As people work, create, stir things up, advocate, react, adapt and relate in many other ways we make sense out of life. This sensemaking combines simultaneous action and adaptive reflection as people navigate their way through real-life situations in order to survive, learn and in some cases thrive. . . . Knowledge informs our actions, which can generate further knowledge that can inform further action—towards any human purpose (p. 2).

To some extent all aspects of action research engage people in actions and activity. Thinking is as much an action as is kicking a football or drinking coffee. To live is to act, to do things for some purpose, even if not always explicit. In action research terms, however, it is useful to distinguish between intentional or purposeful action, where we move past the processes of thinking, describing, or theorizing in order to take some more practical action. One of the problems of traditional academic research is that researchers often produce a list of "recommendations" without any intent of actually engaging or facilitating the actions they recommend. Action research assumes that actions are actually implemented and become part of the process of investigation. For that reason, action researchers need to be explicitly aware of the difference between more passive (or static) and more active (or dynamic) actions (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Active and Passive Activity in Action Research: A Partial List

Type of Action	Nature	Examples
Engaging ideas individually	Passive	Activities such as reading, writing, framing, and reflecting that do generate passive learning but don't generate (dynamic) reactions from other people that could alter or deepen learning. Surfacing and harvesting past action through reflection could also be an example of engaging ideas individually.
Engaging others in controlled ways	Active	Controlled actions include engaging people through interviews, focus groups, and observation, where the knowledge sought has been pre-framed by the instruments used, which then constrain possible responses to the types of questions asked. The more structured the instrument, the more likely responses will fit closely within the specific knowledge that the action researcher was seeking.
Engaging others in less structured settings	Active	Examples include participating in programmatic activities, social movement actions, convening meetings, and engaging people and groups of people in less structured settings.

Type of Action	Nature	Examples
Engaging others in dynamic exercises	Active	Could include trying something new at the workplace, developing and testing a prototype, or developing a specific action experiment intended to generate new knowledge or improvement in an action research process. Use of drawings and arts-based methods, performative methods such as skits and improvisation, and other creative methods that engage people's diversity and multiple ways of knowing are also included here. Much short-cycle action research falls in this category of action (see Chapter 4).
Engaging others through full-on change initiatives	Active	Designing and implementing ongoing action research projects and other change initiatives that involve large-scale participation, action, and knowledge generation in support of worthwhile practical purposes.

As we move from passive to more active actions, *the possibilities for learning* (but not necessarily the quality of knowledge) increase because we are revealing differing opinions and perspectives, interacting with people's everyday culture, and so on. If we engage ideas without talking to other people, on the other hand, we don't generate any counterreaction; there is no one outside of our own heads to interpret what is happening—to tell us what something means or doesn't mean. The more active we become, the more we interact with other people's ideas, the more we challenge existing systems of meaning. Engaging people in creative and dynamic exercises in workshops, for example, can draw out better understandings of the complexity of their experience, which we can use to enrich participants' analysis of the situation.

We would make a mistake, however, if we were to automatically elevate active action over passive action, or vice versa. Each action type has its value, which may become relevant at different moments in an action research process. Deep reflection as a discrete activity, for instance, can generate relevant knowledge that more active action-taking may not. Well-placed interviews at a key moment may allow us to frame a topic in a way that keeps us from getting lost, down too many irrelevant rabbit holes. The question is not whether we should take active or passive action but rather whether the mix of passive and active actions we take is generating the knowledge and understanding we need to address the practical purposes that are the focus of the action research.

We encourage you, the reader, to think through the implications of these ideas on ways of knowing as you begin to think of action research methods, which we explore in detail in Chapter 4.

ACTION RESEARCH: THE THEORY BEHIND THE PRACTICE

Action research is grounded in a constructivist paradigm that proposes that people acquire knowledge by constructing it on the basis of prior knowledge and experience. The major purpose of action research is to gain greater clarity and understanding of a question, problem, or issue rather than determine objective, generalizable truths explaining aspects of human conduct.

The theoretical discourse that follows is not presented as a "correct" description of "the" social world. It is articulated as one way of interpreting social experience and presents perspectives that seem to make sense from our viewpoint. In essence we, as authors, provide a framework of ideas as a rationale for action research. Those readers who find it unhelpful may skip to the next chapter and formulate their own rationale for accepting or rejecting the approach to research we advocate.

The Social Construction of Knowledge

In order to acknowledge the significance of the above issues, action research is grounded in a constructivist paradigm whereby people acquire knowledge by building on understanding gained from prior knowledge and experience. Initial purposes of action research are to gain greater clarity and understanding of a question, problem, or issue, rather than working from the basis of objective, generalizable truths that have emerged from previous research. Unlike quantitative research (sometimes referred to as experimental or positivistic research), which is based on the precise definition, measurement, and analysis of the relationship between a carefully defined set of variables, action research commences with a broadly defined question, problem, or issue and seeks initially to clarify the issue by revealing the way participants in a study describe their actual experience of that issue—how things happen and how it affects them.

In these circumstances, action research initially is based on localized studies focusing on the need to understand *how* things are happening, rather than merely on *what* is happening, and how stakeholders—people concerned with the issue—perceive, interpret, and respond to events related to the issue investigated. This does not mean that quantitative information is necessarily excluded from a study, because it often provides significant information that needs to be incorporated into the study, but it does not form the central core of the processes of investigation.

This research stance acknowledges the limitations of the knowledge and understanding of the “expert” researcher and takes account of the experience and understanding of those centrally involved in the issue explored—the stakeholders. By so doing, researchers acknowledge a central feature of social life—that all social events are subject to ongoing construction and negotiation by actors within any social setting (Charmaz, Harris, & Irvine, 2019; Denzin, 2001, 2013). By incorporating the perspectives and responses of key stakeholders as an integral part of the research process, a collaborative analysis of the situation provides the basis for deep-seated understandings that lead to effective remedial action.

Formally, then, action research, in its most common forms, is phenomenological (focusing on people’s actual lived experience or reality), interpretive (focusing on their interpretation of acts and activities), and hermeneutic (focusing on how people make meaning of events in their lives). It provides the means by which stakeholders explore their experience, gain greater clarity and understanding of events and activities, and use those extended understandings to construct effective solutions to the problem(s) on which their study is focused. As following sections reveal, however, these processes do not occur in socially neutral settings but are subject to deep-seated social and cultural forces that become illuminated by the participatory processes of action research.

The Social Construction of Programs and Services

One of the fictions of modern professional and organizational life is that ideologically and culturally neutral scientific procedures will provide the means to achieve effective outcomes in any form of service—health, welfare, education, business, and so on. Centrally controlled management processes are seen to identify “best practices,” which organize the activities of professional practitioners and administrators, often delineating precise details of their work. “Accountability” processes, whereby practitioners are required to report back to their supervisors in terms of outcomes achieved on key performance indicators (KPIs) further constrict their ability to accommodate the diverse needs of their clients, students, or customers.

Denzin and Giardina (2018) suggest that these elements are increasingly incorporated into professional domains and result from a neoliberal rationality, wherein economic issues become the primary means by which social life is orchestrated. Within this climate, they suggest, an “audit culture has emerged as a key strategy for producing efficient and productive subjects” (Denzin & Giardina, 2018, p. 3). They quote Shore (2008) and Power (1994), who suggest that “the techniques and values of accountancy have become a central organizing principle in the management of human conduct—and the new kinds of relationships, habits, and practices this is creating” (Denzin & Giardina, 2018, p. 279).

A major problem in professional life, therefore, is that judgments about quality, worth, and effect have been reduced to particular measures that often fail to validly reflect the complexity of professional practice, where practitioners draw on a wide range of expertise in order to accomplish discerning judgments related to the needs of their clients. The reduction of these key aspects of professional practice to depersonalized, quantified, and constrained metrics of “performance indicators” fails to recognize the ongoing constructed nature of much professional practice. The reduction of practice to the measurement of “key” elements of performance traps practitioners within a limited number of “indicators” that do not reproduce the reality of people’s experience or behavior.

General

Reflection 2.2:

Ernie—Evaluating Outcomes

I once facilitated a highly successful project in a remote Aboriginal community in which participants produced short books that provided photographs and accounts of their work and other community activities. The materials were highly regarded in the community and became popular reading material in schools in the region. The books were highly valued by those who participated, enabling them to experience the pride of having their stories told and giving them greater insight into the work and community events in which they were engaged. It therefore contributed positively to their orientation to employment, an important issue in these contexts. Despite the eagerness of participants to extend the range and complexity of the project to other media, funding was refused by the relevant government agency on the basis that “no one gained employment as a result of their participation in the project.” The value of this being part of a developmental process that acquired skills increased employment possibilities and enabled participants to understand more clearly the value of the work depicted in the books was apparently not accepted by the government agency as a “key performance indicator” of the program.

This is a continuing source of frustration for those whose duty it is to perform services or to gain the outcomes stipulated by government departments and agencies, educational institutions, and health services for which they work. Centrally devised best practices rarely take into account the dynamic social and cultural forces that operate in diverse contexts in which professional practitioners operate and therefore place them and their clients and students in untenable situations. They are often subject to increasing levels of stress and disenchantment as restrictive legislative mandates and highly prescribed administrative controls attempt to dictate precisely the ways they enact their professional duties. Managers and administrators of programs and services are often subject to even greater stress, caught in the nexus of organizational imperatives, recalcitrant subordinates and clients, the complex reality of the social contexts they engage, and their personal needs for ego satisfaction and career advancement. Highly prescriptive plans provide little opportunity for managers and practitioners to adapt and adjust their work to the realities of the particular environments in which they operate and act to increase their levels of stress.

General

Reflection 2.3:

Ernie—Agency Procedures and Cultural Diversity

Indigenous Australians, whose lives often are dependent on government-subsidized welfare schemes, have recently been subject to conditions that are so restrictive that they are being reduced to increasing poverty. Government requirements, previously checked by agency staff stationed in towns and regional centers, are now monitored by telephone from the city. City-based personnel have little understanding of the social and cultural conditions of their clients and are unable to communicate effectively with people whose English language is marginal. As a consequence, large numbers have now been denied services and resources that are their right as citizens, with an increase in poverty now being manifest in increasing violence, increases in crime, and consequent increases in incarceration. The well-being of Indigenous Australians, already precarious, is now under threat from the imposition of processes nominally designed to provide more effectively and efficiently for their needs.

The problem is, of course, that it is impossible to control human behavior with the rigor and precision demanded by the procedures of the physical sciences. The dynamism of social life and the creative facets of human behavior are at odds with the high degrees of control embedded in scientific method and technological production. While the imposition of centrally controlled practices is problematic even for those working within the social and cultural mainstream, it is even more significant in contexts where practitioners provide services to socially and culturally marginalized groups—lower socioeconomic groups, migrant peoples, Indigenous populations, alienated youth, and so on. In these circumstances centrally mandated practices, with associated expectations for “deliverables,” often serve only to alienate clients, customers, and students from the very services meant to provide for their needs.

Understanding Power and Control: Theoretical Perspectives

How, then, are we to more clearly understand the sometimes complex events that make up our lived experience, not only in our workplaces but in our homes, communities, and societies that give order and coherence to our lives? Behavioral theorists, on the one hand, focus on the capabilities and characteristics of individuals and point to factors such as motivation, personality, intelligence, and other traits to explain people’s behavior. Social theorists, on the other hand, tend to stress the large-scale forces—class, gender, race, and ethnicity—that influence social events. Marxist-oriented theorists explain social events by the controlling and competitive relationships inherent in modern capitalist economic systems. The people who control the means of production, this genre of theory suggests, maintain systems of domination that reinforce the power and authority of those in positions of power at the expense of subordinate groups.

A more recent genre of theory, known collectively as *postmodernism,* provides a distinctive way of envisioning the social world that enables us to understand human experience in different ways. Although modern perspectives of the world are bound to scientific visions of a fixed and knowable world, postmodernism questions the nature of social reality and the very processes by which we can come to know about it. Elements of postmodern thought suggest that knowledge can no longer be accepted as an objective set of testable truths because it is produced by processes that are inherently “captured” by features of the social world it seeks to explain. Scientists and those responsible for organizing and controlling social institutions and agencies, as products of particular historical and cultural experiences, will formulate explanations of the social world that derive from their own experiences and hence tend to validate their own perceptual universes.

Controlling the Texts of Social Life

From a postmodern perspective, attempts to order people's lives on the basis of scientific or managerial knowledge largely constitutes an exercise in power. Knowledge, and the social processes that produce that knowledge, is as much about politics as it is about understanding. An understanding of knowledge production is not just an exploration of method but an inquiry into the ways in which knowledge is produced and the benefits that accrue to people who control the processes of knowledge production.

Michel Foucault's (1972) exploration of social life reinforces the notion that there can be no objective truth, because there is an essential relationship between the ways in which knowledge is produced and the way power is exercised. Foucault's study of the development of modern institutional life led him to conclude that there is an intimate relation between the systems of knowledge—discourses—by which people arrange their lives and the techniques and practices through which social control and domination are exercised in local contexts. Humans are subject to oppression, Foucault suggests, not only because of the operation of large-scale systems of control and authority but also because of the normally accepted procedures, routines, and practices through which we enact our daily public and personal lives.

From a Foucauldian perspective, such institutional sites as schools, businesses, agencies, hospitals, clinics, and youth centers might be viewed as examples of places where a dispersed and piecemeal organization of power is built up independent of any systematic strategy of domination. What happens in these contexts cannot be understood by focusing only on system-wide strategies of control. At each site, a professional elite, which includes administrators, researchers and teachers, social workers, nurses, doctors, and youth workers, defines the language and the discourse and, in doing so, builds a framework of meaning into the organization and operation of the system. Individual members of this elite exert control by contributing to the framing and maintenance of ordinary, commonly accepted practices, which are often enshrined in bureaucratic fiat, administrative procedure, or government regulation. The end point of this process is the accrual of "profit" or benefit to people in a position to define the "codes of knowledge" that form the basis for organizational life. Professional acceptance, employment, promotion, funding, and other forms of recognition provide a system of rewards for people able to influence or reinforce definitions inscribed in reports, regulations, rules, policies, procedures, curricula, texts, and professional literature.

Foucault (1972) contends that any large-scale analysis must be built from our understanding of the micropolitics of power at the local level. For him, any attempt to describe power at the level of the state or institution requires us to

> conduct an ascending analysis of power, starting . . . from its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then see how these mechanisms of power have been—and continue to be—invested, colonized, utilized, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended, etc., by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination. (p. 159)

If we accept Foucault's analysis, then many negative features of society are intimately related to the ways in which people organize and act out their everyday lives. Feelings of alienation, stress, and oppression are as much products of everyday, taken-for-granted ways of defining reality and enacting social life as they are the products of systems that are out of people's control. The means by which people are subjugated are found in the very "codes" and "discourses" used to organize and enact their day-to-day lives. Oppressive systems of domination and control are maintained not by autocratic processes but through the unconsciously accepted routine practices people use in their families, communities, and occupations.

Foucault suggests that the only way to eliminate this fascism in our heads is to explore and build on the open qualities of human discourse and thereby intervene in the way knowledge is constituted at the particular sites where a localized power discourse prevails. He maintains that people should cultivate and enhance planning and decision making at the local level, resisting techniques and practices that are oppressive in one way or another. Foucault (1984) instructs us to "develop action, thought and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction" and "to prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic" (p. xiii). He suggests that we become more flexible in the ways we conceive and organize our activities to ensure that we incorporate diverse perspectives into our social and organizational lives.

The theme of control is also taken up by Fish (1982), who describes social life in terms of "interpretive communities" made up of producers and consumers of particular types of knowledge or "texts." Within these communities, individuals or groups in positions of authority control what they consider to be valid knowledge. Classroom teachers, administrators, managers, social workers, health professionals, policymakers, and researchers are examples of "producers" who control the texts of social life in their professional domains. In organizing classrooms, writing curricula, defining the rules and procedures by which services operate, formulating policies, and so on, they control the boundaries within which particular interpretive communities operate. They have the power to dominate the ways in which things happen in their particular domains.

Fish's position is complemented by the work of Lyotard (1984), who casts doubt on the possibility of defining social and organizational life according to well-ordered, logical, and objective (read "scientific") systems of knowledge. He suggests that people live at the intersection of an indeterminate number of language games that, in their entirety, do not constitute a coherent or rational order, although each game operates under a logical set of rules. His vision of a social world atomized into flexible networks of language games suggests that each of us uses a number of games or codes depending on the context in which we are operating at any given time. There is a contradiction, Lyotard suggests, between the natural openness of social life and the rigidities with which institutions attempt to circumscribe what is and is not admissible within their boundaries.

Derrida's (2016) notion of the interweaving of discourses provides yet another perspective on the texts of social life. Derrida provides insight into the continuing tension between people in positions of control and their subordinates and clients. According to him, cultural life can be viewed as a series of texts that intersect with other texts through the processes of social interaction. In portraying written texts as cultural artifacts—that is, as human productions—Derrida suggests that both reader and writer interact on the basis of all they have previously encountered. Both author and reader participate separately in the production of meanings inscribed in and derived from that text, although neither can "master" the text—that is, control the meanings conveyed or received—in any ultimate sense. Writers tend to accept the authority to present reality or meaning in their own terms, but these meanings are deconstructed and reconstituted by readers according to their own experiences and interpretive frameworks.

Reconstructing Organizational and Institutional Life

There is an implicit ideological position in Derrida's writing. He suggests the need to find new ways of writing texts—rules, procedures, regulations, forms of organization, reports, plans, and so on—to minimize the power of people in positions of authority to impose their perceptions and interpretations. Thus he implies the need to structure organizations in ways that create greater opportunities for popular participation and a more democratic determination of the cultural values embedded in the procedures that govern people's lives. This also implies the need to enact knowledge-producing activities in ways that are more participatory and democratic, enabling the perspectives and agendas of client groups and students to be included in the development of programs that serve them.

Huyssen (1987) also speaks to these issues. He is critical of writers whose theorizing—systems of explanation—presumes to speak for others. He suggests that all groups have the right to speak for themselves, in their own voices, and to have those voices accepted as authentic and legitimate. The authenticity of these “other worlds” and “other voices” is an essential characteristic of the pluralistic stance of many postmodern writers. Huyssen’s position has much in common with those of writers such as Cornel West (1989) and Roberto Unger (1987), who place a premium on the need to educate and be educated by struggling peoples. This stance reflects a movement within the postmodern tradition that shifts the focus of scholarship away from the “search for foundations and the quest for certainty” (West, 1989, p. 213) toward more utilitarian approaches to the production of knowledge.

West (1989) provides a compelling argument for a more pragmatic approach to our ways of understanding the social world. His notion of “prophetic pragmatism” points to the need for an explicitly political mode of cultural criticism. He suggests that philosophy—more generally, intellectual activity or scholarship—should foster methods of examining ordinary and everyday events that encourage a more creative democracy through critical intellsocial theory moves us, thereforeigence and social action. He advocates ways of living and working together that provide greater opportunities for people to participate in activities that affect their lives. He urges philosophers—academics, researchers, experts, and professionals—to give up their search for the foundations of truth and the quest for certainty and to shift their energies to defining the social and communal conditions by which people can communicate more effectively and cooperate in the processes of acquiring knowledge and making decisions.

The underlying notion in West’s (1989) work is not that philosophy and rational deliberation are irrelevant but that they need to be applied directly to the problems of the people. West’s pragmatism reconceptualizes philosophy—and therefore research—as “a form of cultural criticism that attempts to transform linguistic, social, cultural and political traditions for the purposes of increasing the scope of individual development and democratic operation” (p. 230). He advocates fundamental economic, political, cultural, and individual transformation guided by the ideals of accountable power, small-scale associations, and individual liberty. This transformation can be attained, he implies, only through the reconstruction of practices and preconceptions embedded in institutional life. On the political level, West acknowledges the need for solidarity with the “wretched of the earth” so that by educating and being educated by struggling peoples we will be able to relate the life of the mind to the collective life of the community.

West’s emphasis on liberation links him, conceptually, with the German scholar Jurgen Habermas, who has provided important ideas that can assist us in understanding human social life. Habermas (1979) focuses on the need to rethink the cultural milieu in which people attempt to find meaning and a satisfactory self-identity. He suggests that we clarify the nature of people’s subjection and seek human emancipation from the threats of dehumanized bureaucratic domination through more effective mechanisms of reflection and communication. Habermas proposes that the emphasis in institutional and organizational life on the factual, material, technical, and administrative neglects the web of intersubjective relations among people that makes possible freedom, harmony, and mutual dependence. His universal pragmatics attempt to delineate the basic conditions necessary for people to reach an understanding. The goal of “communicative action” is an interaction that terminates in “the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust and accord with one another” (p. 3).

The general thrust of the ideas presented above is to question many of the basic assumptions on which modern social life is based. In general, these ideas are in opposition to rigidly defined work practices, hierarchical organizational structures, representation in place of participation, the isolation of sectors of activity based on high degrees of specialization, centralized decision making, and the production of social texts by experts or an organizational elite. Inversely, these perspectives suggest emphasis on the following:

- Popular and vernacular language and its meanings
- Pluralistic, organic strategies for development
- The coexistence and interpenetration of meaning systems
- The authenticity of “other worlds” and “other voices”
- Preference for what is multiple, for difference
- Flexibility and mobility of organizational arrangements
- Local creation of texts, techniques, and practices
- Production of knowledge through open discourses
- Flexibility in defining the work people will do
- Restructuring of relations of authority

Recent social theory moves us, therefore, to examine the ordinary, everyday, taken-for-granted ways in which we organize and carry out our private, social, and professional activities. In the context of this book, it *demands that we critically inspect the routines and recipes that have become accepted and commonplace ways of carrying out our professional, organizational, and institutional functions*. By illuminating fundamental features of social life, postmodern writers provide us with an opportunity to explore social dimensions of our work and to think creatively about the possibilities for re-creating our professional lives.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggest that “postpositivist inquirers of all perspectives and paradigms have joined in the collective struggle for a socially responsive, democratic, communitarian, moral and justice-promoting set of inquiry practices” (p. 123). They further suggest that the search for “culturally sensitive” research approaches that are attuned to the specific cultural practices of various groups and recognize ethnicity and culture as central to the research process (Tillman, 2002) is already under way (pp. 1, 123). These ideas stand alongside their advocacy of a new praxis deeply responsive and accountable to those it serves and a reimagined social science that calls for an engaged academic world that leaves the ivory tower and learns from experiences in community, organizational, and family settings (Levin & Greenwood, 2011). The next generation of research methods is emerging.

Action research provides the specific techniques and procedures that enable these lofty ambitions to take place in the everyday worlds of professional practitioners and the people they serve. In their particular contexts they work artfully to engage the creative reconstruction of the practices enshrined in the ongoing life of their institutions and agencies. In doing so they take into account both the nature and intents of existing protocols as well as the particular needs, capacities, and sociocultural orientations of their clients. Action researchers become creative artists, reframing the colors and textures of the events and activities in which they are engaged, modifying and adapting their practices while maintaining the fundamental features required by the organizational demands of the setting. Yet action researchers also need to be aware of the power they hold by virtue of their often privileged positions (see Lit Corner 2.1).

General

Lit Corner 2.1:

Calling Out the Inherent Power in Action Researchers

Healy (2001) argues that while participatory action researchers' (PAR) claim that power is fully shared between researchers and participants, the researcher is often in a place of power throughout the process—guiding and facilitating through the use of institutional knowledge and often societal privilege. In Healy's words, "The radical egalitarian ethos of PAR preempts enquiry into the positive and the negative effects of power in the research/action context. Our understanding of PAR is the poorer because of it" (p. 98). There are both negative and positive consequences of the researcher utilizing their power, but ignoring these power dynamics or claiming they do not exist may contribute to further distance between researcher and participant and lead to disempowerment among participants.

Healy also questions whether PAR authentically uplifts the voices, perspectives, or worldviews of participants, or if instead the researcher's intent is to impose their own critical understanding of the participants' reality and experience in the context of society: "The problem is not only that the researcher holds critical truth that he or she seeks to share or even impose. It is also that this intention is cloaked in the veil of dialogue, equality and even intimacy" (Healy, 2001, p. 98).

What Healy's critical analysis reminds us is that for all of our good intentions, action researchers do not stand outside the systems we try to change—we need to engage in continuous critical reflection so that we don't reproduce the same systems of power we aim to challenge.

Neoliberal Theory: Institutionalized Practices of Corporate Capitalism

The analyses of Foucault and others cited earlier seem quite prophetic in the current era. Since the 1980s, neoliberal ideologies based on the principles and practices of corporate capitalism have come to permeate all levels of social life, including government and private agencies and institutions that provide programs and services to broad sectors of the population. Proponents of neoliberalism promote unrestricted entrepreneurial freedom, free markets, free trade, radically reduced state controls, and vigorously promoted consumerism. Deregulation, privatization, market forces, and consumer choice provide the mechanisms whereby corporations provide the institutional settings through which economic growth and increased profits could be maintained (Beckett, 2019; Smart, 2010).

While the application of these ideological imperatives have had many positive effects, with greatly increased wealth across the globe having a marked impact on the economies of many countries, detrimental effects have become increasingly evident. The growing gap between a rich elite and the remainder of the population has disenfranchised significant sectors of society and created destabilizing conditions at national and international levels. Recent decades have seen rising international tensions, mass migrations occasioned by wars and increased poverty, the rise of extremist governments, and, most significantly, a threat to the whole fabric of the international economic order through the global financial crisis. The devastating effects that threatened, in this case, were only avoided by government intervention, a sign that "the market" itself was not able to overcome the impact of a deregulated financial system.

Universities, as institutions, have become radically transformed as a result of increasing imposition of neoliberal ideologies, in which techniques, values, and concepts of accountancy have become a central organizational principle of the university. The logics of the market increasingly dominate the life of the university, infusing an audit culture in which performance metrics are used to calculate status in national and international rankings. Thus the well-being and worth of each university and each member of its academic and administrative staff are determined by such numbers as research funds acquired, books and papers published in rated journals, students numbers, and so on. These become the basis for rewards of promotion and tenure that then dominate the lives of those who teach and engage in research (Smart, 2010; Spooner, 2017). Increasing numbers of university faculty find their lives driven by the economic imperatives embodied in these processes; their situation has been described in these terms: “In this moment we, as academics, are depersonalized, quantified, and constrained in our scholarship via a suffocating array of metrics and technologies of governance” (Denzin & Giardina, 2018, p. 2).

Surveillance is but one aspect of the situation since all aspects of university life have become increasingly subject to the dictates and central control of university administrations. Approaches to teaching, evaluation, course organization, and operation as well as the conduct of research are now open to the controlling gaze of centralized administrative processes, one faculty member echoing the perspective of many of her colleagues: “I feel as if someone is standing over my shoulder watching everything I do!” (Stringer, 2019). In this increasingly difficult terrain, the principles and processes of action research become increasingly important, since a new set of stakeholders—those who control the texts and processes of university life—need to be included in the mix of participants. These are not “enemies,” but people who, like other stakeholders, need to have their concerns included and their understanding of research processes extended.

ACCOMMODATING DIVERSITY: INDIGENOUS, MIGRANT, REFUGEE, AND OTHER MARGINALIZED PEOPLES

Action Research, Diversity, and Developmental Process

The continuing failure of mainstream services and programs to provide for the social, cultural, and educational needs of marginalized social groups can be attributed to their failure to accommodate the unique circumstances that derive from people’s history of experience. The legacy of cultural difference and social alienation continues to impede efforts to provide appropriate and effective programs and services for people whose lives differ in significant ways from mainstream populations.

In such contexts research often is defined by the search for a “silver bullet,” and “spray on” or “quick fix” results provide immediately measurable solutions to complex and long-term problems. The cyclical and participatory processes of action research, on the other hand, are designed for diverse groups of participants to be “given voice,” enabling them to describe and interpret situations and events in terms that are meaningful from their own perspectives. Continuing cycles of action research identify issues to be resolved and actions that can productively move the project steadily forward toward an effective and sustainable outcome.

These processes require carefully articulated activities that enable people to develop greater clarity and understanding of the issues involved and to devise actions that provide the foundation for determining the more extended processes required to deal more effectively with complex issues deeply embedded in the context. As revealed in Chapter 8, quick fix solutions are replaced by more developmental processes that enable participants and relevant agencies and organizations to more effectively serve the needs and well-being of the people they serve. Large, centralized projects that provide generalized outcomes for a large population fail to accommodate the reality of the diverse groups and contexts that comprise most modern social settings.

Research in Multicultural Societies

Most current research has the purpose of revealing factors affecting features of the social world, including the size and interaction of the many variables influencing social phenomena. In many spheres—health, education, politics, economics, and so on—research has provided significant bodies of knowledge that have improved social conditions and individual well-being, as well as the technological wonders that are now part of people's lives. Recent research (Rosling, Rönnlund, & Rosling, 2018) has indicated, for instance, that in global terms over the past century the percentage of people living in extreme poverty has dropped from 67.1% to 10.6%. As regards other significant issues, there have been dramatic decreases in child mortality rates, oil spills, and famine, while there have been significant increases in areas protected as national parks or reserves, population literacy levels, cereal crop yields, and so on (Stewart, 2019).

Many significant problems remain, however, and governments and social institutions struggle to find solutions to many of the issues that threaten the stability of our societies and the well-being of the people within them. Issues of poverty, violence, and other social problems continue despite sometimes massive funding directed to the solutions to specific issues. The problem often lies in the inability to resolve the often complex web of interacting issues that are part of any social setting, research often only identifying surface-level issues that need to be addressed. Much of the research, however, provides results generalized over large populations and fails to distinguish between subsets of the population from which the research sample was drawn. Thus even when research takes account of some of the major differences—socioeconomic, gender, race, ethnicity, and so on—it fails to reveal the diversity that runs across each of these factors.

The result is that programs based on this type of research often identify "best practices" to be applied across the population but fail to realize the need to modify and adapt practices and procedures according to the particular needs of the various subsets within the population. Centrally devised solutions to major social problems therefore often have a poor record of success despite the application of major interventions directed at their resolution. This dynamic is particularly relevant to Indigenous, migrant, refugee, and other marginalized peoples, whose social circumstances and/or cultural lifeworlds differ significantly from those of the general population. As has become evident for many decades, programs and services for these groups fail to achieve their purported purposes. Social indicators in health, education, income, employment, incarceration, and so on continue to indicate a significant gap in their well-being, often despite the application of a multitude of programs and services designed to "close the gap" between them and the general population.

Statistical evidence from Australia of the continuing gap in indicators of well-being in Indigenous health, employment, income, social justice, and so on shows the failure of systems to accommodate the social, cultural, and educational needs of people whose social histories and circumstances differ considerably from those of mainstream populations (Holland, 2016).

> It is of great concern to us, the Close the Gap Campaign—as indeed it should be to the Australian nation—that the target to close the gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people by 2031 is, in 2019, widening rather than closing. In his Closing the Gap Report 2019 to Parliament, the Prime Minister acknowledged that this target is not on track. (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019)

In the United States, Michael Cole (2010), in a Distinguished Lecture at the prestigious American Educational Research Association national conference, reaffirmed an analysis by Seymour Sarason (1990) indicating that over a 40-year period there had been no progress on a key aspect of the U.S. national reform agenda—closing the achievement gap between students of different social classes and ethnic groups. Cole concurred with Sarason, who wrote: "What is called school reform is based on the acceptance of the system as it has been and is" (p. xiv). Cole

(2010) notes the general trend, despite exceptions, for reform to remain largely restricted to improvements within the systems and structures that emerged in the historical past. He speaks of "the enduring pattern of many children sitting at tables facing forward while a single adult stands before them doing recitations, interacting through mediation of written texts." More recently in the Australian context, greatly increased funding levels over many years have failed to produce any appreciable gain in educational outcomes in remote Aboriginal communities (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019; Guenther, 2013).

Despite the possibilities open for truly innovative thinking in these contexts, schools largely continue to operate in terms of the standard practices inherent in city and suburban schools, the application of state and national curriculum and pedagogical processes failing to make inroads on the continuing poor outcomes of schooling in these regions. Despite significant recent increases in funding and the application of specific strategies to improve literacy and numeracy scores, unacceptably low levels of academic achievement persist in schools in remote Aboriginal communities. Statements of the need to "think outside the box" are confounded by administrative arrangements and pedagogical procedures that keep schools firmly "inside the box" of standard practice.

Often the largest impediment to progress is the tendency of systems to focus on deficiencies in marginalized people. It is our contention that change is possible only through integrating the rich social and cultural resources available within communities into the operation of the services, programs, and agencies that serve them. Participatory action research processes, we contend, provide the means to reveal the realities of people's sociocultural circumstances and effective pathways toward the development of practices and protocols that better serve the needs of the people concerned.

Culture and Social Practices

Cultural difference still pervades many facets of the interaction between social groups, but the nature of that difference is not well understood. Culture relates not just to the ceremonial or spiritual aspects of people's lives or the food they eat and the music they play. More important are the many small but significant ways in which people enact the beliefs, behaviors, actions, practices, expectations, attitudes, values, and emotional responses that are part of their everyday social identities—as parents, children, friends, family, workers, and so on. These distinctive features of their lives are part of the rich fabric of social life that comprises their everyday experience. Culture is not something that can easily be identified and described but is something embedded in the web of meanings and interactions embodied in the minutiae of a person's everyday life.

The major point to take from this analysis is that enacting social practices is not just a process of "making sense" from a mainstream point of view. When people from different cultural backgrounds or with markedly different life experiences work together, the task they face is to find ways of defining the situation in terms compatible with the diverse systems of meaning operating in the particular context. This may need accommodations or changes for all of the people involved, whatever their social status or organizational position. A key feature of action research is to find ways of defining the situation and taking action in ways that are compatible with the cultural lifeworld of all participants. This type of search for meaning is central to all action research processes.

Alienation and Colonization

This issue is particularly relevant to Indigenous peoples who have been subject to the brutal dispossession by invading European colonizers who in past centuries invaded their land and destroyed their societies. From the very beginning of "settlement," Europeans failed to understand or acknowledge the humanity or rights of Indigenous people, occupying their land using often-brutal processes of dispossession. The ruthless suppression of Indigenous peoples is now well documented, and though most of the massacres, poisonings, and displacements and similar types of events happened many years ago, the legacy of distrust and anger that remains is still felt by many of the descendants of these people. Their alienation from the land was exacerbated by the removal of many Indigenous children from their families and their internment in missions and homes far from their own land and people.

These events have left a legacy of deep hurt and mistrust within Indigenous populations, the corrosive impact resulting in intergenerational trauma that is a continuing aspect of their experience. These effects are likewise felt by peoples who have been subject to slavery, the alienation of the experience itself exacerbated by the continuing impact of deprivation and discrimination that followed. The outcomes of this history not only were visited on the subject peoples but also resulted in systems of bigotry and prejudice that continue as a significant aspect of social life in the countries concerned. In more recent times, these systems of prejudice have been directed at migrant peoples who, seeking to escape from the poverty and/or violence in their home countries, have sought to settle in more stable and prosperous nations. In these cases, cultural differences mix with systems of prejudice to inhibit their peaceful transition into a new society.

Despite the best of intentions and the positive effects of many of the measures to counteract these issues, deep and enduring wounds continue to impact the lives of many people, sorrow, anger, antipathy, and distrust often remaining deeply embedded in people's consciousness of everyday life. The legacy of hurt evolving from historical circumstance often is reinforced by the experience of prejudice that still affects the well-being of many people. These wounds are not necessarily immediately evident but explain why people from marginalized groups often are wary of "doing business" with mainstream individuals, sometimes responding negatively when they feel they are subject to inappropriate characterization of their situation. Alienation therefore remains a potential barrier to harmonious and effective action in socially and culturally diverse contexts. This alienation and historical backdrop provides an urgent imperative to take the concept of co-research seriously when working with Indigenous peoples (see Lit Corner 2.2).

General

Lit Corner 2.2:

The Imperative of Co-research With Indigenous People

Many action research approaches aspire to the idea of egalitarian coresearch, where all participants share power and fully participate in all aspects of an action research process—from framing to implementation, data processing, and reporting (Heron & Reason, 2008; Israel et al., 2017; Schubotz, 2019, p. 100). Some approaches, such as Co-operative Inquiry, are designed around the idea that the very problem owners initiate the inquiry and those that believe that the inquiry does not suit them are given opportunities to simply leave, thereby ensuring a self-owned action research process (Heron, 1996). Full participation is an ideal in much action research literature, for ethical, pragmatic, and strategic reasons (Chambers, 1997; Ortiz Aragón & Hoetmer, 2020), and even when not possible, some believe that no "action researcher is ever free of the obligation to do whatever is possible to enhance participation" (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993). Without the involvement of participants as co-researchers, perhaps "the research would not attain transformative, emancipatory outcomes, nor be authentic to the core values of participatory research" (Wood, 2020, p. 120). In any case, "participation can always be improved, even in cases when full-scale participatory action research is not possible" (Greenwood et al., 1993).

Unfortunately, "del dicho al hecho, hay mucho trecho" (there is a big gap from what we say to what we do). Chevalier and Buckles (2019) note that many challenges to how participation unfolds in practice are questionable:

> A majority of action research initiatives rely on mainstream methods designed by experts to collect and analyze quantitative or qualitative data, namely questionnaires, participant or non-participant observation, focus groups and interviews (centred on key questions or themes, life histories, etc.). However well tested they may be, these mainstream methods impose serious limitations on meaningful group engagement in designing the research goals and process, collecting and analyzing data and interpreting the findings so as to plan and assess further collective action. (p. 24)

Chilisa (2020) affirms that participatory action research methodologies when working with Indigenous people also embrace the participant as co-researcher approach in all moments of the research process and not only in formal moments of definition and dissemination. She offers the following questions "to evaluate the extent of participation and the presence of the voice of the researched in the participant as co-researcher approach" (p. 270):

> How are the research questions produced?
>
> Whose research questions are they?
>
> Do the research questions energize the researched to engage in a dialogue about their material world?
>
> What methods and theories are used to accurately generate and record marginalized voices as well as indigenous and local knowledge predominantly excluded through Euro-Western conventional methodologies?
>
> With what and with whose theories are research questions and analysis of data conceptualized?

Diversity Within Diversity

In many nations, the term "Indigenous" or "migrant" is a general designation applied to all people who identify themselves and are identified by others as having familial and cultural links to their people. It is essential to recognize, however, that the terms refer to an exceedingly diverse body of peoples as different from each other, in terms of their original boundaries, as the many peoples that make up the continent of Europe or Asia. In any part of the world, despite some similarities in culture of many Indigenous and migrant groups, there is widespread and deep diversity between them. In language, culture, history, lifestyle, social organization, art, religion, and behavior, the cultural differences between groups are exacerbated by their history of experience and the different ways they have interacted with mainstream populations.

The intrusion of European colonization and the imposition of modern Western social forms and norms have created even greater diversity among Indigenous groups. Those who have an extended history of experience living alongside and/or among non-Indigenous peoples have made dramatic modifications and adaptations to their lives to accommodate the demands and pressures of mainstream life. Some groups now are able to interact easily and comfortably within mainstream social contexts, their competence in mainstream cultural capacities enabling them to participate more effectively alongside their non-Indigenous peers. Many Indigenous people, however, especially those living in sparsely inhabited remote areas, maintain a strong attachment to their historical ways of life and their cultural values, with little desire to live according to the beliefs, values, and behaviors of the mainstream.

In many nations, however, centralized policies fail to take into account the different circumstances, cultural orientations, and lifehistories of marginalized people. This rather unfortunate situation is exacerbated by the operational practices administered by government or organizational officers who have little understanding of the social and cultural dynamics operating in these situations. Often they make assumptions based purely on their own history of experience and fail to identify many features of the social and cultural life of the people they are serving. In the chapters that follow, many of the processes described have the specific intent of providing the means for people from different walks of life/lifeworlds to develop ways of describing events that not only “make sense” to them all but provide the basis for their ongoing work together.

REFLECTION AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Reflection

1. How is action research different from other approaches to research you have encountered in your courses or your professional life?
2. Do you find anything interesting or exciting about the possibilities of using action research in your program or professional life?
3. Do you have any concerns about using action research in your program or professional life? If so, what are they?
4. What might stop you from using action research?
5. Do people in leadership positions in your institution, agency, or organization affect your ability to use action research?
6. Why might people in leadership positions be wary of allowing the use of action research?
7. From your own perspective, what might be the benefits of engaging in action research in your program or your professional life?
8. What might constrain or enhance your ability to do so?
9. Why and in what ways is action research particularly relevant to work with marginalized and culturally diverse groups?

Action

1. Reflect on the above questions individually, taking notes as you go that speak to the issues presented.
2. With a small group of classmates, colleagues, or friends, discuss these issues and present your perspective on them. As previously suggested, use social networking apps to facilitate your discussions.
3. What questions and issues emerge from these discussions that you would like to learn more about? Note them down to see whether they emerge in the coming chapters.

Extension

This chapter explores issues that have been subject to extensive philosophical debate for many years. If you wish to further explore an issue, use the search features of reputable academic websites to clarify or extend your understanding. Apart from Wikipedia, other reasonably reputable websites include Google Scholar, Microsoft Academic Search, Academic Info, or iSeek.

You may extend your understanding of some key terms by placing them in a search engine and reading some of the material that emerges. Try some of the following, or other terms about which you’re unclear: constructivist, paradigm, hermeneutic, phenomenology, quasi-experimental, generalizable, causal connections, prediction and control, complexity theory, lived experience, lifeworld, neoliberal, capitalism.

CHAPTER REVIEW

Action research is one of a number of **approaches to social research**, each of which is founded on **different philosophical assumptions** about the **nature of knowledge**—what can be known and how can it be known.

Quantitative research uses **experimental or quasi-experimental methods** using **statistical analysis** to provide **generalizable statements**, often stated in terms of cause–effect relationships that explain human individual and social behavior validly and reliably. The emphasis is on explaining **what is** happening.

Qualitative research is more concerned with understanding the **dynamics of human social life** using **descriptive and interpretive methods** to reveal the social, cultural, and political features of social life. The emphasis is explanation more focused on **why** and **how** things happen.

Quantitative researchers work on the assumption that it is possible to generate **generalized explanations** that provide the means to **predict and control** human social life within specified degrees of certainty.

Qualitative researchers work on a different set of assumptions that seek to **describe and understand** the **dynamic qualities** and particularly human **dimensions** of social life.

Where both qualitative and quantitative research provide robust **explanations** for social phenomena, **action research** seeks to identify **practical actions** that can **resolve or ameliorate problems and issues** on which research focused.

Mixed methods research uses **multiple methods** to formulate more robust and comprehensive **explanations**, but does not necessarily seek **pragmatic solutions** to the research problem.

Applied research within the academic disciplines—anthropology, sociology, psychology, and so on**—uses research methods and techniques associated with the discipline** to provide **practical solutions** to research problems.

The **dynamic systems** that comprise both the **physical and social** world can be distinguished according to their **degree of complexity—simple, complicated, complex, and chaotic**. Methods of investigation may be chosen by researchers according to the degree of complexity of the problems to be investigated.

Scholars have recently suggested that merely **describing or explaining** social life is **insufficient** because of the degree of **complexity** inherent in human social life, that explanations can only be **validated** and extended through **practical action**.

Action research assumes the need to **actively engage** the realities of the **research setting** rather than acquire knowledge and understanding through **passive, disengaged processes**.

Action research is grounded in a **constructivist paradigm** that assumes that all **knowledge is socially constructed,** grounded in the **lived experience and perspective** of groups of people.

Recent social theory suggests that knowledge incorporated into the normally accepted **procedures, routines, and practices** of programs and services reflects the **experience and perspective** of those who **control** those **organizational texts**.

Systems of control are created by a **professional and managerial elite,** establishing organizational processes that **benefit those who control** the system and **those who comply** with their directives through a **system of**

rewards that include professional acceptance, employment, promotion, and funding.

Recent social theory suggests that the **principles and practices of corporate capitalism** now **permeate all levels of social life**, the operations of organizations and public institutions operating according to the ideologies and practices of **market-based consumerism**.

The consequent increasing **gap between the rich and the poor** and increasing masses of **disenfranchised people** have resulted in the rise of i**nternational tensions**, mass migrations, the rise of **extremist governments,** and a series of **international crises**, including the global financial crisis and impending climate devastation.

Universities and other **institutions** have become radically transformed by the central organizational **principles, techniques, values, and concepts of accountancy** and the **logics of the market.**

Many scholars and social activists now are **advocating** the need to **reconstruct organizational and institutional life** to find more **democratic ways of writing rules, procedures, regulations, reports, plans,** and so on.

They seek **human emancipation** from the threats of **dehumanized bureaucratic domination** through more effective mechanisms of communication.

In the process they seek to **legitimate the right of marginalized people to speak for themselves**, in their own voices.

This would shift scholarship **away from** the search for **foundational knowledge** and the quest for certainty toward more **utilitarian approaches** to the **production of knowledge**.

Scholars and professional practitioners should **educate and be educated by struggling and marginalized peoples** to relate the **life of the mind** to the collective **life of the community**.

These ideas point to a new **praxis** deeply **responsive** and **accountable** to **those it serves**.

This also calls for a **reimagined social science** that calls for an **engaged academic world** that leaves the ivory tower and learns from experiences i**n community, organizational, and family settings**.

Action research provides a set of **pragmatic principles and practices** that enable **scholars** and **professional practitioners** to counter the processes of **ideological colonization.**

These enable the **institutions and organizations** of democratic societies to accommodate **the needs of diverse people** in the search for **equity, justice, peace, and a sustainable world**.

Descriptions of Images and Figures

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Details shown by the image are tabulated as follows:

	QUANTITATIVE	QUALITATIVE
Paradigm	Positivist/Postpositivist	Constructivist
Purposes	Objective study	Understanding subjective experience

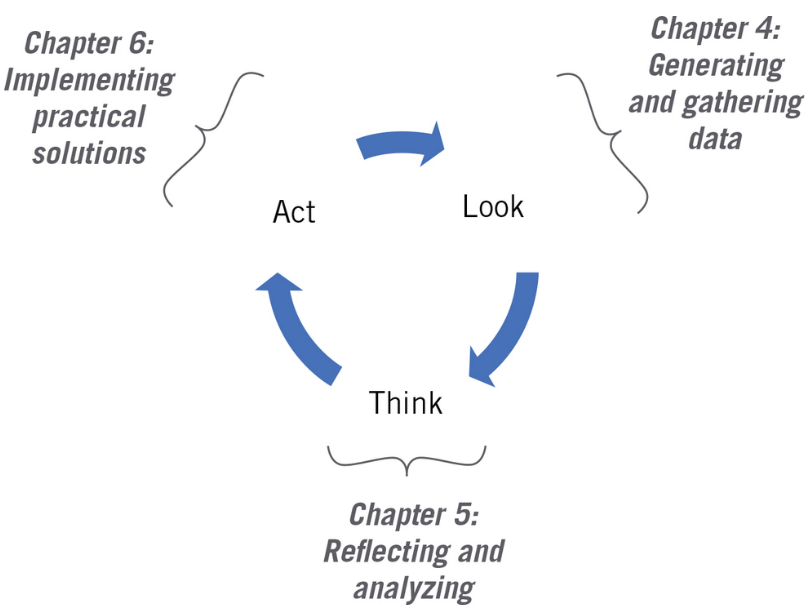
	QUANTITATIVE	**QUALITATIVE**
	Hypothesizes relationships between variables of interest	Explores individual or group perspectives
Processes	Precise measurement of variables	Descriptions of experience and perspective
	Careful control of events and conditions within the study	Study of naturally occurring events
	Statistical analysis of quantitative data	Interpretive analysis of qualitative data
Outcomes	Precise analysis of relationships between variables	Extended understanding of events and behaviors
	Describes relationships in terms of causal connections	Detailed descriptions and presentations of experience and perspectives of actors
	Generalizes findings to sites and people not included in the study	Findings are setting and group specific
Rigor	Established by measures of validity and reliability	Established through processes of trustworthiness

SECTION II AN INTRODUCTION TO ACTION RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION: INTERACTING WITH THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE REAL WORLD

Though professional practitioners and academic experts may have revealing insights into some of the key factors influencing problems to be investigated, they also often have but superficial insight into the personal, experiential, historical, and culturally embedded understandings embodied in the lived experience of those who inhabit the settings investigated. Chapters in this section provide detailed procedures and practices that provide the means to overcome the restrictions inherent in traditional approaches to research by engaging the real-world environments of the people who experience the issues and problems on which the research is focused. Where traditional approaches to research use more *passive* approaches to inquiry—observing, questioning, testing, and so on—to describe and explain the issues investigated, action research requires stakeholders to be *active* participants in research settings, generating robust and comprehensive understandings more likely to produce effective, practical outcomes to their investigations.

Details of the Look–Think–Act research framework (see Figure II.1) presented here are not meant as a fixed plan of action, but a *heuristic* designed to assist research participants to maintain focus on the central features of a rigorous yet adaptive approach to investigation.



Description

Figure II.1 Look–Think–Act Framework

The Look–Think–Act cycle should be understood as a continually recycling set of activities rather than a neat, predefined plan that allows participants to proceed step by step to the end of the process. It is an iterative process that may *change directions* —sometimes in minor and sometimes in major ways—based on understandings that emerge along the way.

Participants in action research projects therefore might find themselves starting with small actions—visiting people or observing a setting—and working backward through the cycle, thinking about what they have seen and heard, and using the knowledge they have acquired to determine their next steps. They may find themselves repeating and revising steps, rethinking or skipping planned actions, and even making significant changes in direction, based on the knowledge they gain as they go. Presenting the cycle in its linear form can still be helpful, however, in that it provides a reminder to action researchers to deeply understand people's specific needs and the context in which they live or work (Look), to consciously reflect on events, leveraging emerging knowledge to guide action (Think), and to use the emerging analyses to achieve practical solutions to the problem(s) investigated (Act).

SHORT AND LONG CYCLES OF INVESTIGATION

Action research participants take an *attitude of inquiry* that is at the heart of *all* research, effectively saying: *"We don't know, but we will seek to develop a better understanding of the issues involved."* This demands that research participants engage in *short cycles* of investigation, constantly questioning all aspects of the situation subject to investigation. They search for information (Look), reflect on what it means (Think), and use emerging understandings to define their ongoing actions (Act). The same framework, however, may be applied to the *long cycles* of activity, where participants spend significant periods acquiring information (looking) before pausing to engage in a preliminary analysis of that information (thinking/reflecting) and deciding what to do next (acting). In both long and short cycles of investigation, however, action researchers are engaged in research settings, not as "objective" observers but as active participants who become a recognized part of the social scene in which they work.

Short cycles of the Look–Think–Act routine are therefore at work through every step of investigation, as participants, both individually and collectively, ask themselves to be aware of the actions they are taking as part of the work in which they are engaged, questioning themselves about the adequacy of their activities, being aware of the knowledge they are acquiring, and using that enhanced understanding to enrich the processes of investigation. In the process, researchers engage the critical consciousness required to ensure the validity of the research from the perspective of all stakeholders.

Chapter 3: Setting the Stage describes detailed procedures for initiating a research project, research facilitators entering the field to identify stakeholding participants who will assist in defining and refining the problem to be addressed, the people who need to be included, the issues that need to be addressed, and the procedures to be used. In doing so they consciously enact ethical procedural guidelines and record the information they acquire in the process. Chapter 3 also emphasizes the need to understand action research not as a one-shot didactic walk through a set of predefined procedures but a more organic process whereby emerging understanding provides the basis for ongoing revision and enhancement of both the processes and products of investigation.

Chapter 4: Look: Generating and Gathering Data is divided into two sections that represent two *stages* or "moves" of inquiry. *Move I* provides the processes by which research facilitators engage in investigation to establish the focus of the action research. It describes interview processes—guided conversations—that enable issues, events, and phenomena to be framed in terms that are meaningful from the perspective of stakeholders—those affected by or having significant influence on the problem investigated. *Move II* presents a variety of activities that assist research participants to gather information and knowledge from a range of sources, extending and increasing the depth of understanding emerging from their investigations.

Chapter 5: Think: Reflecting and Analyzing commences by recognizing the need to make sense of what might become a large and puzzling mass of information/data. It provides approaches to analysis that enable people to distill the information, culling peripherally relevant material and identifying significantly relevant or informative elements. Elements are then arranged into categories and themes and presented in frameworks that provide the basis for accounts and explanations that enhance participant understanding of the issues investigated and provide the basis for planning effective action.

Chapter 6: Act: Implementing Practical Solutions speaks to the fundamental distinguishing feature of action research. Traditional approaches to research end with a report on the findings of the investigation, with recommendations for steps to be considered to resolve the issue investigated. Action researchers continue the process of investigation, continually planning actions that will lead to a practical resolution of the research problem. The chapter therefore first presents steps for reviewing progress and planning continuing activities (short cycle) and then provides detailed guidelines for more strategic planning of actions that will resolve the issues on which the research was focused (long cycle).

Descriptions of Images and Figures

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In the image, each circular arrow corresponds to a chapter listed as follows:

Look corresponds to Ch 4: Generating and gathering data.

Think corresponds to Ch5: Reflecting and Analyzing.

Act corresponds to Ch 6: Implementing practical solutions.

3 SETTING THE STAGE: INITIATING AN ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS

ENTERING THE FIELD: A FOUNDATION FOR EFFECTIVE RESEARCH

The principles outlined in this chapter apply particularly in the initial stages of action research. More interactive processes that engage the research facilitator and other participants in carefully articulated processes of inquiry replace the detached, impersonal procedures associated with traditional research. The sociable nature of the research processes should not, however, mask the necessity for ensuring that rigorous and ethical procedures provide the basis for illuminating and effective investigations. As we do so, however, we need to acknowledge ways in which a research study might affect people's lives, including through possible research training and important uses of their valuable time (Abma et al., 2018).

When we enact action research processes, we are likely to engage approaches to work and community life at odds with the general conventions of the institutions and agencies that form the settings for much of our activity. The open dialogue that constitutes a core ingredient of our research processes runs the risk of disturbing a carefully controlled and regulated social environment. We may unconsciously disturb micropolitical alignments and threaten people who have established positions of power or influence. In these circumstances, therefore, it is essential to ensure that our initial entry to the setting is as sensitive as possible. We need to understand the complex interactions among people, events, and activities and to comprehend the ways in which they interpret their situations so that any activity we initiate sits well in the minds of the people with whom we work.

Our ultimate goal is to provide a context that enables diverse stakeholders to work collaboratively toward solutions to the significant problems that confront them. The preliminary processes described in this chapter set the stage for this activity. They enable research facilitators to gain an overall picture of the situation, to develop positive relationships with people, and to help them think more deeply about their issues and concerns. The relationships and forms of communication that evolve set the stage for the inclusive and participatory processes that are the basis for common unity and productive action.

SOCIABLE RESEARCH PROCESSES

When we engage in action research, we are not merely employing impersonal, technical routines that have little impact on people's daily lives. A major purpose of our activity is to work in such a way that we are able to assist people to make changes in their work or community lives that will have a directly beneficial effect. When we enter any social setting, we engage with people who have histories of experience that orient them to us in ways that will affect the processes of inquiry that emerge from our activities. The first task in any project is for researchers to immerse themselves in the setting(s), talking with people informally about general events and activities, participating in community or group activities, and generally making themselves visible in a sociable way. Scientific objectivity is not the purpose here. Although it is sometimes important to maintain a neutral stance in relation to interpersonal issues, participation entails the need to develop the trust that enables others to feel safe in your presence and set an empathetic tone for activities to follow. This section therefore presents details of ways in which researchers may engage both enjoyably and productively with the people who inhabit the particular setting relevant to issues to be investigated. It is groundwork that, if played out with genuineness and authenticity, will capture people's attention and provide the basis for productive relationships that are a necessary part of any action research project.

Designing Effective Action Research

In the early stages of an action research project, it is important to establish a positive climate that engages the energy and enthusiasm of stakeholders. Projects that fail to capture the interest or commitment of the people involved are often ineffective, inefficient, or both. Practitioners often assume that they can implement a program once they have gained official permission, only to discover that potential participants refuse to become involved. Professional practitioners in many fields are often frustrated by their inability to engage people in activities that appear, from their own perspective, to be highly desirable. Their comments and questions are indicative of their dissatisfaction:

> How can we get parents to participate in classroom activities? We can't even get them to come to the school.
>
> These young people must help us if we're to develop this facility for them.
>
> The mothers should bring their babies to the clinic more regularly, but they won't.
>
> We just can't seem to stop these kids from drinking or taking drugs or engaging in sex.

General

Reflection 3.1:

Ernie—Socializing as an Action Research Practice

I've heard such comments as "All he does is sit around drinking coffee or tea with people"—remarks that, especially in the early stages of a project, contain a grain of truth. I am constantly aware of the symbolic significance of sharing food and drink, so I always take people up on the offer of a cup of tea or coffee, or an invitation to a community event. I've been invited to church and into people's homes. I've sat in gardens drinking beer after work, watched basketball games, and attended school functions. It's not only that I enjoy socializing—the activity is all part of my work—but it allows me to enter people's lives in a "real" way. These social activities break down barriers to communication, help me develop good working relations with others, and give me greater exposure to the setting in a relatively short time. It's surprising how much can be accomplished in these contexts. People in the course of social talk will often discuss issues about which they are concerned. They become less guarded in such nonthreatening contexts and reveal much that in more formal contexts they might have thought either unimportant or too sensitive.

When this happens, I always make a formal visit to the people concerned soon afterward to ensure that they are comfortable with the conversation. I will say, "I had a great time with you yesterday. I enjoyed talking with you." Then, in the course of conversation, I also mention, "I was interested in what you had to say about.. . . I didn't know that." This enables the other person to check that the confidentiality and safety of our conversations still hold. The information is confirmed and often extended, and working relationships are strengthened in the process.

The language these practitioners use provides clues to the social dynamics involved. When we try to get people to do something, insist that they must or should do something, or try to stop them from engaging in some activity, we are working from an authoritative position, which is likely to generate resistance. Such situations often are characterized by processes in which people in positions of authority already have defined the problem and formulated a solution. They fail to grasp that others may interpret the situation and significance of the problem in ways different from their own or may have different agendas in their lives, with other matters having much higher priority. Experience suggests that programs and projects begun on the basis of the decisions and definitions of authority figures have a high probability of failure (see Reflection 3.2).

General

Reflection 3.2:

Ernie—Top-Down Planning

I recently spoke with a university professor who was frustrated at the lack of participation of local police in a training program he had implemented. In an area where most of the population was African American and local police were largely European American, there was clear need, as demanded by local community leaders, for police to be instructed in more effective approaches to their work. The professor had set up the program in conjunction with the police (chief) but complained about the surly attitude of the officers who attended the compulsory training sessions. They expressed discontent about the waste of time listening to "theory" that didn't take into account the complex realities of the work in which they were engaged.

This type of process, however, is common in many arenas. In classrooms I (Ernie) have personally discovered the joy and seen others delighted by the increase in effectiveness of their teaching when they engage their students in processes of planning their own learning. In business and industry it is now broadly accepted that operations and outcomes will be far more effective when workers and clients, at all levels, are included in the processes of investigation and planning. I now recognize the limitations of my own perspective and the power of processes that enable me to take advantage of the resources of the people with whom I work.

In Chapter 1, we introduced the three fundamental phases of a basic action research routine. In the first phase—*Look*—participants define and describe the problem to be investigated and the general context within which it is set. In the second phase—*Think*—they analyze and interpret the situation to extend their understanding of the nature and context of the problem. In the third phase of the process—*Act*—they formulate solutions to the problem. This simple routine, however, masks a complex array of influences and activities. Multiple viewpoints and agendas constantly come into play, resulting in a continuous need to modify and adapt emerging plans. The action research task requires a social process in which people extend and reconstruct information emerging from their inquiry (data gathering and analysis) through continuing cycles of exchange, negotiation, realignment, and repair. Look–Think–Act is not a linear planning process—it is a reminder for us to iteratively generate knowledge through and for action in ways that are meaningful to the people whose needs the project primarily is meant to support—students, clients, patients, and so on.

Seeking Consensus: Joint Construction of a Research Agenda

The art and craft of action research include the careful planning of research activities in which stakeholders jointly construct processes of exploration that are meaningful to them and provide the basis for discovering effective solutions to the research problem. Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest that "the major task of the constructivist investigator is to tease out the constructions (i.e., understandings, emerging interpretations) that various actors in a setting hold and, so far as possible, to bring them into conjunction—a joining with one another—and with whatever other information can be brought to bear on the issues involved" (p. 142). Constructions are the stuff of which people's social lives are built—created realities that exist as an integrated, system of meaning and action that enable them to almost automatically navigate the complexities of everyday life. The aim of inquiry is *not* to establish the truth or to describe what really is happening as a unified account, but to reveal the different truths and realities—constructions—held by different individuals and groups. Even people who have the same facts or information will interpret them differently according to their experiences, worldviews, and cultural backgrounds.

The task of the action researcher, therefore, is to develop a context in which individuals and groups with divergent perceptions and interpretations can formulate a construction of their situation that makes sense to them all—a joint construction. Guba and Lincoln (1989) designate this a *hermeneutic dialectic* process, in which new meanings emerge as divergent views are compared and contrasted. The major purpose of the process is to achieve a higher-level synthesis, to reach a consensus where possible, to otherwise expose and clarify different perspectives and use these consensual or divergent views to build an agenda for negotiating action. The hermeneutic dialectic process is fundamental to action research, requiring people to work together with purpose and integrity to ensure the effective resolution of their issues and problems.

Because this activity often brings people's work, community, and private lives into the public arena, it requires a great deal of tact and sensitivity. Enabling people to reach consensus requires carefully articulated processes of negotiation and accommodation that enable people to maintain their dignity and enhance their feelings of unity. The routines described in the following section, therefore, reflect a commitment to the working principles discussed in Chapter 1—relationships, communication, participation, and inclusion. At every stage of their work, action research facilitators should ensure that procedures are in harmony with these principles, constantly checking that their actions promote and support people's ability to be active agents in the processes of inquiry. The underlying principle here is that human relationships are at least as important as the technical considerations of research.

It is not always possible to easily achieve consensus, but the time spent in doing so more than compensates for the time lost in searching for solutions to sometimes apparently incommensurable issues. There is, however, the danger that important issues remain unresolved in the push to continue the research process by establishing an incomplete consensus. People may feel silenced as their ideas and perspectives are ignored or lost, and this lack of resolution often comes back later in the process to destroy the harmonious movement toward a productive outcome. The imperative here is to acknowledge that all perspectives and orientations are integrated into the project through the continuing creative action of the Look–Think–Act cycles of research. Where no resolution is possible, then two projects may emerge, each with a somewhat different focus or a different direction. In this case, it is necessary to clearly articulate the different orientation of both groups so that each may see the other as a complementary part of a broader set of objectives.

Establishing Who Benefits

There are many situations where researchers engage in a study for which subjects or participants gain little or no benefit for the time and energy they have provided. Sometimes they are not even informed of the outcomes of the study and the only benefit obtained is to be found in the CV of the researcher. From the very beginning of a project, research facilitators should start to take note of who needs to benefit from the project and in which way. The key beneficiaries should be those who are centrally impacted by the problems or issues on which the project is based. Students, clients, customers, or patients are usually central participants, research being required to resolve particular issues or problems they are experiencing. Those who serve them—teachers, health professionals, social workers, businesspeople, and so on—also are likely to need to see some benefit for themselves as they adapt and adjust their work activities according to the outcomes of the research process. Others whose lives or work are affected—supervisors, administrators, colleagues, families, and so on—may also need to see some benefit for either assisting, facilitating, or approving the research. In all these cases, the research needs to proceed transparently so that all affected understand the nature of the project and can see benefit in it for themselves. This should be clearly established early in the formative stages of a project.

The agenda, stance, and positioning of research facilitators thus has considerable impact on the success, or otherwise, of any action research process. These elements of researchers' presentation carry many implicit messages that affect the extent to which other participants feel "at home" in the research process and are able to develop feelings of ownership. In summary, facilitators should

- present themselves as resource persons,
- be aware of their dress and appearance,
- establish their purpose in nonthreatening terms,
- associate with all groups, formal and informal,
- be visible,
- be accessible,
- meet in places where each stakeholder group feels at home,
- enable people to see the potential benefits of the research for themselves.

ENTERING THE FIELD: BUILDING A PICTURE

The processes described in the following paragraphs are designed to furnish a context to stimulate stakeholders' interest and inspire them to invest their time and energy. Thoughtful and engaged planning enables research participants, including facilitators, to discover the makeup of the setting and establish a purposeful presence in that context.

Establishing Contact

In the early stages of a research project, facilitators should establish contact with all stakeholder groups as quickly as possible. Each group needs to be informed of events and needs to feel that all members can contribute to the research processes. A stranger who is heard speaking to some groups about issues of concern to other groups may arouse suspicion, antagonism, or fear. With that in mind, research facilitators should place a high priority on identifying the various groups of stakeholders in the setting and establishing relationships with them.

Initial contact should be informative and neutral. A statement such as the following is appropriate:

> I'm Ernie Stringer. I've been employed by the Watertown Council to work with unemployed single parents. Some people seem to think there is a problem. I'm not sure if anything needs to be done, but I thought that I might talk with people to find out what they think.

This type of introduction provides a general context for a community-wide conversation. After contact has been established, a process of communication should be formulated; for example, “Thanks for talking with me. You’ve been most informative. I’d really like to talk with you again. Would that be possible?”

Facilitators should establish convenient times and places to meet with people and should, after initial visits, contact people regularly. This way people are more likely to feel that they are included in the process, that their input is significant, and that the project is theirs in some fundamental sense. This condition of *ownership* is an important element of action research. When research facilitators talk with people, they should also ask about others who should be included in discussions. This will extend the facilitator’s knowledge about the stakeholder groups and their membership. Networking, in this context, is not merely a political tool to be used to gain advantage but a social tool that ensures that all stakeholders are included in the process.

Mapping the Context: Constructing a Preliminary Picture

Research facilitators should develop an understanding of the setting’s social dynamics, identifying stakeholding groups, key people, the nature of the community, the purposes and organizational structure of relevant institutions and agencies, and the quality of relationships between and among individuals and groups. This process commences from the very start of a project but continues throughout the project. Part of this process also involves learning the history of the situation as action researchers will need to know what has previously happened in relation to key issues and stakeholders prior to their arrival. Past events sometimes leave legacies of deep hurts and antagonisms that severely limit prospects for successful projects unless they are handled judiciously.

Doug McCauley (1985) used questions in the following list to guide the building of his own preliminary picture of a particular situation. It was a picture he kept for his own information only and differed from the pictures built by the community groups he worked with, but it served to orient him to the setting and to enable him to keep the “big picture” in mind. He was careful not to impose this picture on others or use it as a tool to define the reality of their situation. He would also use some of these questions with community groups engaged in extended and complicated projects associated with multiple groups and agencies.

Relationships

- Who is related?
- How are they related?

History

- When was the community started?
- Who were the founders?
- Why was it started?
- What has been the main economic base?
- Are the original families still there?
- What about the history of minority groups?

People

- Important people
- Elected people
- Church people
- Government departments
- Local government
- Community leaders
- Community workers
- Who is involved?

Groups

- Geographic groups
- Social groups
- Family groups
- Community groups
- Racial groups
- Ethnic groups
- Who is involved in each?
- Who are the key people?
- Which are the influential groups?

Problems

- What problems do you see?
- What problems do others see?
- What problems do the power brokers see?
- What problems do local, state, and federal government officers see?
- What problems do small groups see?

Resources

- What social resources are available?
- What economic resources are available?

Who owns them?

Are they owned by individuals, groups, or government?

What is missing?

Why is it missing?

Research facilitators need to formulate their own questions according to the nature and extent of the inquiry in which they will engage. A more limited context, such as a classroom or agency office, may require a less extensive list of questions. The purpose of such questions is to ensure that researchers gain an adequate understanding of the setting in which they will work.

General

Reflection 3.3:

Ernie—Building the Picture

A community group in a country town contracted my organization to assist in investigating a problem that threatened to close down their agency. The agency had been set up to provide developmental services to a number of community groups in the town and surrounding region. The government authority involved had discontinued funding the agency, however, because it was alleged that it was no longer providing the services for which the funds had been provided. This was potentially a serious blow to a small community with limited resources.

At a meeting of the agency's executive committee and in later interviews with staff, we were able to gain some understanding of the nature of the problem that had led to the current state of affairs. Participants in this process included the agency staff—development officer, bookkeeper, secretary, and field officer—and members of the executive committee—chair, secretary, and committee members. They also identified key people in the funding body—regional manager and field officers—as well as other individuals and groups who supported or were associated with the agency—members of a church group, the town clerk, and workers in a community agency in a nearby town.

We were given permission to contact each of these groups or individuals and proceeded to meet with them. We first spoke with the field officer of the funding body and then the regional manager, taking care to maintain a friendly, nonthreatening, yet businesslike relationship and to have each of them describe the situation from their perspective. From their points of view, the agency had ceased to function effectively, and staff members had become increasingly hostile each time they were approached to account for funds they had expended. I soon established that relations between the staff of the agency and the funding body were extremely antagonistic, making any communication problematic. Reports presented to the executive committee provided a general picture of events (which was clarified further as different people presented their own parts of the story) that revealed a much clearer picture of issues emerging from the current operation of the agency.

Reestablishing a working relationship between agency staff and officers of the funding body was difficult because agency staff members' attitudes seemed to change constantly. Although we discussed the need to establish a working relationship with the funding body and were able to arrange meetings with relevant people, agency workers would then quickly take a negative stance, criticizing the funding agency and decrying the activities of its workers. We *eventually discovered that the workers were meeting regularly with the agency's former bookkeeper, who angered them each time they met by describing the deficiencies and character of the funding-body officers.*

We met with the former bookkeeper and talked through the issues with him, learning more about the history of the situation in the process and asking him to suggest what could be done. By incorporating his suggestions in our preliminary plan and asking his assistance in carrying them out, we were able to defuse an uncomfortable situation that was hindering the project's progress. The final result was that agency staff reestablished a working relationship with the funding agency and their funding was restored to the great relief of all concerned within the agency itself and the funding authority.

Identifying a Research Problem or Issue

Research is commonly generated by processes wherein researchers identify a gap in the literature, identifying an issue that has been designated by past research as worthy of further investigation. The intent is to increase understanding or knowledge of that issue by setting up an appropriate research study that delineates the processes of investigation and an appropriate set of research subjects.

Action research, however, is derived in quite different circumstances, often through identification of a social group that is struggling with an issue within their professional, community, or organizational life. Action researchers, through continuing development of research relationships with agencies, services, organizations, or businesses, are able to identify through their network of interactions people and contexts that would benefit from assistance with the systematic investigation of an issue or problem they are unable to resolve through the regular operations of their agency, service, or business. Where common approaches to research have the intent of contributing to the body of professional and academic knowledge, the primary purpose of action research is to assist people to find solutions to real-life problems experienced by people in their community, professional, and social lives—contributions to the general body of knowledge being a secondary purpose, though an important one.

Researchable issues are often identified by people in their own professional, social, or community lives, where deep-seated and complex issues inhibit their ability to provide effective service or to attain the outcomes they desire. In these instances, professional practitioners may, through conversations with colleagues and supervisors, commence more systematic investigations into issues that detract from the effective operation of their agencies and organizations. Health professionals may be dissatisfied with the outcomes of carefully orchestrated care plans. Teachers may be frustrated by the lack of engagement of sections of their students and the consequent poor educational outcomes they are able to attain. Businesspeople may regret their inability to provide adequate services to customers or to attract customers in the first place. In these and many other contexts, action research provides the means to investigate more systematically the dynamics of their work lives and, through continuing cycles of investigation, derive the practical means to resolve the issues that inhibit their work.

General

Lit Corner 3.1:

A Five-Phased Model for Context Mapping

Jain, Schröder, and Schinkel (2015) advocate a five-phase model for context mapping to create a preliminary picture of an action research project. The *preparatory phase* may include local stakeholder mapping, awareness-raising of the research problem with local stakeholders, and communicating benefits of taking local action. A *planning and decision-making phase* follows in which local stakeholders, researchers, and practitioners clarify intended action research activities. *Implementation* follows, which in Jain et al.'s model is community driven, with researchers playing a facilitative role to ensure intended purpose are fulfilled. A participatory *monitoring and evaluation phase* follows in which the project is assessed from different perspectives to find out what is working and what is not, and what can be done to modify the plan—including by seeking new participation and insights from different stakeholders and community members. Monitoring and evaluation should be considered as an ongoing or parallel phase to the implementation phase. Finally, there is a *follow-up and continuation phase* where efforts are made to create sustainable processes for ongoing local organizational support that can continue generating benefits for local stakeholders and communities when support from external actors is eventually reduced. The authors argue that this phase is often neglected due to limitations of time and budget. Ignoring sustainability is at our own peril, however, as doing so may undermine initial good intentions, put important action research gains at risk, and undermine community goodwill and reputation. (Adapted from Jain et al., 2015, p. 177)

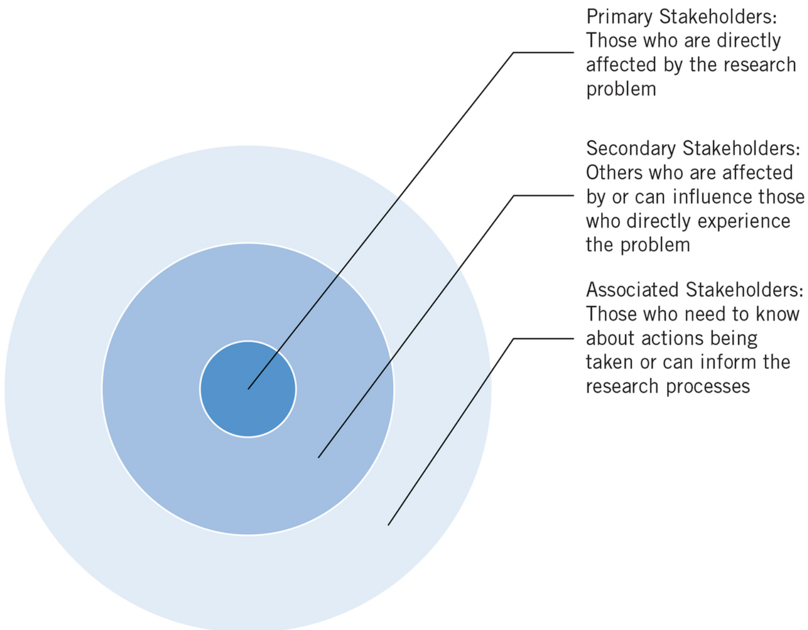
When identifying issues to address through action research, it is important to focus not only on problems but also on assets and solutions that may already exist within the particular social setting. Abma et al. (2018, p. 68) note that highlighting deficits "contradicts the resource-orientated approach found in social work, education, and health professions." Asset-based approaches can help focus on relationships and trust as mechanisms for change, remind us to prioritize people's needs over service deficits, and define meaningful outcomes to the communities that are most affected (Harrison et al., 2019, p. 1). It is important, however, to not allow asset-based approaches become rose-colored glasses that mask over significant socioeconomic problems people face (Ward, 2019, p. 308) and prevent discussion of deeply challenging and even traumatic issues that may be present in the experiences of the participants (Duncan, 2015).

Identifying Stakeholding Groups

In most research studies, one of the first tasks is to decide which people to include. In quantitative studies, random selection of participants is the most common method for determining who will take part, but qualitative and action research studies require a different process, often called purposeful sampling, that consciously selects people on the basis of a particular set of attributes. In action research, the major attribute is the extent to which a group or individual is affected by or has an effect on the problem or issue of interest.

Any problem or issue is likely to affect or be affected by a wide range of people. A teacher's work, for instance, is likely to be influenced directly by students, colleagues, administrators, support staff, and parents, but teachers can also be affected by others who come into occasional contact with their classrooms—government officials, police, social workers, community leaders, and church leaders. Health professionals may likewise find their patients influenced by nurses, paraprofessionals, doctors, support staff, patients, and administrators. Social workers and agency staff also find their work with clients affected by workers from other agencies, families, friendship groups, social groups, or ethnic, racial, or religious groups.

Any or all of these stakeholders should be recognized as necessary participants, the extent of their participation depending on the degree to which they are able to exert influence on the issues investigated. All, to a greater or lesser extent, influence what is happening and have their own understandings of people and events. They therefore need opportunities to express their thoughts, ideas, and feelings about the issue(s) at the heart of the project, not as enemies or adversaries, but as contributors to a greater understanding of the context/setting (Figure 3.1).



Description

Figure 3.1 Different Levels of Stakeholding Participants

Researchers, therefore, need to ensure that all stakeholders whose lives are affected by the research problem participate in defining and implementing the investigation. Although it is not possible for all people to be directly engaged, it is imperative that all stakeholder groups feel that someone is speaking for their interests and is in a position to inform them of what is going on. An investigation within a small business may identify customers or clients, staff, administrators, and those associated with relevant services; a classroom study may involve students, the teacher, other teachers (colleagues), administrators, and parents; health clinic studies may involve patients, nurses, doctors, family members, administrators, and other relevant personnel.

Larger studies may require research facilitators to conduct a social analysis of the setting to ensure that all relevant groups are included in the research process. Such a social analysis should identify the groups that have a stake in the problem under consideration so that men and women from all age, social class, ethnic, racial, and religious groups, in all agencies, institutions, and organizations, feel they have a voice in the proceedings. It is important to cut across these categories to ensure adequate representation—a middle-class migrant person cannot always speak for lower-class migrant people, an older person for youth, or men for women. Members of groups that do not have voices in the proceedings will likely fail to invest themselves in the research processes and may then undermine any resulting activity.

Social Mapping

Social mapping processes can help researchers identify the diversity of people affected by the issue at hand so they can fashion a comprehensive picture of stakeholders in the setting. All groups may not be involved in the research process, but the charting of stakeholders will help research participants identify those people who are primarily concerned with the issues at hand—sometimes known as the *primary or critical reference groups*. Table 3.1, constructed by researchers who wished to identify the different groups in a Texas school district, is similar to such a chart. Another version of the same table also identified groups by sex so that each row was split into male and female. For other purposes, it may be necessary to define categories for age groups. The information may be recorded in tabular or descriptive form, although a map of the context that locates groups physically is sometimes illuminating.

Table 3.1 Stakeholding Groups

	Anglo			**African American**			**Hispanic**			**Asian**	
	Lower SES	**Middle SES**	**Upper SES**	**Lower SES**	**Middle SES**	**Upper SES**	**Lower SES**	**Middle SES**	**Upper SES**	**Lower SES**	**Mi SE**
Students											
Families											
Teachers											
Administrators											
Businesses											
Churches											
Service agencies											

Note: SES = socioeconomic status.

General

Reflection 3.4:

Ernie—Including Stakeholders

In many settings, I see middle-class professional people making decisions about programs and services that serve the needs of people about whom they have little understanding. The failure of schools to provide for the learning needs of minority populations signals the failure of school systems to engage minority people in the processes of educational planning. In one Australian town that I know, issues related to Aboriginal students are usually referred to a local Aboriginal pastor, although he represents only one of the Aboriginal groups there. The pastor speaks from the perspective of a Christian Aboriginal person and sometimes neglects the interests of other groups who are more closely bound to their traditional spiritual heritage.

This is not an unusual situation. In the United States, I have observed instances in which individuals from a minority group are chosen by research facilitators to speak for all others because their middle-class social skills make them acceptable to mainstream institutions despite their alienation from the people they are asked to represent. Youth programs often are set up so that well-mannered, clean-living, decent young people are inducted into courses intended to provide them with leadership skills that will enable them to provide appropriate direction to their peers and thus prevent drug problems, teenage pregnancy, and so on. In many cases, participants rarely are chosen by their peers, and few are closely related to the groups of young people who are actively engaging the types of activity that are the cause of concern. The real leaders in these situations are ignored in favor of the types of youth preferred by adult community leaders. I participated in a training workshop in which agency workers sought ways of working with the members of a community group to stop young people consuming large quantities of alcohol. The question asked was, "What can we do to stop them from drinking?" The answer, I thought at the time, was "Precious little!"

Identifying Key People

Researchers sometimes feel disconcerted when people fail to engage in projects that the researchers consider significant. They are often surprised when obstacles appear without warning, when people fail to attend meetings, when tasks are not performed, or when antagonism is directed toward them. In many such instances, they have not only transgressed the boundaries of people's symbolic territory but failed to obtain permission to enter that territory.

General

Reflection 3.5:

Ernie—Including Key People

In one community project I observed, the agency worker took pains to identify all key people. After 2 months, he became aware that many of the activities he was promoting were failing to make headway despite positive responses from many of the townspeople. He eventually discovered that one of the farmers in the district who came to town infrequently was a key person in a number of groups in town. He was highly respected and had a significant impact on community affairs. Once the worker contacted this farmer and talked through the issues with him, many of the obstacles simply disappeared.

An important preliminary task for research facilitators is to determine the formal structure of relevant organizations, identifying and communicating with people in positions of influence and authority in order to gain permission to engage in research in that context. Concurrently, they also need to locate informal patterns of influence to ensure that all significant people—sometimes called *opinion leaders* or *gatekeepers*—are included in the early stages of the research process.

One technique for establishing or extending the people to be included in the study is to ask participants, a process sometimes called *snowballing*. Researchers may ask, "Who else should we talk with about this issue? Who else is affected by it or has an effect on it? Who might provide a different perspective on the issue?" This signals the need to ensure that the people included in the study are drawn from groups or individuals having different experiences and perspectives.

Place and Space

Place can be thought of as three elements to which any group in a social setting may stake a claim: physical space, social status, and symbolic territory. A family clinic, although ostensibly available to the whole community, for instance, may be claimed by an informal group known as young mothers. A particular ethnic or age group may feel as if they "own" a community center. Part of a school ground may be recognized as belonging to a particular clique of girls. These examples show how informal groups, despite no formal legitimacy, can have powerful impacts on social life. When researchers conduct their social analyses, it is imperative that they get to understand how the interacting networks of social groups and identities cut across the boundaries of the formal organization of a community, institution, or agency. The physical and symbolic territory that such groups occupy will have significant impact on the processes of investigation.

Networks of social identities are established more formally in such organizations as schools, hospitals, government agencies, social clubs, businesses, and churches.

These institutions carefully delineate activities and allocate the people responsible for each territory. A high school English department, for instance, operates under the leadership of a senior teacher accorded higher status than the other English teachers. The department has responsibility for teaching English and related subjects and is probably located in a particular part of the school building. A hospital trauma clinic engages in medical emergency work, with orderlies, nurses, and doctors having different tasks and statuses—levels of importance—in that context. Churches likewise allocate a variety of functions, statuses, and locations for worship, child and youth services, finances, and so on to different groups or individuals.

Difficulties often arise when newcomers or people aspiring to change the status quo attempt to invade or change territory that is already occupied. The following comments illustrate situations in which people perceive territorial boundaries to have been crossed inappropriately:

> But Mrs. Jones and Miss Smith always have done the flowers.
>
> I'm a history teacher. How on earth can I teach English literature?
>
> Why are you engaging in action research in health when you have no health knowledge? *We* have health knowledge.
>
> Don Jackson is part of my caseload. You have no right to interfere with him.
>
> Staff have never had access to the overall budget.
>
> The research methods class has never included action research before.

As researchers commence preparatory work, they should artfully position themselves so that they do not threaten the social space of the people with whom they will be working. They should take an impartial position in their status, activities, and physical location, expressing interest but showing no signs of designs on any territory. Research facilitators cannot afford to be associated too closely with any one of the stakeholding groups in the setting. Members of all groups need to feel that they can talk freely, without fear that their comments will be divulged to members of other groups whom, for one reason or another, they do not trust. They also need assurance that their perceptions and agendas will be considered important.

Researchers, therefore, should endeavor to spend significant periods in places associated with each of the major stakeholder groups—the practitioner's workplace, the administrator's office, and the places where client services are provided. They should make themselves available regularly in these diverse settings so that all stakeholder groups feel they have equal access. Visibility is important.

Researchers also should meet with people informally—in coffee shops, lunchrooms, sports arenas, bars, community centers, and even private homes, if invited. As they become known and accepted, they may tentatively request permission to attend events, meetings, activities, and so forth (e.g., "Would it be okay if I came along?"). The more freely researchers are able to participate in the ordinary lives of the people with whom they work, the more likely they are to gain the acceptance crucial to the success of an action research project. By meeting with people in places where those people feel safe and comfortable, action researchers enter spaces that allow others to speak more freely and, in the process, acknowledge the significance of their cultural settings. A common mistake is to have people meet in the offices or rooms of the agency, institution, or organization that is the context to be studied—a school, a government agency, corporate offices, and so on. Although this is sometimes appropriate, these contexts can be seen, especially by people from poor or marginalized groups, as quite threatening. The site of meetings, whether they be formal or informal, should be subject to negotiation with group members to ensure feelings of cultural and physical safety.

Keeping Track: Recording Details of Proceedings

One of the key features of an effective action research process is the need to keep detailed records of what people say and what they do. This does not mean that every word that is said or every action taken needs to be recorded, but that the key elements of discussions, debates, and deliberations provide a record that can be referred in cases of disagreements about what was said or what was to be done or has been done. Often recorded as the minutes of meetings, these records provide a continuing history that enables participants to keep track of the progress of their activities.

Chapter 4 provides more details regarding the different processes for recording and distilling these records, but in the earliest stages of planning an important feature of the research process is to provide all potential participants with a briefing about the initiation of the project. This can be presented as briefing notes that ensures stakeholding participants do not become wary of "secret deals" or the suggestion of the imposition of agendas by people they consider to be outsiders. In formal settings, departments, agencies, and institutions often require formal reports about activities that affect their operations. In these cases, careful recording of information provides the material from which formal reports can be constructed. More detail related to the construction of formal reports is provided in Chapter 7.

Establishing the Role and Status of Self in the Setting

Traditionally, researchers have carried with them the aura and status of the expert or scientist, expecting and being accorded deference. In action research, however, the role and function of the researcher differ considerably from that model. No longer laden with the onerous task of discovering generalizable truths, the researcher takes on a role carrying with it a unique status that, in a very real sense, must be established in the context of each study.

The research facilitator, therefore, first should establish a stance that is perceived as legitimate and nonthreatening by all major stakeholding groups. Problems will soon emerge if the researcher is perceived as a stranger prying into people's affairs for little apparent reason or as an authority attempting to impose an agenda. Although the researcher usually will be there under the auspices of some authority, that fact alone is insufficient to engage the attention or the cooperation of all groups in the setting. In many situations, associations with authority may be a marked hindrance, especially if people perceive that the researcher is there to judge, control, or interfere in their affairs.

Research facilitators may continue to establish their presence in a setting by assisting people to establish an agenda for research. Initial formulations should include nondefinitive information that invites questions and states the agenda in the broadest terms. Initial statements should provide the tacit understanding that the research facilitator is a resource person whose role is to assist stakeholders rather than to prescribe their actions. Researcher roles and functions, therefore, become overtly articulated in the process of introduction. The people involved can begin to understand what the researcher is concerned with and the part they play.

As inquiry proceeds, agendas will begin to emerge and become more clearly formulated. At this early stage, however, it is necessary only to establish the focus of activity in the most general terms. Initially research facilitators might frame their question in the following terms:

"I've been speaking with a number of people in this area and many are concerned about the number of homeless people living around here. Does this concern you?" Later they might approach people who appear to have a particular interest in the issue and ask them, "Some of the people I've talked with are getting together to see if there is something we can do about this issue. Would you like to join us?"

An important feature of this part of the process is to identify those who might become part of the research team—to become actively engaged in the research as participants or co-facilitators, responsible for establishing and monitoring the ongoing progress of the project. The best people to include would be key people—opinion leaders—from each of the stakeholding groups who have the informal authority to speak for their group and/or to share information with them.

A researcher's presentation of self should be as open-minded and nonthreatening as possible. Body language, speech, dress, and behavior should be purposeful, inquiring, and unpretentious. The all-knowing stance of the expert, the authoritative demeanor of the boss, or the swagger of the achiever is likely to be detrimental to participatory investigation. Many people, especially those in subordinate positions, are likely to respond negatively to any such presentation of self. Researchers should aim to present themselves in ways likely to be perceived as skilled, supportive, resourceful, and approachable. A friendly, purposeful stance is appropriate for most situations.

General

Reflection 3.6:

Ernie—Presenting One's Self

I have seen many mistakes made in all these areas—agenda, stance, and position—by otherwise well-intentioned researchers whose personal presentation of self effectively distanced or alienated them from those with whom they intended to work. I have seen social workers whose fashionable, high-quality clothing was in stark contrast to the cheap and worn clothing of their clients, serving as a constant reminder of the difference in their status. I have observed stylishly coiffed, manicured, and made-up teachers who were unaware of the subtle yet powerful messages their images presented to parents whose incomes and lifestyles were unable to sustain this type of presentation of self on a day-to-day basis. I have encountered researchers and agency workers who always visited the administrator first, disappearing into an office for extended conversations that raised the suspicions of workers and clients. In one instance, I spoke with a school psychologist who drove to her work in the poorest part of the city in an expensive Mercedes-Benz sports coupe. And in the case of the visiting politicians and bureaucrats mentioned in Chapter 1, their suits and ties were in embarrassing contrast to the stained and worn clothing of their audience.

ETHICS IN ACTION RESEARCH

Ethical procedures are an important part of all research, and formal research institutions such as universities, agencies, and organizations all have rules and regulations covering the conduct of research. This arises because researchers in the past have engaged in forms of inquiry that have put subjects or participants at risk. This does not necessarily arise because unscrupulous researchers take advantage of people over whom they have control, though this sometimes happens, but because they unwittingly or carelessly reveal information that puts their subjects in situations that are harmful.

The conduct of the Milgram (1963) experiments is perhaps the most famous example. There, subjects believing they were administering severe electric shocks to other participants were so traumatized that some required extensive therapy. In anthropological studies, researchers have revealed secret or sacred information that created havoc in the communities concerned. There is a long list of instances where researchers have consciously or unwittingly engaged in ethically untenable practices or procedures. As researchers we have a *duty of care* in relation to all people we engage in processes of investigation.

In planning a study, therefore, researchers usually need to take specific steps to ensure that participants come to no harm as a result of their participation in the research project (see Lit Corner 3.2).

General

Lit Corner 3.2:

Ethics in Support of Caring Relationships

"Ethics of duty" principles are exceptionally important in protecting research subjects from personal harm. For example, researchers in the 40-year U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee egregiously failed in their ethics of duty when they intentionally misrepresented the purposes of the study to the African American male research subjects (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020a), and chose to not offer penicillin to those that had contracted syphilis, even after penicillin became the recommended treatment (CDC, 2020b). This and many other examples of researchers risking people's well-being led to "the need to prevent harm to the 'human subjects' involved in any research, ensuring that they were not exploited or physically or emotionally damaged" (Banks & Brydon-Miller, 2018, p. 7). Emanating from the Tuskegee study, other U.S. and international ethical cases, and the World Medical Association's Helsinki Declaration on Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects, the U.S. Belmont Report outlined three basic ethical principles to be followed: respect for persons, beneficence (i.e., higher-level obligation to others), and justice. These, the Belmont Report indicated, "should underlie the conduct of biomedical and behavioral research involving human subjects, including guidelines to assure that such research is conducted in accordance with those principles" (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). These principles still form the basis of current research guidelines from the U.S. federal government (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016), and have been widely accepted by university Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in the United States.

Banks and Brydon-Miller (2018), however, note that formal institutional ethics processes, heavily informed by biomedical research studies, have led to "an over-emphasis on protection from harm and risk aversion, which does not necessarily fit with the circumstances of social research, let alone PR (participatory research)" (p. 8). The deeply positivist focus of most IRB policies, which assumes there is a strict distinction between researcher and researched and "that research should be objective and value-neutral [makes] it difficult to engage in discussions of the moral implications of research, or the ethical responsibilities of researchers" (Brydon-Miller et al., 2015, p. 597). On one hand, this results in decontextualized external rules to control research methods that assume following the rules will generate an ethical process (Brydon-Miller et al., 2015). And on the other, it leaves action researchers unserved by university IRBs and unprotected from real-life ethical challenges that IRBs do not even consider, related to collaboration and power, advocacy, participation in change processes, and adaptive research design (Banks & Brydon-Miller, 2018).

Brydon-Miller, Rector-Aranda, and Stephens (2015) have developed a methodology for Structured Ethical Reflection (see Chapter 6 for more detail) to help action researchers put their personal ethical values into action with participants in ways that IRB processes fail to do. This methodology assists action researchers to develop additional approaches and methods that help complement existing ethics of duty principles, using relational "ethics of care" and communitarian ethics that focus on developing caring and collaborative relationships. These value the primacy of community and interconnectedness that are central to many action research processes (Brydon-Miller et al., 2015; Johansson & Hall, 2019). Duty of care ethics, according to this viewpoint, require more than preventing harm.

Informed Consent

One of the principal tools to ensure this is to clearly inform participants of the purpose, aims, use of results, and likely consequences of the study, a process known as *informed consent*. This requires those responsible for the study to provide written information about the aims, purposes, and processes of the study and to gain written acknowledgment of participants' willingness to participate. Such written consent documents usually include statements indicating the following:

- People have the right to refuse to participate.
- They may withdraw from the study at any time.
- Data related to their participation will be returned to them.
- Any information (data) will be stored safely so that it cannot be viewed by others.
- None of the information that identifies them will be published, made public, or otherwise revealed to others without their explicit and written consent.

Because of the participatory nature of action research, ethical considerations work in a special way. The same provisions for duty of care apply, and all stakeholders have the same rights to safety and informed consent that apply in other forms of research. In action research, however, there is a particular imperative to ensure that all participants know what is going on, that the processes are inherently transparent to all. Because participants in an action research process have much more control than is usually accorded participants in a study, they are in effect engaging in a mutual agreement about the conduct of a study. Nevertheless, the need for informed written consent is still required for situations where people are at risk because of the sensitive nature of issues involved in the study.

In some cases, where practitioners engage their students, clients, or patients in routines of inquiry as part of their everyday engagement, formal consent may not be required. This may be the case in situations where teachers involve students in small projects to find better ways of attaining learning objectives, where social workers engage clients in personal explorations of issues in their lives, or where health professionals assist patients in a systematic exploration of a particular health issue. In these cases, the systematic processes of inquiry are part of the legal framework of duty of professional care, and no additional formal procedures may be required to legitimize them.

General

Case Example:

Agreement to Participate

Gladville Community Youth Group

Study of Youth Recreational Needs

Research Facilitator: Jenni Lee Hong—Gladville Youth Services Coordinator

Phone: 259–0892

The Gladville Community Youth Group wishes to study the recreational needs of young people in the Gladville area. The information used in this project will be collected by interviewing individual group members. Participants will be asked to engage in two interviews of approximately one hour duration each. The researcher will also have follow-up sessions with each person to check the accuracy of the information. Names will be kept confidential. Digital recordings and field notes always will be stored in a secure place by the researcher and not used for purposes other than the current study. Information that identifies individuals will only be used with their explicit written permission.

If you wish to withdraw from the study at any time you are free to do so, and all information gathered will be deleted, shredded, destroyed, or returned to you.

You may contact the researcher at any time via the above phone number.

I, ____________, have read the information above, and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity on the understanding that I may withdraw at any time without prejudice. I acknowledge that I understand that any information that identifies me may only be published or otherwise used with my explicit written consent.

Signed: _______ (Participant) Date: _______

Signed: _______ (Facilitator) Date: _______

Formal Ethics Approval: Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and Agency Procedures

In recent years people working in universities or government agencies have experienced some problems in acquiring formal approval to engage in action research. The enforcement of procedures and regulations designed to protect people participating in biomedical research, where drug trials and experimental medical procedures have the possibility of harming participants, has created real problems (also see Lit Corner 3.2). Unthinking enforcement of regulations has resulted in unneeded and overburdensome ethical requirements. Social scientists have appropriately criticized biomedical Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) for failing to adequately understand research methods such as ethnography, oral histories, and anecdotal evidence that often do not constitute “human subject research” as defined in the regulations for clinical research. The U.S. National Science Foundation (n.d.) has indicated that the regulations have some flexibility and rely on the common sense of the IRB to focus on limiting harm, maximizing informed consent, and limiting bureaucratic interference in valid research.

CASE STUDIES: DESIGNING ACTION RESEARCH PROCESSES

We conclude the chapter with four case studies that speak to how different action research processes are initiated, from establishing contact, to mapping the context to construct a preliminary picture, to identifying key knowledge holders and process participants, and so on. These cases are meant to help readers develop a process understanding of the concepts provided in this chapter.

Case Study 1: Sexual Harassment in the Lives of Middle School Students

This report is drawn from a study facilitated by a middle school teacher who describes a research project carried out by a group of her middle school students. It the explains the methods they used to explore the issue and reveal key features of their experience. More details of the study are provided in Chapter 1 on p. 14.

Framing

Students in my eighth-grade language arts classes were excited about working on a research project concerning a school issue. In a class discussion, they had no hesitation in identifying sexual harassment as the number one issue facing them on a daily basis. They felt that sexual harassment is so pervasive that most of the 850 students in the school had experienced sexual harassment in the hallways, inside class, in locker rooms, at the cafeteria, and on the buses. “Nowhere is safe at school,” said Moira, one of the eighth-grade girls who became a participant in the study.

Students shared that sometimes sexual comments created such anxiety that it was hard to focus on class work. Some students had stayed home from school to avoid being a target. They felt that physical abuse of peers was much less of a problem than verbal, sexual harassment. In fact, sexual harassment was a way of life. “You get used to it, ’cos there is nothing you can do about it,” said Katie and many students nodded in agreement.

“Like it happens when teachers are around,” reported Moira. When teachers heard name-calling in the hallways, like “faggot,” nothing was done about it. Moira went to her desk in science to find her name written across two desks. It said, “Moira gives me a boner.” When Moira asked for the names of the students who sat in those desks, the teacher said he didn’t know. The following day the graffiti had been removed, but when she again asked for the names of the students from the seating chart, the teacher replied, “What do you want me to do? Write a research paper about it?” In fact, there have been many research papers written about sexual harassment and it appears that some of them need to be presented to the faculty at my school.

In *Hostile Hallways*, a survey carried out by the American Association of University Women released in 1993, the overall national picture is revealed. Overall, 83% of the girls and 60% of the boys reported experiencing unwanted sexual attention in school. When this study was shared with the class, there was relief that that school wasn’t the only one with the problem of sexual harassment. There was also anger and confusion as to why sexual harassment is such a prevalent issue among teens. We decided to start a research group to investigate this issue.

Method

Five girls volunteered to meet after school every Tuesday afternoon to explore how they had experienced sexual harassment. We began in October 1999 and continued meeting through May 2000. Their level of concern and commitment is shown in the fact that they never missed a single meeting. The first step was to write letters to parents explaining the project and asking permission for their daughters’ participation. Letters were also written to the principal, assistant principal, counselor, and our on-site police officer explaining the nature of the study.

I interviewed the volunteers individually using ethnographic interview questions (Spradley, 1979; Stringer, 1996). I took notes during the interviews and collected articles that the girls brought in from their own research in magazines and from the Internet. The group was extremely involved and self-motivated. At times, our meetings were very intense, a natural response to such a sensitive issue, and I wrestled with my own ignorance of what a school day is like for an eighth-grade girl. One of the girls suggested I interview the counselor and the police officer, as many students sort out their help after they had been sexually harassed. I made appointments and followed through with interviews. The group also decided to ask other students in our language arts classes to anonymously write down their thoughts about sexual harassment. We saved these writings and later incorporated them into a performance piece.

After the individual interviews were completed, we began by discussing the official stance on harassment: “Arnet Independent Schools are committed to providing all members of the school community with a safe, supportive, and harassment-free environment. Members of the school community are expected to treat each other with mutual respect. Harassment is a form of disrespectful behavior that is intended to intimidate, creates a hostile environment, unreasonably interferes with an academic or working environment, adversely affects academic and employment opportunities, or seriously alarms or terrorizes another person.” The students in the study wanted to know why their school had not told them of the policy to protect them. It made me think about the importance of sharing information, especially when harassment drains so much energy from learning. They have the right to be protected from harassment.

This study therefore commenced with a group of volunteer girls exploring the issue but eventually evolved into a broader program of activities that highlighted the issue to the school and the community. As described in Chapter 1 (p. 14), it had a marked impact, resulting in a significant drop in the number of complaints about harassment in their school.

Case Study 2: Redevelopment of an Aged Care Community

The action research project described in Chapter 1 (p. 15) reveals how Barbara Horner, a senior university health researcher, was engaged by the Senior Management Team (SMT) of an aged care community to assist their plans for redevelopment of the facility. This was a sensitive issue since it would involve major changes in the lives of a vulnerable group of people who had limited capacity to engage in the significant changes contemplated by the facility’s governing board. Having first obtained official approval to carry out this research from her university’s research administration section, Barbara engaged in conversations with the director of the aged care community and, through him, the SMT. By carefully ensuring that the SMT understood her research was designed to assist and complement their work, a research team consisting of members from the SMT worked under her direction to provide materials for ongoing planning.

An initial review of literature related to the social and organizational dynamics of aged care revealed many issues to be addressed by the SMT as they planned the changes to their organization. This was complemented by a review of relevant documents and records that provided further information related to the operation of the facility. This assisted the research team to clarify the broader arena of aged care and the key issues to be taken into consideration as they moved forward. At this stage, the research facilitator also attended meetings of the SMT, gaining an understanding of the facility’s history, current situation, and its challenges, issues, and aspirations. An additional period of reconnaissance also enabled the research facilitator to develop positive relationships with other staff and with residents.

Initial interviews with a diverse sample of residents, whose level of care differed across sectors of the community, provided a solid foundation of issues to be addressed by the SMT, providing a much deeper level of understanding of the potential impacts and potentials of sound planning practices. Throughout this period Barbara carefully recorded relevant details of organizational planning meetings, providing regular reports on the progress of her investigations to the SMT. Records of resident interviews also provided a continuing body of knowledge that was fed into SMT organizational planning meetings.

In the following 2 years, the outcomes of their research activities were integrated into the SMT's plan for the changes required to take account of changing circumstances of aged care funding. Initial interviews with members of the SMT identified the issues they faced as they sought to ensure the continuing high levels of care provided to residents, while facing the financial pressures stemming from changes in government funding protocols.

Case Study 3: Environmental Conservation: Getting to Know People and Their Needs (draws from Ortiz Aragón, 2013)

In 2009, I (Alfredo) negotiated an agreement to implement an action research project to support an Ecuadorian environmental conservation organization in developing a strategic plan that would contribute to the sustainability of this organization. The organization needed to address various challenges it encountered in conserving and managing 12,000 hectares of highly biodiverse, privately held land (referred to as "the corridor") in northwest Ecuador, while also trying to develop and maintain friendly relationships and address some conflicts with communities in and around the corridor. I negotiated an agreement with the main funder of the Ecuadorian organization—a UK-based conservation organization—to enter into this project and pursue funding for the cost of the activities. The process of coming to agreement before even ariving in Ecuador included the following:

- Initial Skype calls with the Latin America regional director of the UK conservation organization (who I knew from previous work together) to identify an overall need
- Emails and Skype calls with additional programmatic folks in the UK office of the funding partner organization, for the purposes of better understanding the need as they perceived it
- A follow-up visit to the headquarters of the UK funding partner to iron out details (I was living in England at the time, 3 hours away by train)
- A Skype call with the Quito-based director of the Ecuadorian organization, in conjunction with representatives from the UK partner organization

These conversations allowed us to sketch out a plan for a series of meetings and workshops, but we were careful to not be too specific about what we would actually do, as specific actions would need to emerge from the on-the-ground process itself—through cycles of Look–Think–Act. I must admit that many times in the past as a capacity-building (similar to organizational development) practitioner, I would have designed more of the process in advance, mostly based on conversations with organizational leaders. I would have then gone to the field to implement a process that had already been agreed upon. Because I was making a shift to action research, however, I knew that I needed to redesign the process on the ground and with the input and *constructions* of a broader range of stakeholders. Here is the process that followed once I was in Quito:

- I went to the Quito office of the conservation organization and spent 3 days interviewing a mix of people, including the organization's director, a park ranger, his supervisor, a board member, and Quito-based staff from the UK partner and funder.
- I quickly processed the interviews and created and presented a mind-map of strategic challenges that the different participants had expressed in the interviews.
- On the last day of my initial visit, I facilitated a participatory meeting with the director and two representatives of the funding partner to use the knowledge gained from the interviews to redesign the action research process. Not all the

interviewees could stay for the meeting, but they would participate in the subsequent process.

As part of our initial design, we mapped additional knowledge holders that should inform the process, including community members and leaders, local authorities, local staff near the corridor (which was in northwest Ecuador, a 5-five-hour drive from Quito), which included additional park rangers and even the director of the nearby national park (Cotacachi-Cayapas Ecological Reserve).

The design that emerged could be thought of as *an educated sketch* of the process that was to come, and not a plan in the traditional sense. For example, although we set aside some workshop times and spaces, we did so without designating the focus of the workshops. To engage in Look–Think–Act–Repeat cycles meant harvesting our learning along the way *for purposes of informing future action*. If we had implemented the original plan without any changes, it would have indicated that we had not used the knowledge we had gained along the way. *How could we know what we would talk about in workshop 4 before going through workshops 1–3?*

The broader message I wish to communicate here is that as an action researcher I knew I needed to ask the question "who knows" about the issues the conservation organization wanted and needed to address, both within and outside the organization. The people who had the knowledge included organizational leaders but also park rangers, community members, and other actors who also held deep knowledge that could inform the strategic priorities of the organization. Involving these different actors also increased the chances that they might buy in to and help implement the ideas that would emerge.

Case Study 4: Transitioning From Hospital to Home

Issue Investigated

After a preliminary inquiry of possible issues or problems was conducted in late August 2015, the following issue was raised, with the understanding that it could possibly change after further investigation and clarification with a broader range of stakeholders.

Issue:	Older women are experiencing problems when they return home following a stay in hospital, such as not having the capacity to cook meals, perform routine household tasks, or care for other family members (e.g., an older spouse).
Problem:	There are no transition services from hospital to home for older women.
Research Question:	How do older women experience the transition period from hospital to home?
Objective:	To understand what this experience of the transition from hospital to home means for older women.

Context of the Study

The Moorane region covers an area of more than 90,000 km^2, with an estimated population of more than 143,578 permanent residents, of which approximately 69,800 are females. The region is serviced by the Moorane Base Hospital, the Marcia Manners Hospital, and the Vista River Hospital. Other key community health services in the region include Home Care (in-home nursing care), Meals on Wheels, Silver Bird (care for people with disabilities), Home Help (general handyman services), and

Home and Community Health Assistance, including a local bus service for older and/or disabled people.

Researcher/Historical Perspective

Because I had no previous professional experience in community development and had been a member of the Moorane community for only a short time, the context of my research included the following:

1. Making initial contact with an appropriate organization and key people within the organization
2. Negotiating entry into the organization
3. Identifying further opportunities for other individuals to enter the research group to participate in a possible research project
4. Making contact and negotiating with key stakeholders external to this organization to initiate a research project

Stakeholders, Sites of Action, and Time Frames

Primary Stakeholders

Originally, older women who have had experiences in the transition from hospital to home were the primary stakeholders in this action research project. These stakeholders were initially drawn from the Senior Women's Network (SWN), which is "an independent forum in which the special needs of older women could be specifically addressed" (SWN, 2004). At the focus group meeting on October 20, these primary stakeholders decided to modify the context of this action research to include both women and men.

Other Stakeholders

During interviews with individual primary stakeholders, when the project was focused on the experiences of older women, other possible stakeholders for this action research were identified. During the October 20 focus group meeting, however, these stakeholders were further clarified by the primary stakeholders and divided into separate groups. They now included the following:

1. Other primary stakeholders

    Men and women from organizations such as Independent Retirees, Older Women's Network, 50 and Better, the Senior Citizens Association, National Seniors, and Australian Pensioners League

    Friends and acquaintances of current primary stakeholders

2. Hospital representatives

    Representatives of Central Hospital Extended Care, which "provides care and support for discharge from hospital"

    Social workers

3. Community service providers

Home and Community Care transport services

Blue Nurses in Moorane

Meals on Wheels in Moorane

Home Assist in Moorane

Dial an Angel

RSL Home Care in Moorane

4. Other community members

President of the Moorane Regional Council of Social Development, which is also a local member of State Council of Social Services

Member of the Moorane District Health Council

President of National Seniors, who is also on the State Council for Seniors

Sites of Action

The project has essentially been situated in locations that were preferred by the primary stakeholders:

Meeting with SWN at their usual venue (Blue Nurses function room)

Meeting with primary stakeholders in their homes (except for one who chose to meet at a coffee shop)

Focus group meeting at a primary stakeholder's home, as decided by the stakeholders themselves

Because the primary stakeholders are expecting the size of the meeting group to expand, they have commenced inquiries into accessing an alternative meeting venue.

REFLECTION AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

As suggested in the Reflection and Learning Activities in Chapter 1, visit the cultural scene you have selected to study—a place you might know a little but in which you are a stranger. It might be a store, school, classroom, club or association, church, or any other public place. (If you have access to *The Cultural Experience* [McCurdy, Spradley & Shandy, 2002] you will get clues about the variety of places people can study.) Your task is to visit that scene and make contact with people there. You will extend your study of that cultural scene in following visits.

Learning Activities

1. Visit the place. Stay there for an extended period (around a half hour or more).
2. Look at what is happening. Introduce yourself to some of the people there—customers, students, staff, patients, or others. Tell them why you are there.
3. Talk with some of them to find out why, in general terms, they are there.
4. Who seem to be the "key people" in this place?

5. What other stakeholders are present—people who affect or are affected by what happens in that place?
6. As you engage in these activities, take notes on what you are seeing and what people are telling you.
7. Make sketches and later draw a picture or map of the place.
8. If it is possible without being intrusive, take a few photos of the place and its surroundings. Do not at this stage take photos of particular people.

Reflection and Action

1. To start “building a picture,” write a description of the place on the basis of what you have seen. Share it with your group/learning circle, using your picture, map, or photos as part of your presentation.
2. Reflect on this experience.
3. How did it feel to be in a place where you were a stranger?
4. How did people respond?
5. How much did you learn? Did you gain a deep or superficial understanding of the place?
6. What would you need to do to gain an in-depth understanding of this place?
7. Take notes and discuss this experience with colleagues or classmates.

CHAPTER REVIEW

The chapter focuses on the **initial stages** of an action research project.

Researchers enter the field **sociably** to **make themselves known** to people in the context.

Those initiating the study seek to develop **relationships of trust** that enable people to speak with them easily and freely.

They seek to establish a **research agenda** according to the experiences and perspectives of **stakeholders**, people whose lives are affected by the issue in which they are interested.

They establish **who will be willing to participate** in the project and **who will benefit** from it.

Initial participants collaborate to start **building a picture** of the situation by

- establishing **contact with other stakeholders** whose lives or work are affected by the issue of interest,
- constructing a **preliminary picture** of the context and the history of the situation in relation to the issue of interest.

Stakeholders then collaboratively define the nature of the **research problem** on which the project will focus.

Research participants continue to **identify stakeholding groups** who will participate or need to be informed about the progress of the study. They also identify **primary stakeholders**—those mainly affected by the issue of interest.

Social mapping processes may be used to extend participants' understanding of the context of the study.

Participants identify **key people** within each stakeholding group who are able to have significant degrees of **influence** group members.

Research participants identify the **places and spaces** where they will do the work of the project.

They keep an **ongoing record** of the information emerging from these activities.

Research facilitators **do not set themselves up as experts or leaders**, but present themselves as **a resource** who is able to assist participants to organize their activities.

Research participants also enact **ethical processes** that enable people to participate in safety, ensuring that no one is put at risk in any way by any research activity. In recording information they need to

- obtain **informed written consent** to record and use any information participants consider to be private,
- obtain **formal ethics approval** from any institution auspicing the project.

Descriptions of Images and Figures

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Details shown in the image are listed as follows:

Inner circle is labeled “Primary Stakeholders: Those who are directly affected by the research problem”

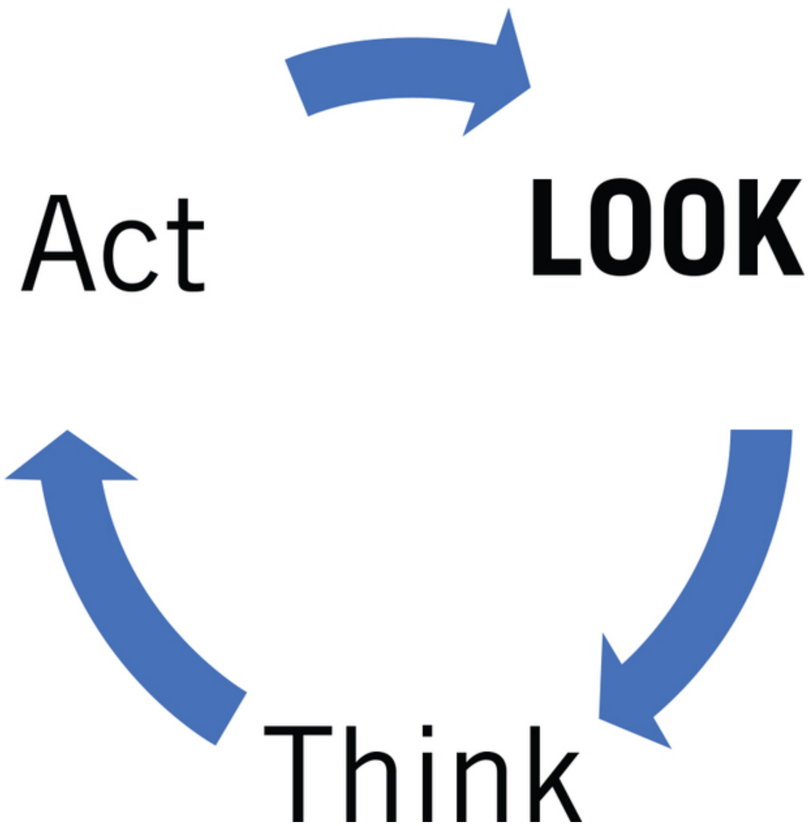
Central circle is labeled “Secondary Stakeholders: Others who are affected by or can influence those who directly experience the problem”

Outer circle is labeled “Associated Stakeholders: Those who need to know about actions being taken, or can inform the research processes”

4 LOOK: GENERATING AND GATHERING DATA

INTRODUCTION

Look–Think–Act provides a simple framework guiding us through the general process of action research. This chapter focuses on the Look aspect of the routine, presenting a range of ways that research participants build a picture of the issues involved in their investigations, extending their understanding of the context, the people, and the ways that different “actors” in the setting—the stakeholders—experience and respond to problematic issues in their lives.



Research processes that emerge in the following sections can be thought of as a process of *learning*, in which we seek new ways of thinking, new *knowledge*, that provides the basis for better *understanding* the often complex issues involved in people’s lives. Learning occurs informally through our everyday interaction with other people, activities, and events, or in formal processes of education and training. Research, however, is a process whereby we systematically engage in more structured processes of observation, analysis, or reflection in order gain knowledge—that is, new ways of thinking about issues that, in turn, provide the basis for more coherent and refined understandings of the concerns investigated. In action research, these emerging understandings provide the basis for taking action to resolve the problems inherent in the project.

Unlike research related to the physical world that can be defined in terms of a fixed universe that is reduced to its component parts and analyzed accordingly, the world of human behavior is entwined in more complex events. Understanding human behavior requires methods of analysis that encompass the fact that people construct their behavior according to events, acts, and activities enmeshed in their history of experience and the differing ways they observe and interpret events within their everyday lives. Understanding human behavior requires action researchers to take into account the differing rationalities, intuitions, emotions, and other aspects of human experience that affect the ability of people to engage in actions necessary to resolve significant problems and issues in their lives.

Learning, knowledge, and understanding are central features of research *epistemology*—the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge—that, in turn, enable us to understand the nature of the world around us (*ontology*). This and the following chapters present some of the steps through which action researchers might systematically and creatively work through cycles of research to engage processes of learning that lead to the types of knowledge and understanding that not only are personally empowering for research participants but provide them with the basis for taking further action to resolve the complex issues often embedded in their contexts.

We present the Look aspect of the Look–Think–Act framework in two stages, or moves. Move I: Establishing the Problem, involves a process of discovering the issues, problems, and needs that will provide the focus for research, and the people who will be involved. It largely involves preliminary work in which guided conversations at an individual level provide the means of identifying the directions and purposes of a research project. Although the chapter focuses specifically on the processes of *gathering information,* "looking" also involves "thinking" and "acting" in small ways as participants seek better understanding of the features and dynamics of the settings in which they work.

We then proceed to Move II: Extending Our Understanding—Generating and Gathering Information. Using information acquired in Move I, research participants use a selection of methods to extend the depth and breadth of learning and gain a greater understanding of the people, the setting, and the social dynamics associated with the issues and problems on which the research is focused.

MOVE I: ESTABLISHING THE PROBLEM

The Look step of the Look–Think–Act routine provides the means for research participants to take a step back from their usual ways of working to search for new and better ways of working that enable them to resolve the problematic issues that inhibit their ability to accomplish their professional or organizational goals. The initial move in action research is first to establish the issue or problem upon which inquiry and investigation will focus. The fundamental imperative is to ensure that these issues are described not only in terms laid down by the organization, institution, or agency that may have initiated the research, but primarily in terms that make sense from the perspective of primary stakeholders—those whom practitioners serve—their students, clients, customers, workers, and so on. Other perspectives—organizational procedures, colleagues, supervisors, families, and so on—will become a necessary part of the process, but these should be treated as subsidiary rather than primary sources of information.

The nature of a problem is often difficult to state clearly because any issue may be enmeshed in a web of relationships, interactions, actions, events, and activities that make up the dynamic operation of any social setting. A project having the intention of reducing smoking, for instance, may need eventually to take into account family histories, access to cigarettes, peer behaviors, individual circumstances—employment, health, education, and so on—as well as the publicity, either direct or indirect, that influences a person's orientation.

Stating the initial focus of investigation is sometimes simple but often requires careful thought to identify what might be at the heart of the matter. Preliminary conversations may be casual and informal, providing research participants with opportunities to talk through and clarify their own thoughts to identify issues in their own terms and on the basis of their own experience. This type of conversation often reveals subsidiary questions that provide the basis for a more systematic and comprehensive investigation. Some of the questions we need to ask when identifying a problem are the following:

- What is the actual problem here?
- For whom is it problematic?
- How do these people perceive the problem?
- Are other problems and issues associated with the initial problem?

This stage of investigation does not seek solutions to issues or problems but merely to determine the immediate directions the process might take and who needs to be involved.

Preliminary Interviews

Interviews are a primary means of obtaining valid and authentic information in action research. They provide ways in which research participants enter the lifeworld of others, “bracketing” their own experiences and seeking to understand how others experience and interpret events in their own lives. The types of questions used are critical to this process since they need to be posed in ways that allow respondents to describe and frame issues and events in their own terms.

Preliminary interviews provide opportunities for participants to describe the situation in their own terms. It is a reflective process that enables the interviewee to explore their experience in detail and to reveal the many features of that experience that have an effect on the issue investigated. It is not a conversation as commonly understood, in that the person facilitating the process does not share their own experiences or perspectives but merely gives an indication of why they are engaging in the conversation. The interview process not only provides a record of participants’ views and perspectives but also symbolically recognizes the legitimacy of their experience (Bivens & Wheeler, 2021).

Preliminary interviews may be more like informal conversations and take place over a cup of coffee or a lunchtime meeting that enables people to become informally acquainted. Initial conversations allow a prospective action research participant to indicate their interest in a particular topic and open up the possibility of a follow-up meeting. Allowing participants to designate the time and place maximizes the possibility that they will suggest contexts in which they feel comfortable. One of the key features of successful interviews is the need for participants to feel an empathetic connection to the interviewee so that they will feel free to say what they are really thinking or to express what they are really feeling. An important starting point is building a communicative space where people can feel comfortable and safe, which will ideally enhance the conditions for generating new knowledge that goes beyond consensus around current knowledge (Abma et al., 2018, p. 130).

To initiate a follow-up interview, research facilitators should do the following:

- Identify themselves, their interests, and their role.
- Ask permission to meet again and to record information.
- Arrange a time that is convenient for an extended discussion.
- Negotiate alternative places to meet again.

As interviews progress, research facilitators may be presented with viewpoints that appear limited, biased, or even factually inaccurate. Interviewers should, however, avoid discussion or debate with interviewees at this stage since this detracts the ability of participants to express their own experiences and perspectives. Challenges to participant views will occur naturally as engagement in research activities with other participants provides people with opportunities to hear the differing perspectives held by others. The task at this stage, to adapt the words of a well-known anthropologist, is to grasp local points of view in order to understand the worldviews of other stakeholders (Malinowski, 2016, p. 25). Questioning procedures described below therefore are drawn from ethnographic procedures that seek to elicit information from an insider's perspective, technically known as emic knowledge or understanding, in contrast to etic or outsider constructs and terminologies derived from people who do not naturally "inhabit" a particular social domain.

An effective action research process therefore requires participants to work through Move I of investigation by examining ways each stakeholding group describes or interprets the problem as initially framed. Only then can a research project frame questions that provide sufficient direction to an investigation that enables it to accomplish an effective outcome.

General

Reflection 4.1:

Ernie—Framing the Issue as a Question

I was once asked to assist a school system to develop ways of engaging parents and communities in development of school resources.

Question: How can parents assist in the development of school resources?

Initial attempts by principals to engage parents proved ineffectual and discussions with a number of parents indicated that they were suspicious that this was another strategy to have them "donate" more money to the school or to increase school fees. Preliminary workshops with parents in a sample of schools clarified this issue and asked parents to identify things they would be willing to do to develop school resources. The framework for action research workshops in schools in the system started with clarifying comments indicating why the school needed extra resources and that it was not intended to ask parents for donations of money. Subsidiary questions extended the original question to focus on actions.

Subsidiary questions:

> *What resources are needed?*
>
> *How can parents assist in aquiring these resources?*
>
> *What can they do?*
>
> *How can they do it?*

Framing the issues as questions rather than requests enabled parents to discuss many creative possibilities. Workshops in pilot schools were notable for their success in mobilizing parent energies in a wide range of activities and projects that significantly enhanced their school resources.

INTERVIEWS: GUIDED CONVERSATIONS

Action research interviews do not follow the practices of more deterministic approaches to research, where a questionnaire specifically designates the issues to be discussed. The constructivist intent of action research requires participants to be free to define and describe issues and events in their own terms, unfettered by the necessity of framing their responses according to the terms and directions of previously defined questions. The following procedures provide guidance for framing questions in ways that locate the general area of interest but maximize the ability of the interviewee to present events in terms that resonate with their own experience.

Semistructured Questioning Procedures

Professional practitioners are confronted with practical problems and issues that they usually resolve by applying skills and procedures drawn from their professional stock of knowledge. They are confronted with difficult clients who seem unable or unwilling to follow designated procedures, students who seem unable to perform or behave appropriately, or dysfunctional family or community groups. In these instances, research always starts with a general question: “Why are clients unable to follow their care plans?” “Why can’t these students learn this material?” “Why do they engage in these inappropriate or disruptive behaviors?” or “Why are people in this organization or family always arguing?”

Common professional procedures require practitioners to hypothesize an answer to these questions, formulate a potential solution, and then test it out by having clients, students, or groups follow procedures implied by that solution. In action research, facilitators “bracket”—hold in abeyance—their personal or professional stock of knowledge so that other key participants—clients, students, colleagues, and so on—may define and interpret the issue *in their own terms*. Professional perspectives may be included at a later stage when primary stakeholders have described both the situation and the issue in their own terms.

Questioning procedures are very delicate because participants are likely to react negatively if there is an implied judgment or criticism embedded in the question. In the early stages of a project, research facilitators should ask very general questions that enable participants to express the way they experience the context—“How are things going for you, Jenny?” “Tell me about this school (or your class).” The following questions enable participants to extend their exploration of their own experience and their own perspectives on issues that emerge in the course of the interview. All participants in an action research process need to understand and enact this approach of conducting interviews/guided conversations, so preliminary workshops may be required to provide opportunities for people to practice these types of activity.

General

Reflection 4.2:

Ernie—Using People’s Own Words

A neighborhood group engaged in an action research project in their local school. They decided they would interview parents to find out what people thought about communication between the school and families. Under the guidance of a professor from the local university, they learned about and practiced interview processes with each other. One of them exclaimed as they were debriefed, “This is hard. I kept wanting to tell people what I thought about the issue but realized the importance of listening to them and taking down what they said, not putting it in my own words!”

Questions, in fact, are merely triggers that enable participants to explore and describe what is happening in their lives or to reflect on events associated with issues of concern. Their purpose is to generate meaningful conversation, not containers to be filled with “appropriate” answers. Sensitive questioning processes enable them, in effect, to tell stories of their own experience. These not only allow them to recount the everyday context in which events emerge but sometimes also to explore epiphanic events—those defining moments of experience that occur in problematic interactional situations and reveal underlying tensions and problems in a situation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014; Denzin, 2001). The procedures described below and summarized in Box 4.1 follow Spradley (2016) and provide a useful framework of relatively neutral and nonleading questions that minimize the extent to which participants’ perceptions will be governed by language and concepts inadvertently imposed by researchers.

General

Box 4.1

Semistructured Questions

Grand Tour Questions

General: Allow participants to describe the context in their own terms.

Typical: Enable participants to describe how events or activities usually occur.

Specific: Focus on specific events, activities, or other phenomena.

Activity Questions

Guided tour: Participants show researchers places and describe what happens there.

Tasks: Participants are asked to perform tasks that enable them to describe the setting, events, activities, or issues with greater clarity—maps, drawings, demonstrations, and so on.

Prompt Questions

Extension: Assist participants to talk further about something they have mentioned.

Encouragement: Prompt participants to continue talking.

Example: Encourage participants to describe specific events, activities, and people.

(Adapted from Spradley, 1979, 2016)

Grand Tour Questions

These are framed in the most general way to enable participants to describe the situation in their own terms (e.g., “I’m interested in the recent media reports about the poor health services in this town. As a health professional, what do you think about that?”). More generally, once you have established rapport with a potential participant you might indicate your interest in an issue then simply ask, “Can you tell me about that?” thus providing focus without giving direction or suggesting responses. An initial grand tour question may be followed by questions that assist respondents to extend their descriptions:

General grand tour questions enable participants to describe the setting or issue in their own terms (e.g., "I've recently come to [town, this office, the school] and don't know much about it. Could you tell me about this place?").

Typical questions encourage respondents to describe how events usually occur (e.g., "How does your group usually work?" "Describe a typical day in your office").

Specific questions focus on specific events or phenomena (e.g., "Can you tell me about yesterday's meeting?" "Describe what happened the last time." "What happens in the recreation room?").

Researchers can further extend accounts by using activities that enable participants to visualize their situation more clearly:

A *guided tour* question is a request for an actual tour that allows participants to show researchers (and, where possible, other stakeholders) around their offices, schools, classrooms, clinics, centers, or agencies (e.g., "Could you show me around your center [office, classroom, clinic]?"). Throughout the tour, participants may explain details about the people and activities involved in each part of the setting. Researchers may ask questions as they go (e.g., "Tell me more about this part of the clinic [room, office, class]." "Can you tell me more about the social workers [clients, patients, young people] you've mentioned?").

A *task* question aids in description (e.g., "Could you draw me a map of the place you've described?"). Maps are often instructive and provide opportunities for extensive questioning and description. Participants can also demonstrate particular features of their work or community lives (e.g., "Can you show or tell me how you put a case study together?").

Further information may be acquired through the skillful use of questions that *prompt* participants to reveal more details of the phenomena they are discussing:

Extension questions (e.g., "Tell me more about . . ." "Is there anything else you can tell me about . . . ?" "What else?")

Encouragement comments or questions (e.g., "Go on." "Yes?" "Uh huh?")

Example questions (e.g., "Can you give me an example of that?")

Mini-Tour Questions

Researchers may gain more detailed information by pursuing a *mini tour* that focuses on particular issues or events emerging from grand tour questioning. Mini-tour questions focus on each issue and explore it using the types of questions described earlier (e.g., "You previously mentioned [blank]. . . . Can you tell me more about that?" "Can you describe a typical . . . ?"). Combinations of typical, specific, tour, task, extension, encouragement, and example questions provide opportunities for extensive exploration of the setting, events, and activities.

Action researchers should take a nonpartisan stance throughout these activities and neither affirm nor dispute, verbally or nonverbally, the information that emerges. At the same time, they should remain keenly attentive, recording responses as accurately as possible. Researchers should be particularly wary of leading questions that derive from their own perspectives and are not directly related to participant agendas. Though more specific questions may become appropriate at later stages of the research, as indicated below, initial interviews provide a context in which those interviewed are able to describe events in their own terms using the everyday language of the contexts in which they live or work and frame their responses in ways that derive from their own ways of describing and interpreting their lived experience.

Recording Information: Field Notes and Audio and Digital Recording

Participant researchers thus should carefully record details of interviews using field notes or audio/digital recordings for this purpose. Taking field notes is a skill that requires some practice, because it is important to apply the *verbatim principle* when possible, recording precisely what is said, using the respondent's language, terms, and concepts. Researchers should resist the impulse to summarize what is said or record it in terms with which they are familiar or comfortable. This requires researchers to write at speed, so notes may be rather untidy. If possible, forms of shorthand in note taking (e.g., *t* for *the, takg* for *taking, w* for *with,* and so on) provide one of the means of keeping up with a person's conversation.

As an interview commences, or when rapport has been established, the interviewer may ask something like, "Do you mind if I take a few notes as you speak? I'd like to remember what you've said." As the interview progresses, the interviewer might also ask, "Could you just hold on for a moment? I'm a bit behind."

General

Reflection 4.3:

Ernie—Enjoyable Interviews

My own experience suggests that most people enjoy being interviewed using these techniques. They appear to like the fact that someone is listening carefully to what they are saying and consider it of sufficient worth to record what they are saying, in their own words. The "member checking" process is also informative, providing respondents with opportunities to reflect on ideas or events they have presented and to extend or modify their comments. "Yeah, well, I know I said that, but what I really meant was . . ." "Yes, and now I remember what was going on then. We had been . . ."

Following the interview, the interviewer should "member check," reading back the notes and asking whether they are an accurate record of what was said. Alternatively, they may choose to type up the notes later and have the respondent read them, preferably with the interviewer present, to check for accuracy.

Audio or digital recording has become much easier in recent years, with multiple devices, including phones and mini-recording devices, now available. The use of digital recording has the advantage of allowing researchers to record accounts that are both detailed and accurate. It can have a number of disadvantages, however, and researchers should carefully weigh the merits of this technology. Technical difficulties with equipment may damage rapport with respondents, and people sometimes find it difficult to talk freely in the presence of a recording device, especially when sensitive issues are discussed. The conversational quality of an interview can be lost with the introduction of devices that introduce a quality of formality more compatible with institutionalized procedures. Researchers may need to wait until a reasonable degree of rapport has been established before introducing the possibility of using a digital audio recorder. When using a recorder, the researcher should be prepared to pause the device to allow respondents to speak off the record if they show signs of discomfort.

When using a digital audio recorder, researchers should do the following:

Prior to the interview, check that the device is in working order, batteries are charged, and there is sufficient recording space for the length of the interview(s). A practice run using the technology provides the means of ensuring trouble-free recording.

Ask the interviewee's permission to record the interview.

Transcribe the recording as soon after the interview as possible.

Provide the interviewee with a copy of the transcription to check for accuracy. This process is formally referred to as member checking (see Chapter 5).

Store digital audio recordings and transcriptions in a safe place to ensure confidentiality.

MOVE II: EXTENDING OUR UNDERSTANDING—GENERATING AND GATHERING INFORMATION

The primary objective of the Look phase of action research is to gather and generate information that enables participants to describe their everyday understandings—the knowledge they have acquired through their own experience in the various settings where they have lived or worked. Move II enables research participants to extend their understanding of the many factors influencing the issue under study by focusing on the experience and perspective of other stakeholders—particularly those mainly affected by or having an influence on the issue investigated. Move II requires researcher participants to gather (miner) and generate (traveler) information about stakeholder experiences and perspectives (see Lit Corner 4.1.) and to describe the situation in terms that continue to make sense to them (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014).

General

Lit Corner 4.1:

Interviewer as Traveler or Miner

Kvale and Brinkman (2014, 2008) offer an interesting distinction between information "gathered" or "collected" (interviewer as miner) versus that which is *constructed* through the interview process itself (interviewer as traveler). The miner sees information as buried treasure—valuable metal that is known to exist and simply needs to be unearthed—whereas the traveler is on a journey to an interesting land seeking new tales, new knowledge to bring back home:

> The interviewer-traveler wanders through the landscape and enters into conversations with the people he or she encounters. The traveler explores the many domains of the country, as unknown terrain or with maps, roaming freely around the territory. The interviewer-traveler, in line with the original Latin meaning of *conversation* as "wandering together with," walks along with the local inhabitants, asking questions and encouraging them to tell their own stories of their lived world. . . . The journey may not only lead to new knowledge; the traveler might change as well. The journey might instigate a process of reflection that leads the traveler to new ways of self-understanding, as well as uncovering previously taken-for-granted values and customs in the traveler's home country. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008, pp. 48–49)

Kvale and Brinkmann further note that interviewer as miner echoes mainstream conceptions of modern social sciences where “true” knowledge is discoverable and waiting to be found and should therefore not be contaminated by the miner. Interviewer as traveler is closer to anthropological and postmodern constructivist understandings of knowledge that value conversational approaches to constructing knowledge through social research. We argue that both are needed, as there are moments in which capturing local accounts can benefit from an efficient mining approach, whereas traveling can be much more generative and adaptive and will likely be used on a more general basis than a mining approach.

A research process, however, also may require researchers to understand the nature of the setting, including its organization and operational processes, activities that take place there, and so on. Some of this information may be gained by observation, but usually we also need to speak with people involved in the setting to provide appropriate information. We need to understand the nature of the setting, not in an objective sense, but from the perspective of those who live, work, play, or otherwise inhabit it. Ultimately we need to build a body of knowledge and understanding that enables research participants to define viable solutions in which people act purposefully and collaboratively to resolve the issues that concern them. This is a defining feature of action research—that the definition of issues and their resolution are not predetermined solely by service professionals but centrally take into account the perspectives inherent in the lifeworlds of their clients, students, customers, or organizational members.

Research participants, especially primary stakeholders, are therefore engaged in the process of describing the nature of the problem and gathering relevant information. This differs from traditional hypothesis-testing research in two significant ways. First, participants are knowingly engaged in seeking to develop understandings and solutions, objectivity not being the primary aim of the process, as solutions need to make sense to the subjective experience of the participants. Second, researchers do not hypothesize an immediate answer to issues of concern but seek to understand the nature of related events—how and why things happen the way they do. Gathering data, therefore, has quite a different purpose.

General

Reflection 4.4:

Ernie—Constructing the Research Question

I’ve seen many examples of action research processes that have provided effective outcomes for the key stakeholders. In one school, a group of Hispanic parents expressed concern about the quality of their children’s schooling. With the support of the principal, they engaged in an action research project that focused on improving communication between the school and the students’ families. Volunteers from a Hispanic neighborhood group interviewed parents and teachers to understand their experiences of parent–teacher conferences. They were able to identify a range of ways that both parents and teachers could improve the conferences and, in the process, also discovered other ways to improve communication between the school and the students’ families.

There is a real sense, however, that we seek a sense of accuracy as we gather data by ensuring that our action research is grounded in information gained directly from diverse participants and is not simply a projection of the perspectives, predispositions, or experiences of people in positions of authority. When we frame research questions, we need to be very careful that we do so in a way that enables participants to share their accounts because leading questions that implicitly suggest an answer to the problem may actually prevent the knowledge-holder from sharing their lived experience.

Initial phases of exploration are designed not to gather concrete evidence or objective data but to reveal the reality that makes up people's day-to-day experience, bringing their assumptions, views, and beliefs out in the open and making them available for discussion. The process of talking about their experience also provides people with insights that enable them to achieve greater clarity about events, activities, and other aspects of their lives. As they share experiences, they gain greater understanding of the realities of the situation and the potential of constructing solutions to the problem that take these realities into consideration. By working collaboratively, participants develop collective visions of their situation that provide the basis for effective action. At its best, this type of activity is liberating, enabling people to master their world as they see it in a different way—a tangible process of enlightenment.

The anecdote presented in Reflection 4.5 contains an important message: Problems do not exist in isolation but are part of a complex network of events, activities, perceptions, beliefs, values, routines, and rules—a cultural system maintained through the life of the group, organization, or community. As people reveal relevant details of their situation, they see more clearly the ways in which the research problem or focus is linked to features of their organizational, professional, and/or community lives. This type of exploration leads people past their taken-for-granted perspectives and promotes more satisfying, sophisticated, and complete descriptions of their situation.

General

Reflection 4.5:

Ernie—"Opening Up" Questions

In a community health workshop focused on problems related to alcohol, participants were asked to describe the types of drinking behavior displayed by groups in their community. At the end of the workshop, one of the health workers exclaimed excitedly, "I used to see alcohol as a blanket covering my community. Now I see it in a different way. I can see the different ways that people use alcohol and the different outcomes of that use. Now I can see areas where things can be done." An explanatory framework that focused on descriptions of alcohol use, rather than alcoholism as a whole, resulted in a new vision that provided novel possibilities for action.

Understanding Lived Experience: Artistic and Multimedia Processes

One of the enduring problems with all forms of social research is its tendency to become enmeshed in formalistic processes that fail to capture the essence of the human dimensions of the issues investigated. Written reports are limited in the extent to which they are able to depict the realities of people's lives or to provide outcomes that encompass those realities. Information often is presented in written forms that fit the language and formalistic culture of the organizations within which events are played out. The task for action researchers is to produce representations—reports and accounts—that resonate with the lived experience of research participants, especially the primary stakeholders. As Denzin (1997) points out, however, the written word is but a poor vehicle for such purposes, urging researchers to use more creative methods of communication that enable us to understand more clearly the concrete human experience of interacting individuals.

In order to represent people's rich experience more effectively, therefore, action researchers may use a variety of methods that mimic real life and engage the visceral reality of people's lived experience (Heron, 1996; Reason, 2006; Seeley & Reason, 2008). To do so, Denzin (1997) suggests ways of enacting research that recognizes the following features:

- There are always multiple interpretations of any event or phenomenon.
- Experience is embedded in and derived from local cultural contexts.
- Local events are affected by broader discourses—age, class, gender, ethnicity, race, and so on—that are inscribed in people's experience.
- Reports need to be vehicles through which participants discover truths about themselves and others.
- Research outcomes provide participants with new ways of describing and interpreting events that transform their understanding of events in their lives.
- There is a need to record the agonies, pain, tragedy, triumph, and other peak experiences, as well as the deeply felt emotions—love, pride, dignity, hate, envy, and so on—that characterize people's realities.
- Many of these elements of experience cannot be captured directly but may be recorded in a variety of ways—symbolically, visually, aurally, and/or artistically.

Methods are then needed that allow action researchers to help people explore and reveal the realities of their lives, thereby making everyday events open to exploration and examination.[1] Action research methods may take the following forms:

1. In Chapter 7 we address in detail how to share knowledge formally and informally in ways that represent the dynamic and culturally rich nature of lived experiences that we encounter in action research.

- *Informal conversations* sometimes called "yarning," in which people exchange experiences relevant to the topic under investigations
- *Storytelling* in which participants recount significant relevant events in their experience
- *Poetry* that is able to encompass the emotional aspects of experience
- *Songs* that likewise contribute significant features of people's lives
- *Drama* based on relevant events that are fictionalized by changing names and locations
- *Reality theater* in which participants act out real-life events in which they have participated
- *Art* that visually depicts representations of events pictorially or artistically
- *Pictures or photographs* that provide the basis for storytelling (see Lit Corner 4.3)
- *Yoga* as an embodied therapeutic research method (see Lit Corner 4.2)
- *Other artistic forms*

General

Lit Corner 4.2:

Yoga as an Embodied Research Method

Ramaswamy (2014) and Rommel (2013) used yoga as an innovative way to help adults suffering from schizophrenia and students with cognitive special needs to improve mental health outcomes. Ramaswamy worked with 10 adult schizophrenia patients and their health care giver team in an outpatient medical health clinic to practice yoga as an "integrative therapeutic approach" to complement known uses of yoga as a physical and spiritual practice (Ramaswamy, 2014, p. 239). Methodologically, they used Co-operative Inquiry to explore how yoga might effectively mitigate symptoms of schizophrenia and help people suffering from the thought disorder to develop a strong yoga practice and the ability to meditate despite their intrusive thoughts (Ramaswamy, 2014, p. 240). Through experimentation and discussion as a group with the researcher and the therapist, patients were able to co-create a meditation model that worked for them, using music, meditation, and movement over time.

When patients began to express a variety of opinions about the use of dance and other movements, the researcher/therapist suggested standing and seated stretches, which were accepted by the group (Ramaswamy, 2014, p. 244). This led to the group dropping the intended natya aspects (rhythmic movements with music) of the yoga (postures and deep breathing for meditation) from the therapy. "It taught me that while dance and movement may be my preferred portal to meditation, they were not the only portals" (Ramaswamy, 2014, p. 250). The fact that each participant was "a visible contributor, responsible for the co-creation of the group and their own treatment," contributed to group sense of oneness or community and highlighted the need to include voices of participants as essential for future treatment (Ramaswamy, 2014, pp. 248–251).

Rommel (2013) used 20-minute yoga sessions in 90-minute classes with seven high school students with physical and cognitive special needs as a "brain break" to explore whether yoga could help improve on-task behavior, completion rates on assignments, and student attitudes toward their academic work (Rommel & Anderson, 2013, pp. 5–6). Using a teacher-made survey, a tally sheet for observation, a student response page, a paired sample t-test, and by counting assignments completed, Rommel was able to use yoga to show how on-task behavior and assignment completion increased in a statistically significant manner, which confirmed a theoretical proposition of her study. Student responses also indicated that they enjoyed the yoga sessions. The study showed action research as a pragmatic mixed-methods approach that used a variety of data-gathering techniques to generate knowledge in support of change.

Both these studies supported not only the potential of yoga as a therapeutic method for diverse populations but the methodological benefits of using action research with participants whose voices are not often heard in research—patients with mental illness and students with special cognitive needs.

General

Lit Corner 4.3:

Awareness to Action Through Place, Play, and Photography

Trott (2019) worked with 55 10- to 12-year-old children at three sites in an after-school arts-based program called "Science, Camera, Action!" with the Boys and Girls Clubs in Northern Colorado. The action research intervention "combined transformative educational techniques with arts-based and participatory methodologies to explore and expand children's roles as agents of sustainable change within their families and communities through youth-led projects" (p. 43). The project was facilitated by the author and five undergraduate research assistants who worked with students 1 hour per week at each site over a 6-month period, followed by 11 focus group discussions with four to five children at a time. The climate change education lessons were an hour each, often game-based and outdoors, and intended to support children's personal and local connections to issues through place-based education methods. Participants were encouraged to document their personal connections through digital photography (camera), which they discussed during monthly discussions in small groups (PhotoVoice methodology). During the last 6 *weeks of the program, participants at each site developed action plans based on their increased awareness of climate change and the PhotoVoice discussions. Participants reported that the program not only was enjoyable, but also gave them a sense of confidence that "their voices and actions mattered" (Trott, 2019, p. 54).*

The project generated high enthusiasm based on the methods used, a strong sense of agency in the participants, and increased awareness of climate issues and each student's own contributions to both problem and solutions (Trott, 2019, pp. 52—53). The use of PhotoVoice methodology underscored the value of art for meaning making and self-expression, while the action component helped children to emerge as change agents and to increase their role in civic participation on important issues (Trott, 2019, pp. 44–45).

Other Sources of Information

Information to be gathered or generated in any investigation will be determined to a large extent by the nature of the issue or problem investigated. The remainder of this chapter identifies the types of data that might be relevant and the variety of ways in which data might be gathered or generated. As participants explore the issue at hand, they may discover the need for other types of information, and data gathering becomes an ongoing process that emerges as the investigation proceeds. This contrasts with procedures of experimental research in which the data to be gathered are precisely defined prior to commencement of the study.

General

Reflection 4.6:

Ernie—Diverse Sources of Information

A social worker set out to investigate why young teenagers in her town engaged in so much vandalism. By talking with some of them, she discovered that the underlying reason was boredom, and the sources of boredom included schooling that was boring, the lack of sports facilities, and the closure of parks and gardens. Her investigation broadened to include discussions with *the local principal and some teachers, local sports people, the local government office responsible for parks and gardens, and the town police. She discovered that sports clubs lacked facilities to accommodate teenagers, that parks and gardens had been closed for economic reasons, and that the schools were locked into a mandated curriculum that was marginally relevant to the needs and interests of the young people in that region. The information she was able to acquire and share with participating stakeholders enabled them to take action to increase leisure activity opportunities for teenagers, actions that resulted in a consequent dramatic drop in acts of vandalism.*

In another study, Lisa, a special education teacher, was concerned about her students' lack of interest in reading. Initially she tried different teaching strategies to try to increase their engagement—but without success. By talking with her students, however, she discovered a number of issues that affected their reading and was able to take appropriate and successful action to remedy the situation by taking these matters into account. She discovered that students responded to different types of reading activity, the physical arrangement of seating, the social arrangements related to learning activities (some liked solitary reading activities; others liked to work in groups), and the types of reading material she used. She had not been able to "guess" these in her first attempts, but the appropriate data emerged through collaborative work with her students.

Initial sources of data in action research are best derived from interviews and conversations with key stakeholders, but as the focus of investigation and the issues to be incorporated become clearer, other sources of data may become relevant. Research participants may also become involved in events and activities that are themselves informative, or they may systematically observe a site or context. As they do so, a variety of other sources may provide information that further clarifies or extends understanding of the issue being investigated. Further stages of data gathering may include information derived from individuals or teams engaging in the following types of activity:

- Participant observation
- Documents, records, and reports
- Surveys and questionnaires
- A review of the research literature

Researchers need to be parsimonious in selecting information specifically pertinent to the issue, as participants may be overwhelmed by large bodies of material only peripherally relevant to the study. In the early stages of the research, therefore, it is important to engage in preliminary analyses to provide guidance with the ongoing selection of appropriate data. Identifying key elements contained within the data provides initial guidance about directions the research might productively take (see Chapter 5). The following sections provide an indication of the variety of processes that might be used to acquire relevant information.

Participant Observation

Participant observation is distinctively different from observational routines common in experimental research or clinical practice, where the things to be observed are specifically defined. Observation in action research is more ethnographic, enabling an observer to build a picture of the lifeworld of those being observed and to develop an understanding of the way they ordinarily go about their everyday activities. It enables teachers to see how students go about the tasks that have been assigned them, social workers to observe how mothers interact with their children, marketers to study how customers interact with a business or commercial environment, or consultants to see how people go about the work of an organization.

Observation enables researchers to record important details that become the basis for formulating descriptions from which stakeholding groups produce their accounts. Although field notes are commonly used for observations, videos and photographs may also provide a powerful record of events and activities. As researchers observe stakeholding groups, they have opportunities to gain a clearer picture of the research context by observing the everyday settings in which participants undertake activities relevant to the research focus. By recording their observations as field notes, they acquire a record of important elements of the context of the participants. Researchers should record these notes during or soon after events have occurred, incorporating information that will later provide the means to describe a context or event.

Participation in research contexts also provides research facilitators with opportunities to engage in interviews and conversations that extend the pool of information available. The schema depicted in Table 4.1 assists observers to include relevant details in their description with guiding questions to enable participants to describe the situation in their own terms.

Table 4.1 Participant Observation: Guiding Questions

Element	Description	Guiding Questions
Places	Offices, homes, and community contexts; locations of activities and events; physical layouts	Can you tell me something about this place/facility/office/agency?
People	Individuals, types of people, formal positions, and roles	Who meets/works/gather here?
Objects	Buildings, furniture, equipment, and materials	Can you tell me about the place itself? Is it well furnished/equipped?
Activities	A set of related acts (e.g., formulating a case study)	What activities take place here? What do people do here?
Acts	Single actions that people take (e.g., reading a report on a client)	How do they go about their work/activities/duties?
Events	A set of related activities (e.g., case conference, after school program, and so on)	Are there special events associated with this place or the people who use it?
Purposes	What people are trying to accomplish	What are the main goals people are trying to accomplish? Why are they engaged in those activities?
Time	Times, frequency, duration, and sequencing of events and activities	When do they work/meet/engage in those activities? For how long? How often?
Feelings	Emotional orientations and responses to people, events, activities, and so on.	How do they feel about their work/activities/meetings?

This process also provides opportunities for researchers to check the veracity of their own observations. Phenomena such as purpose and feeling can be inferred only superficially by an observer and need to be checked for accuracy. I might record, for instance, “The principal met with faculty to present a written statement of the new school policy. The faculty appeared rather disgruntled with the new policy but made no comment about it.” Here I have noted information related to the purpose of the meeting and the feelings of the faculty. This is potentially relevant information, but I would need to check with the principal and faculty to verify the authenticity of my interpretation. The principal may have other unstated purposes, the presentation of policy merely providing the context for meeting with faculty, and the faculty themselves may have been disgruntled about those other (hidden) agendas.

General

Reflection 4.7:

Ernie—Extensive Participation and Observation

As I talked with people in a community resource agency about their work, I also observed the conditions under which they worked, the resources available to them, the interactions among the types of workers, and the tasks in which they were engaged. Through time, I gained a much clearer understanding of the operation of the agency than I had initially. I interviewed people and made similar observations during my visits to the funding agency and other relevant agencies and organizations in town. I recorded information about all these settings, noting those features that seemed relevant to the investigation. I returned to some of the settings to record more details as the need for additional information arose. When agency workers complained of lack of equipment, materials, and stationery, for instance, I was able to assist them in performing a rough inventory and, in the process, to build a detailed picture of available resources.

I also visited key people in client groups and other agencies to acquire descriptive information about the general context of the town, the conditions in which its client groups lived, and other details of the community context. This information provided the materials from which I produced a general account of the context, which I presented as a preliminary report at the next meeting of the agency committee. I was careful to present an account that represented the different perceptions and interpretations of the situation given to me by participants in the setting. I asked the committee to discuss each section of the report and then made modifications and additions on the basis of their comments.

Documents, Records, and Reports

Researchers can obtain a great deal of significant information by reviewing documents and records. Documents and records may include memos, minutes, reports, policy statements, procedure statements, plans, evaluation reports, press accounts, public relations materials, information statements, and newsletters. Organizational literature from schools, hospitals, clinics, centers, churches, businesses, and so on may include client records, policies, plans, strategies, evaluations, reports, procedural manuals, curricula, public relations literature, informational literature, and so forth. These types of documents are often prolific, and researchers need to be selective, briefly scanning their contents to ascertain their relevance to the issue under investigation. This is best accomplished after initial processes of determining the research question or issue provide the basis for determining information most likely to be useful in extending participant understandings of the situation. At all times, ethical procedures should provide participants with assurance that information thus obtained will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and not used without the written permission of the particular participant.

Researchers should inspect official directories, where available, and keep records of the documents reviewed. They should record any significant information found in documents and note its source. In some cases, researchers may be able to obtain photocopies of relevant documents. They should prepare summary statements of information they have acquired and check them for accuracy with relevant stakeholders. In the process, they should ascertain which information may be made public and which must be kept confidential. The intent of the summaries is to provide stakeholders with information that enables each group to review and reflect on its own activities and to share relevant information with other stakeholding groups. This information provides the key elements from which a jointly constructed account may be formulated.

Documents, records, and reports often reveal a rich body of information particularly relevant to an investigation. Alongside information provided by research literature, records and reports often provide statistical information regarding events, activities, resources, funding, and so on. Large bodies of this type of information can provide the means to describe the makeup of groups and populations, according to age, gender, ethnicity, income, or other social variables. They provide a valuable means of checking the validity of people's perceptions and providing interesting information regarding the history of events.

Surveys and Questionnaires

Surveys are of limited utility in the first phases of an action research process because they provide very limited information and are likely to reflect the perspective, interests, and agenda of the researcher. In later stages of action research, however, a survey may provide a very useful tool for extending the data collection process to a broader range of participants. It provides the means to check whether information acquired from participants in the first cycles of a process is relevant to other individuals and groups.

To conduct a *survey*, researchers should do the following:

Formulate the questions for the questionnaire

Construct response formats:

> Open response: for example, "What factors have the most impact on your ability to do your work?"
>
> Fixed response: for example, "How long should employees have for midmorning break: 5 minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes, 20 minutes?"
>
> Dual response: yes/no; either/or; agree/disagree
>
> Rating response: There are two major forms of rating: the Likert scale, where respondents rate their response to a statement by circling or checking that which is most appropriate (1. Strongly agree, 2. Agree, 3. Neutral, 4. Disagree, 5. Strongly disagree), and the semantic differential, where respondents rate the degree of their response to polar opposites ("The service provided was . . . fast slow."). Responses are quantified in terms of a designated schema that seeks an overall degree of response: 3 2 1 0–1 −2–3.

Provide introductory information for respondents:

> Purpose and nature of the survey
>
> Likely duration of time to complete responses
>
> Examples of types of response required

Test the questionnaire:

> Select a small pilot sample of respondents.
>
> Have them complete the questionnaire or respond to interview questions.

Analyze responses to identify problematic or inadequate questions.

Modify those questions.

Conduct the survey:

Administer questionnaire or interview respondents.

Collect responses.

Thank people for their participation.

Analyze the data:

Collate information for each question.

Compute appropriate statistical measures—sum, mean, standard deviation, and so on.

Identify significant results.

Report on the outcomes of the survey.

Reviewing the Literature: Evidence From Research Studies

In the first stage of action research, the purpose of investigations is to extend and clarify participant understanding of the issue. Research participants seek to understand how and why events happen as they do. Often, however, people's "common sense"—the taken-for-granted knowledge accumulated through their personal experience—comes into conflict with other people in the setting. We need to find ways of checking the validity of these differences in perception, and we also need to check whether commonsense interpretations of the situation can be otherwise verified (Burns, 2021). Sometimes people assume the truth of a statement at odds with other credible sources of information. This is particularly true of distortions arising from sensationalist media reports or the grandstanding of political figures.

In these situations, we have a stable and powerful body of knowledge available, established through a long history of systematic investigations, that enables us to check the validity of statements often presented as "facts." While the research literature does not provide definitive answers to all issues, it does provide information that sometimes has been thoroughly established through rigorous and systematic studies that provide much higher degrees of certainty than gained from other sources—press reports, political statements, and so on. When matters of fact are at issue, research can often help resolve disputes or provide information that has a more solid grounding than "What I think is . . ." or "It's just common sense!" Research can assist us in finding the extent to which the following types of assertions have any basis in fact:

"Crime is increasing,"

"Students are performing poorly in schools."

"Taking 'soft' drugs leads to 'hard' drug use."

"Youth engage in sexual activity (or become pregnant) much younger than they did previously."

"This treatment/diet/supplement definitely is successful in creating weight loss (or stopping smoking, improving health, and so on)."

General

Reflection 4.8:

Ernie—Parent Perceptions and Research Findings

Many parents at a school at which I worked were incensed when the principal informed them that she would need to introduce some mixed-grade classes. At a meeting with parents, she was able to present strong research evidence that students' academic performance did not suffer when they were placed in mixed-grade classes and that there were a number of psychological and social benefits. Most parents present at the meeting were gratified to have this level of information presented to them and were satisfied that their children's education would not suffer. The strength of the information was adequate to calm fears they had expressed early in the meeting.

A recent politically inspired "law and order" campaign in my city, aimed at greatly increasing legal penalties for those found guilty of crimes, was based on statements from political and community figures that suggested an increase in crime. Research recently completed by a local university, however, showed clearly that crime, in almost all areas, had decreased markedly in that period.

The outcomes of research, presented as statistical information, can often provide clear evidence to either support or reject the veracity of such assertions. It is important, however, to check the history of any given set of information to ensure that though a situation may look bad, it may represent an improvement in the situation. It is also important to check a variety of studies because single studies often provide inadequate evidence upon which to make judgments. Review reports provide a useful source for information.

Access to the research literature is usually found in online or in university libraries, largely in academic or professional journal reports. Though this is still the greatest repository of research reports, the Internet now provides a number of avenues to enable community-based researchers to acquire this type of information through web searches. Where matters of fact are involved, research participants now have the ability to acquire reliable information from the huge array of research currently available (for more details, see Chapter 9).

Statistical Information

An action research project may make use of statistical information for a variety of purposes. Records of numbers of events, participants, and so on can contribute to a clearer picture of the status of a research project. An action research project might include the following numerical information:

- Occurrences: the number of people, events, behaviors, participants, and so on

  - A record of the number of people engaged in a project, using a service, participating in activities, and so on provides the means of keeping track of events and estimating the degree to which the project is reaching intended audiences.

Comparisons: differences in occurrence between groups

Interesting information can be obtained by comparing people from different groups—men and women, people from different age groups, people of different race or ethnicity, and so on.

Trends or histories: changes in occurrence over time

A single "snapshot" provides information that, by itself, may be misleading. Sometimes significant accomplishment or success is masked by a low "score" that fails to reveal considerable improvement over time.

Central tendencies: the average number of people, occurrences of events, and so on

Mean scores help us keep track of occurrences of phenomena, especially where large numbers are involved. We can be better informed of the number of people participating in events, the scores on tests, and so on.

Distributions: the extent to which scores or occurrences are clustered or widely spread

Attention to the distribution of occurrences assists us in understanding whether or not there is a wide dispersal of scores in a sample. The distribution may signify the need to treat groups differently or to pay further attention to individuals or groups who appear to be different in some way, either through the lack of participation indicated by the data or through the outcomes of the activities in which they have been engaged.

COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES FOR GATHERING AND GENERATING INFORMATION

The first phases of an action research process are designed to provide well-grounded understandings of the experience and perspective of participants. Further information from observations and so on provides additional data that can complement, clarify, and extend understanding of the events and other phenomena associated with the issue at hand. Preliminary observations and interviews may lead to more extensive processes that enable participants to construct more sophisticated and detailed accounts of their situation, enabling them to see the complex web of interactions and activities within which problematic events are played out.

The following section therefore provides alternative procedures researchers may use to assist people in extending their understanding of their situations and the issues investigated. These are similar to ethnographic processes used in qualitative research and have been applied successfully in many community, organizational, and group contexts. Although each process is intended to provide a separate alternative approach to the development of a descriptive account, researchers may find in practice that they include any combination of these procedures. Chapter 5 provides a set of procedures for identifying the features and elements to develop descriptive accounts.

Focus Groups

The processes outlined in the interviewing section in this chapter may be applied to group contexts. Grand tour and other questions may be directed to a single group or to varied groups attending a meeting rather than to individuals. The research facilitator should elicit multiple responses to these questions verbally using group processes where appropriate and should record them in summary form on charts. This material can then be used in the formulation of descriptive accounts (see the Formal Reports section in Chapter 7).

Focus groups provide another means of acquiring information and might be characterized as a group interview. Participants in a focus group should each have opportunities to describe their experience and present their perspective on the issues discussed. As with interviews, carefully devised questions provide the means to focus the group on the issue at hand and enable them to express their experience and perspective in their own terms without the constraints of interpretive frameworks derived from researcher perspectives, professional or technical language, or theoretical constructs. Focus questions should follow the same rules and formats as those used for interviews, employing neutral language and maximizing opportunities for participants to express themselves in their own terms.

The following steps provide a basic framework for facilitating focus groups, under the direction of a focus group facilitator:

Set ground rules

- Each person should have opportunities to express their opinions and perspectives.
- Participants should be respectful and nonjudgmental of each other.
- Specify time dimensions—how much time will be allocated to each segment of the session?

Explain procedures

- Groups should consist of approximately four people (no larger than six). (Groups may self-select or be designated by the facilitator either to ensure diversity within each group or to provide opportunities for existing groups to work together.)
- Designate a facilitator/leader and recorder for each group (or have the group elect a leader).
- Provide and display focus questions.
- Explain recording and reporting procedures.
- Designate time frames for each activity.

Group facilitators/leaders

- Ensure each person has an equal chance to talk.
- Ensure discussions relate to the focus question(s).
- Keep track of time for each activity.

Assist the group to summarize the perspectives emerging from their discussions, identifying key features of their discussions.

Group recorders

Keep note of what people say using their own words.

Record summaries of the group's discussions, noting key points on a chart.

Plenary sessions

Gather groups together for plenary sessions that provide feedback and clarification.

Ensure adequate time for the process.

Nominated members of each group should present the outcomes of their discussion using the charted summary.

Where one person presents, they should provide opportunities for individuals within the group to extend or clarify points presented.

The facilitator should ask questions that clarify or extend the information presented, extending understanding of the group's perspective.

Ensure that new information emerging in this process is recorded on charts.

Combined analysis

The focus group facilitator should work with participants to do the following:

Identify common features across the charts.

Identify divergent issues or perspectives.

Rank issues in order of priority, using some form of voting procedure.

Planning

The focus group facilitator should work with the group to determine further actions to be taken:

Make an action plan, starting with an issue of highest priority.

Designate tasks, persons, timelines, and resources.

Designate a person to monitor these tasks.

Designate a time and place to meet to review progress on the action plan.

Progress Reviews: Six Questions—Why, What, How, Who, Where, When[2]

2. We will revisit these questions in Chapter 5 from the Think perspective as well.

When participants wish to review the progress of an investigation, a meeting in the form of a workshop provides a way of generating the required information. Participants may need to be informed of the purposes of the meeting and asked to bring relevant information. The above questions provide a way of orienting the meeting and generating a full picture of the situation.

The first question—why—provides a general orientation to the focus of the investigation, whereas succeeding questions—what, how, who, where, and when—enable participants to identify associated influences. The intent is not to define causes but to understand how the problem is encompassed in the context or setting. *How* and *what* questions are more productive than *why* questions. The former provide opportunities for revealing direct experience, whereas the latter often lead to explanations remote from people's experience. Examples of appropriate initiating questions include the following:

> *Why* are we meeting today? What is the purpose?
>
> *What* is the problem(s)? What is happening?
>
> *How* does it affect our work or lives?
>
> *Who* is being affected?
>
> *Where* are things happening?
>
> *When* are things happening?

Answers should focus on acts, activities, and events related to the problem; participants should not attempt to evaluate or judge individual or group behavior. An initial pass through these questions will lead to further questions that can provide increasingly detailed information. This will include the history of the situation (how it came to be as it is), the people involved in or affected by the problem, interactions and relationships among these people, resources (people, space, time, funds, current use, access, availability), dreams, and aspirations.

Community Profiles: Mapping the Context

A community profile provides a descriptive snapshot of the context in which the investigation is placed. It enables stakeholders to formulate an overview that describes significant features of their context. Smaller projects in restricted sites, such as classrooms, schools, community centers, and government agencies, may require information that focuses only on dimensions of the setting itself—that is, the classroom, school, agency office, and so on. In many cases, however, persistent problems require investigations that extend into the neighborhood, town, city, or region.

There is often a profusion of information about community contexts and it is essential that the work of preparing a profile remain focused. Following preliminary activity that briefly describes the setting (see Chapter 3), researchers should ask major stakeholders for their views about the types of information pertinent to the investigation. This will help researchers choose judiciously from a potentially vast array of information and minimize the time spent amassing inconsequential information. Research facilitators should assist stakeholders in developing a community profile framework that appears most appropriate to the task at hand. A community profile might include any of the following:

> *Geography:* location, landforms, climate

History: history of the setting, major events, developments, history of the problem(s) under investigation, major laws affecting the site or the problem(s)

Government: impacts and places of local, regional, state, and federal government policies and agencies; boundaries

Politics: parties, organizations, representatives

Demographics: population size; gender, race, ethnic, and age distributions; births and deaths

Economics: sectors (e.g., business and industry), employment, wages and salary levels, general status (prospering, declining)

Health: services, agencies, facilities, special populations (e.g., older persons, children, persons with disabilities)

Education: schools, institutions, services, sectors (e.g., primary, secondary, college), resources, community education

Welfare: services; institutions, agencies, and organizations (government and nongovernment); personnel (e.g., social workers, counselors)

Housing: number, type, and condition of dwellings; forms of accommodation (e.g., low rent, transient, hotel)

Transportation: public and private transportation, accessibility and availability, areas serviced, road conditions, types (road, rail, air)

Recreation: type, number, condition, and accessibility of facilities and services; clubs and organizations; age groups targeted

Religion: type and number of churches, levels of attendance, activities, and services

Intergroup relations: social groups (race, ethnic, religious, or kinship affiliations), coalitions, antagonisms

Planning: regional, city, town, or local plans

Community profiles usually provide demographic information, much of which can be gained from official or documentary sources, but information may also be acquired during preliminary observations and interviews. Van Willigen (2002) and Vlachos (1975) suggests a format that embodies cultural information in addition to the types of demographic data just described. The type of information collected necessarily requires extended ethnographic work with people within the setting. Van Willigen's framework incorporates cultural tracts that include the following:

Lifestyle: economic status, communication (including language, proxemics, and expressive media), religious sites and practices, housing (styles and clustering of dwellings, place of kin networks), geographic location, institutional characteristics, health definitions and practices, education, leisure and recreational activities, politics

Historical features: contemporary and historical artifacts and physical representations

Worldviews, beliefs, perceptions, and definitions of reality: cognitive systems (how people think about and organize everyday reality), religious systems (spiritual reality), values systems, belief systems, perceptions of one's own group and others, intercultural perceptions.

Once the researcher has acquired the information for the community profile, they can organize and present it in a form that people from all stakeholding groups can readily understand. The profile can be made available for their scrutiny as part of the process of formulating accounts (see Chapter 5). A community profile provides a structured way for participants to determine clearly the range of influences likely to have an impact on the problem under investigation. The information ensures that a broad range of relevant features of the situation are considered and paves the way for effective and sustainable projects and programs.

WORKSHOPS: GROUP PROCESSES FOR COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

The most successful and productive action research occurs where participants have the opportunity to talk extensively about their experiences and perceptions. Carefully designed workshop processes enable people not only to reveal their issues and agendas but also to reflect on the nature of events that concern them. Research facilitators may organize meetings that bring people together to explore the issue under investigation using carefully articulated group processes to ensure that each participant has extended opportunities to describe their situation and to express their issues and concerns.

Preliminary Meetings: Exploring Contentious or Complex Issues

When diverse stakeholder groups are brought together, it is often fruitful, particularly where there has been a history of conflict between parties, for researchers to do some preliminary work to ensure harmonious and productive meetings. Holding prior meetings with each of the conflicting parties can enable them to define their own agendas and to clarify the purposes of the larger meeting. In these contexts, researchers should work to formulate statements that are nonjudgmental and nonblaming yet clearly articulate participants' perceptions and concerns.

A common mistake of researchers' intent on community-based action is to suggest a "public meeting" to discuss issues and formulate plans. Such meetings are often held in places—schools, universities, agency offices—alien to many stakeholders. In consequence, many groups are poorly represented, and the organizers become disconcerted by the apparent apathy of the people they wish to engage. School principals, social workers, and health workers, for instance, cannot understand why certain parent groups will not come to meetings called specifically to deal with their children's problems. They frequently comment in these circumstances on the parents' "lack of interest" and fail to perceive how formal or official environments can be threatening for some people.

General

Reflection 4.9:

Ernie—Gaining Initial Clarity

I have facilitated workshops that included diverse stakeholding groups from the setting in which I worked. I met with individuals and groups separately and provided them with opportunities to express their viewpoints on the issues about which they were concerned. I would then signal the possibility of linking with others, commenting that there are a number of other people (or groups) concerned with the issue. Meetings were not held until each group had, in this way, clarified the nature of their concerns.

General

Reflection 4.10:

Ernie—Socially Threatening Environments

I have been involved in many situations in which parents, especially those from lower socioeconomic environments, perceive schools and government offices as threatening and judgmental bastions of authority. Meetings held in institutional arenas often reinforce these perceptions, as articulate and self-confident people hold the floor and determine the course of events and the texts—resolutions, statements, records, and so on—that finally emerge. Persons who are less articulate are effectively silenced, their concerns unheard and their agendas unmet.

In some instances, public meetings provide contexts in which individuals or groups in conflict meet for the first time. Often the “loud voices” inhibit the possibility that lesser voices will have opportunities to express their issues and ideas. Without preliminary work, these types of meetings may degenerate into conflict-laden situations that serve only to reinforce antagonisms and exacerbate existing problems. Public meetings, presented as workshops, should be used only after people in different stakeholder groups have had an opportunity to meet in safe and comfortable contexts to explore their issues and to clarify their thoughts and perceptions.

Organizing Workshops

A well-organized workshop ensures that participants can work through their issues and attain their objectives without the distractions of poorly articulated activities, inadequate materials and equipment, or uncomfortable or irritating conditions. The following are critical issues research facilitators need to consider when organizing a workshop.

Identifying Participants

Workshops should reflect the participatory intent of action research, ensuring that people who can legitimately speak for the interests of each stakeholding group attend. Having one or two persons represent a diverse ethnic group, for instance, may ignore the deep divisions that lie among families, cliques, and social class groupings within that population. Researchers should review their initial social analysis to confirm that all groups are appropriately represented by individuals who can legitimately take on the role of spokesperson. Meeting conditions—time, place, and transportation—should maximize the opportunities these people have to attend.

Facilitating a Productive Meeting

A meeting is best led by a neutral chair or facilitator—a person perceived as having no overriding loyalty to any particular stakeholding group. Researchers can act as facilitators, but it may be appropriate in some circumstances for a respected community member to act in this role. It is important that participants accept the chair or facilitator as a legitimate or appropriate person to direct proceedings. Only in exceptional circumstances, for example, would a meeting investigating women’s issues have a male chair.

The task of negotiating diverse perspectives in a research process can become difficult if strong and determined people try to impose their own agendas and perspectives. The chair or facilitator should employ judicious, diplomatic, yet firm processes to ensure that such people do not stifle the diverse agendas and perspectives that are essential components of the process. For that reason, researchers should ensure that the chair or facilitator has the formal authority and the procedural skills to maintain the integrity of the meeting process. A formal statement, written or verbal, that acknowledges the chair or facilitator’s authority should be obtained from key stakeholders prior to the commencement of the meeting. This may take the form of a letter or memorandum to participants or may be included in a welcoming speech at the meeting.

Significant differentials of power between the research facilitator and other participants are not conducive to productive meetings. Researchers should ensure that people of appropriate status are engaged to facilitate or lead meetings.

General

Reflection 4.11:

Ernie—Inappropriate Leadership

I learned of a situation in which an inexperienced junior professor and a graduate assistant were asked to facilitate a workshop at a conference of senior educational administrators. Within a short time, the administrators had marginalized the professor and graduate assistant and had taken control of proceedings.

Ground Rules and Agenda

Researchers may ask groups in advance to suggest meeting ground rules in order to minimize the possibility of conflict and to provide conditions conducive to productive work. Meeting procedures should be planned carefully to minimize the possibility that they degenerate into heated debate, accusation, and blaming. Each meeting should begin with the presentation of a broad agenda that includes statements about the purpose of the meeting, the manner in which the meeting will proceed, and the activities in which participants will engage. Time may be allocated for people to comment on the agenda and to suggest alternative procedures. These preliminary activities, however, should not take so much time that they detract from the main activities of the meeting.

General

Reflection 4.12:

Ernie—Timing the Process

I once attended a one-day workshop in which two of the six available hours were expended on establishing ground rules and formulating an agenda. This use of the available time created a great deal of frustration among many of the participants because the time remaining was insufficient to deal with the intended workshop agenda.

Participative Procedures

Meeting procedures can ensure that each group has an equal opportunity to express perceptions and concerns and to have them included in the meeting's generated statements and accounts. By making frequent use of small-group processes, facilitators can provide opportunities for people to articulate their thoughts and ideas in safety. This ensures that multiple perspectives are elicited and that forceful people do not dominate proceedings. In one useful type of small-group process, the facilitator or meeting leader follows these steps:

Divide the meeting into groups of, usually, no more than six members.

Describe the activities to be performed or the questions to be discussed (these may be selected from any of the frameworks for developing descriptive accounts presented in this chapter).

Provide adequate time for these purposes to be achieved.

Have each group write a summary of activity outcomes on a chart.

Have all participants reassemble and display their charts.

Have each group present its summary verbally. As each group presents, questions from the facilitator or audience may allow group members to clarify meanings and, in some cases, extend their descriptions. This additional information may then be added to the chart.

Making Decisions

Wherever possible, meetings should operate on the basis of consensus rather than on majority vote. The latter encourages competitive, divisive politicking, which usually ensures that the least powerful groups will not have their interests met. Although consensus is sometimes difficult to attain, it is a powerful instrument for change when it is achieved. When agendas are pushed through to accommodate time pressures, bureaucratic pressures, or the interests of powerful groups, the outcomes are likely, in the long run, to be unproductive. Time is an essential element in any collaborative activity; it cannot be compressed without damaging the essential participatory nature of an action research process.

Venues

Initial meetings may be held in people's homes, cafes, offices, community centers, or any other venue where the stakeholder group itself is comfortable. When people talk in the comfort of their own territory, they are more likely to be honest and forthcoming. Public venues are appropriate when all stakeholder groups meet to work through issues and agendas. Even then, however, researchers should take care to select meeting sites where the least powerful groups will feel comfortable. If a meeting is held in their territory, they are more likely to both attend and be willing to contribute to the proceedings. A local community hall, church halls, hostels, community health clinics, lodge halls, and even parks may provide appropriate contexts.

Communicating and Reporting

Action research requires all stakeholders to be informed of activities and events as they occur. Where groups engage in activity—sometimes with great enthusiasm—but fail to inform other participants of what they are doing, the process is likely to be disrupted in a number of ways. People may have their feelings hurt, feel excluded, become suspicious, or feel unwanted. In these and many other ways, failure to maintain communication can lead to a loss of commitment and loss of ownership. Continued communication can be achieved informally by regular meetings in which people report on their activities, e-mail, phone calls, or use of social media. Reports may also be made in the form of meeting minutes, newsletters, or verbal presentations. Formal reports, as described in Chapter 7, may require more extended and complete reporting procedures, though the primary purpose is to ensure that all stakeholders are fully informed of the progress and outcomes of the project.

REFLECTION AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Action and Reflection—Gathering Information (Data)

1. Return to the cultural scene you previously visited. Using the techniques presented in this chapter, interview someone who is part of the scene. If you have chosen your own workplace, interview at least one of the stakeholders there. Your purpose is to learn how the person interviewed describes the scene, including significant important events that are part of ongoing operations of the setting.[3]

   3. The Learning Activities above can be a useful exercise at the beginning of a workshop or class. Participants should initially work in pairs, interviewing one another to identify key features of their life—who they are, where they're from, and so on, as well as interesting events or experiences. Interviewers should take notes to assist their memory. When interviews have been completed, pairs should join to form into groups of four to six people. Interviewers should then introduce their subject to the group in terms derived from the interview.

2. Before you start you will need to prepare the following:

   How you will introduce yourself and the purpose of the interview

   The type of questions you will ask (using formats suggested in this chapter)

   The method of recording information—notebook or digital recorder

3. After the interview, read back the notes you have taken to the person interviewed. Ask whether your notes accurately reflect what they said. If this is not possible, type up your notes and have the person read them later, or send them electronically and phone them for feedback.
4. Reflect on the process and discuss with others within your group. How did that feel? What did you note about the interview process? How might you have improved? (Keep the notes [data] for later analysis.)
5. Observe the setting for an extended period of time (at least a half hour), using techniques suggested in this chapter. Record what you observe. (Keep these observations for later analysis.)
6. Reflect on the process of observation. How did that feel? What did you learn about the process of observation?
7. From the interview and observation, list what else you would like to learn about that setting. Formulate a short questionnaire around those issues.
8. Return to the setting and interview a number of people using that questionnaire.
9. Alternatively, prepare a number of copies of the questionnaire and ask people to complete it.
10. Reflect on the differences between the use of a questionnaire and the interview process for gathering information. How do they differ? What are their strengths? What are their weaknesses?

11. Identify a significant issue, question, or problem arising in your interviews. Do a search of the research literature on that topic. Identify studies that have been done and summarize what they reveal. Identify how this information differs from that obtained in the interviews. Discuss these issues with your group.

CHAPTER REVIEW

This chapter describes practical steps for **gathering and generating data** that will enable research participants to **extend their knowledge** and gain a **better understanding of** the nature of the issues and problems they investigate.

Their first step**—Move I**—is to gain a better understanding of the **issues, problems, and needs** upon which their research will focus.

Their next move**—Move II**—will be to continuously extend their understanding by **gathering and generating information** from **participating stakeholders**.

In **Move I**, participants first establish the **nature of the problem** by focusing on the issues involved from the perspective of **primary stakeholders**.

They also identify the issues from the perspective of **other stakeholders**.

These types of information emerge initially from **preliminary conversations** that take the form of an **interview** and allow people to respond to **issues and events in their own terms**.

These **guided conversations** use **semistructured questions** that initially use general grand tour questions to enable participants to frame issues and events in their own terms.

Continuing explorations may focus on **typical events** or on more **specific issues** as they emerge within the guided conversations.

This process may be extended by **guided tours** through parts of the context or by tasks such as drawing **maps**, **diagrams,** or **pictures** or describing what is happening in **photos**.

Mini-tour questions use similar procedures to **follow up** on significant issues emerging from an interview/conversation.

Move II uses **similar procedures** but extends the process by using more **creative techniques** that enable people to express their ideas and represent their experiences.

These may include **storytelling, poetry, songs, drama, reality theater, art, photographs, paintings, drawings, and other artistic forms** that not only are enjoyable but enable other people to understand their experience more clearly.

Research participants may extend their knowledge in a number of other ways:

> **Participant observation**, in which they consciously observe and record significant features as they participate in events and places.
>
> **Review documents, records, and reports** relevant to the places, people, and issues within the project.
>
> Use **questionnaires and surveys** to gain information from larger numbers of people
>
> **Review the research literature** related to the issues included in the investigation

Where large numbers of people or many groups become involved, researchers may use **focus groups** to extend their understanding.

As a project progresses, participants may use **progress reviews** by asking six questions that begin with **why, what, how, who, where, and when**.

They may build a **community profile** that generates a large body of information that increases participant understanding of the nature and dynamics of the context.

Workshops provide an effective means to **gather or generate information**, analyze its significance, and determine **actions** to be taken.

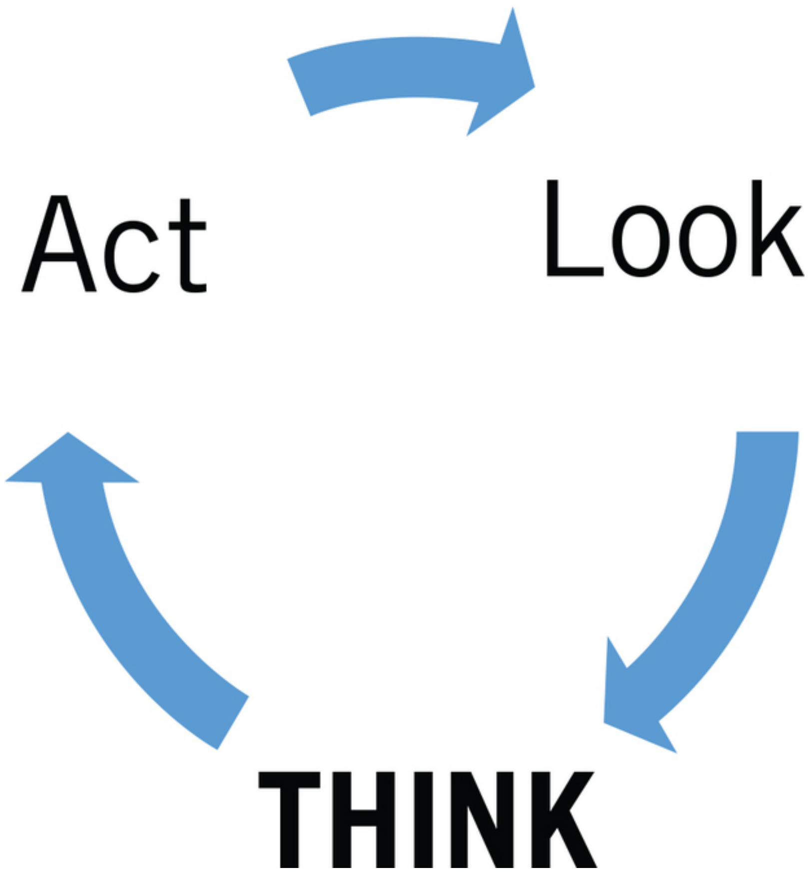
Facilitators **organize workshops** by identifying relevant **participants** and using effective **facilitative techniques** to achieve productive outcomes:

- Set **ground rules** and establish an **agenda** for the meeting
- Use **participative procedures** to ensure that all groups have equal opportunities to express their **concerns and perspectives**
- Use similar procedures for **making decisions**
- Work in settings where all **stakeholders feel comfortable**
- Set up **procedures for reporting** to participants and other stakeholders on the outcomes of their workshop

5 THINK: REFLECTING AND ANALYZING

INTRODUCTION

As research participants engage in the initial phases of a project, they start to gather a considerable body of information, so much so that they run the risk of being buried in a mountain of data. The primary purpose of this phase of the research process is to distill the data, identifying and organizing elements of experience or perspective that are judged to be particularly relevant to the issue or concern on which the investigation is focused. The idea is to provide material that can be formed into accounts, stories, or narratives that provide participants with increased clarity and greater understanding of the underlying dynamics and complexities within which the issues and concerns are played out. The following sections, therefore, provide alternative processes for distilling and assembling information gathered in the Look phase of research. We are essentially on a data journey that leads from a mass of information to relatively simple accounts that provide a more informed basis for planning actions to resolve the issues investigated (see the poem in Reflection 5.1).



General

Reflection 5.1:

Alfredo—We're on a Data Journey (From Data to Meaning)

We're on a data journey, where ideas are tagged with codes

From which we can form categories, that we may as well call nodes!

Sole nodes may become lonely, near death or lying in state

Yet miraculously come back to life, when they dialogue and relate!

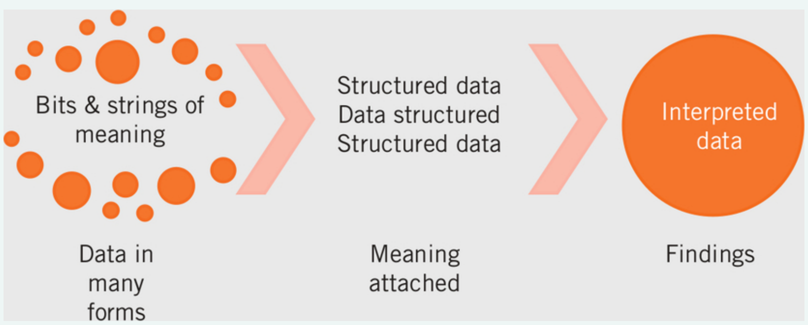
So *this* is what the data *say*… Smart themes that sound like memes.

But what do the data *mean*? How might memes become bright beams?

The data journey continues, as we discover what it is that we found out.

And we diligently remember, lived experiences are what it's all about!

The names of all these steps referred to in the poem can of course be different. Some people call categories themes and vice versa and use many other ways to explain the same thing. What is important is how we make this journey from bits of data to "larger, longer structures of meaningful [ideas]" (Checkland & Holwell, 1997) that reconnect to people's experiences and inform purposeful action.



Description

REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS: IDENTIFYING KEY ELEMENTS OF EXPERIENCE

In their day-to-day lives at work and in community settings, people act and behave according to well-established routines and recipes that have emerged from their socialization or professional development. In organizational and agency settings, these taken-for-granted procedures and processes are usually incorporated into common practices based on particular ways of thinking about activities in that setting—for example, care plans, lesson plans, interview procedures, meeting procedures, procurement processes, administrative arrangements, and many other ways people structure and organize their professional or community activities. These are often so deeply ingrained in people's experience that they are not conscious that the very forms of organizing and implementing activity may themselves be part of the problem they wish to investigate.

Denzin (1989) has written of the need to make the problematic, lived experience of ordinary people directly available to policymakers, welfare workers, and other service professionals so that programs and services can be made more relevant to people's lives. He suggests that an interpretive perspective identifies different definitions of the situation, the assumptions held by interested parties, and appropriate points of intervention:

> Research of this order can produce meaningful descriptions and interpretations of social process. It can offer explanations of how certain conditions came into existence and persist. Interpretive research can also furnish the basis for realistic proposals concerning the improvement or removal of certain events, or problems. (Denzin, 1989, p. 23)

The task of research participants in this phase of the research process is to interpret and render understandable the problematic experiences being considered. Reflection and analysis provide the concepts and meanings (i.e., conceptual frameworks) that enable participants to make better sense of their experiences. From the data gathered, select "experience-near concepts"—terms people use in their day-to-day lives rather than theoretical concepts from the behavioral sciences or the professional terminology of agency procedures—can be used by action researchers to help make sense out of data. An agency worker, for instance, may complain about demands that she comply with the directions of her boss. This is better recorded according to the terms "complain," "demands," "comply," "direction," and "boss" rather than in terms of organizational hierarchies or power relations—"departmental directives," "supervisor," "mandated." Ultimately action research seeks to provide accounts that resonate with the experience of primary stakeholders, clarifying and untangling meanings and illuminating the reality of people's lives. Research participants search for terms and concepts that enable all stakeholders to understand the nature of events being investigated.

This interpretive activity exposes the concepts and everyday theories that people use to describe or explain their conduct. The research task is to assist participants to reveal those taken-for-granted meanings—their "theories in use" (Argyris & Schön, 1996)—and reformulate them into "constructions [that are] improved, matured, expanded, and elaborated" and that enhance their conscious experiencing of the world (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). These new ways of interpreting the situation are not intended as merely intellectualized, rational explanations; rather they are real-life constructs-in-use that assist people in reshaping actions and behaviors that affect their lives.

General

Reflection 5.2:

Ernie—Academic Explanation and Lived Experience

When I began working at the community level, I would often present explanations for problems as derived from my background in the social sciences. I would include concepts such as social class, racism, power, authority, and so on. In few instances did these forms of analysis strike a chord with the people with whom I was working.

On one occasion, I presented an analysis to a group of Aboriginal people that implied that their responses to racism were inappropriate. My explanation outlined a theory of minority responses to racism that highlighted apathy, avoidance, and aggression as typical behaviors that derived from a history of oppression. The anger directed at me by the Aboriginal people present was a humbling experience.

In retrospect, I understand their anger and wonder at my naiveté. Not only was I interpreting their situation from my perspective; I was also judging their behavior in stereotypical ways, implicitly criticizing their responses to situations they faced. Today, I ensure that any analysis I make is drawn from terms known to the people with whom I am working, is expressed in their language, and is derived from their experience-near concepts. My own role in this process is to assist them to articulate their ideas and to ensure that they express them clearly and accurately.

Analysis might be seen as a process of interpretation and clarification of meaning, providing the basis for understanding—"a process of interpreting, knowing, and comprehending the meaning that is felt, intended, and expressed by another" (Denzin, 1989, p. 120). The purpose of interpretive work, therefore, is to help participants to "take the attitude of the other" (Mead, 1967), not in a superficial, mechanistic sense but in a way that enables them to understand empathetically the complex and deeply rooted forces that move their lives.

In some instances, initial analysis quickly provides the basis for immediate action to resolve the issue being investigated. Many problems, however, are more intractable, requiring extended processes of exploration, analysis, and explanation. An issue such as "How can we start a boys basketball program to increase youth activity in the district?" may be relatively easy to resolve, while an issue such as "decrease the use of recreational drugs in the district" would require long-term and extended processes of research and action. The form of analysis should be appropriate to the problem at hand. Complex or highly abstract theories, when applied to small, localized issues, are likely to drain people's energy and inhibit action. Explanations and interpretations produced in action research processes should be framed in terms that participants use in their everyday lives rather than those derived from the academic disciplines or professional practices.

The use of experience-near concepts does not eliminate the need for rigorous inquiry. Restricted or cursory analyses that produce superficial solutions to deep-seated and complex problems are unlikely to be effective. Researchers and facilitators can ensure that explanations are sufficiently rigorous to move people past stereotypical or simplistic interpretations of their situations, but these must be grounded in the reality of their everyday lives. Soft systems theory (see Checkland, 1999; Flood, 1999) suggests that early consensus among participants may actually prevent meaningful conversations to occur that are rooted in different, not similar ways of understanding a problem. Being aware of this possibility, action research facilitators can use tools that keep problem analyses open for a longer period of time and avoid early consensus that may actually impoverish investigations. Action researchers also need to be aware of the need to see and read situations more in terms of data (see Reflection 5.3).

General

Reflection 5.3:

Alfredo—Becoming a Data-Gathering Action Researcher

I spent many years as a designer and facilitator of organizational development (OD) processes (we called it "capacity building") with organizations who work with international development aid funding. As OD practitioners, my colleagues and I frequently used workshops as a means of bringing people together to discuss important issues, conduct organizational diagnostics, strengthen teams, develop plans, and facilitate many other organizational strengthening activities. As practitioners, we always made sure to document the information on flip charts, diagrams, and matrices on the walls, along with any final agreements for action. We also took some notes of key plenary *conversations. We would then include some of these items in a brief workshop report or "memoria" (memory) and send the report to the convening organization for their records. Through all of this documentation we were thinking like practitioners, in terms of workshop products and solutions and not in terms of data and research.*

Shifting from a practitioner to an action researcher requires rethinking what we consider to be data, and in fact what we pay attention to. For example, when we record deep plenary conversations with a digital recorder we may capture deep analyses, problems and solutions present in the participants own voices. Upon listening to some of these recordings we may hear interesting pauses, tensions, new paths of inquiry, and even storylines that we were not aware of when we were in the moment live! As we become more aware of these storylines we may start making methodological decisions to add in more reflection time into future workshops, interview participants who had unique angles on things, or possibly send out a simple post-event questionnaire to generate additional data on the issues being addressed in the workshop. And we may become more aware of the learning or research value of the workshop products, thinking of them less as results and more as conversation starters—mere props in the drama (Shaw, 2003)—that allow us to ask new questions and dig deeper into the live, unfolding drama that is a process of inquiry (Ortiz Aragón, 2013). Shifting from a practitioner to an action researcher requires refocusing inquiry away from correct implementation of our methods to paying deep attention to the inquiry process itself—seeking out the story like a journalist out on the beat.

All interactions generate data, but we may need some new tools to recognize and capture that data so that we can leverage knowledge in more powerful ways than we are used to as a practitioner. Ask yourself in the next action research process in which you participate: "What data are we generating? How might we capture more meaningful data to support informed action? How can we capture those data and how is that different from the ways in which we currently work?" These questions can help you become a hybrid practitioner-researcher that leverages the power of research as you address problems of practice.

Although the experiences and perspectives of those to whom programs and services are directed remain central to the research, this does not mean that external explanations or theories cannot emerge as part of the research process. Where professional or academic participants may perceive that issues of gender, race, or class are being ignored in the process and feel that one or an other of these needs to be included, they may present their concern to other stakeholding participants. Rather than imposing their interpretations based on terminology of the social sciences, however, they should frame their concerns as questions, leaving participants to respond in their own terms. Instead of asking, "Do we need to deal with gender/racial/power issues?" they may ask, "Should we talk with women/people of color/program supervisors about these matters?" Responses to these types of question are best framed in the experience-near concepts of the participants rather than the more general terms. Where terms like "sexism," "racism," "power," and so on are used, facilitators need to assist people to unpack these terms to describe how these features of the situation are manifest in their everyday experience.

Ultimately, research facilitators should try to ensure that descriptions and explanations are sufficiently rigorous to move people past stereotypical or simplistic interpretations of their situations, the terminology incorporated into people's accounts grounded in the reality of their everyday lives. As a central point, they must represent the experiences and perspectives of those to whom programs and services are directed rather than of those who deliver those services or who wish to use them for academic purposes.

In we present a diagram that shows how perspectives from teachers, students, and parents in a school improvement action research project can be envisioned from individual narrative data all the way to an eventual report that retains key features of the original experience. We explore the reporting side in Chapter 7 but wish to highlight here the importance of identifying key elements of experience as we enter into the process of distilling the data, which often includes temporarily taking these experiences apart through coding and other means.

General

Reflection 5.4:

Ernie—Official Interpretations Versus People's Lived Experience

In the early phases of a project in East Timor, principals and superintendents often commented that parents were not interested in their children's schooling—that it would be difficult to get them to participate in school life. Through a series of parent workshops, we were able to demonstrate that parents had high levels of interest in their children's schooling. Using participatory processes of inquiry based on small-group techniques, these workshops gave parents opportunities to express their concerns about the school and to suggest ways that they might be able to engage in activities that would assist the staff of the school in dealing with the issues that emerged. In most schools parents identified a number of ways that they would be willing to participate in improving the school, and many successful projects emerged—fund-raising; school repair and maintenance; garden maintenance; learning materials manufacture; parents teaching local crafts, art, songs, and dances, and assisting with school security arrangements. Despite the expectations of principals and superintendents, parents found many ways that they, with their limited education and resources, could make a difference in their children's schooling.

REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS PHASE I: DISTILLING THE DATA

Two major processes provide the means to distill the data that emerge from the ongoing processes of investigation. The first is a c*ategorizing and coding* procedure that identifies units of meaning (experience, perception) within the data and organizes them into a set of categories that typify, highlight, or summarize the experiences and perspectives of participants. The second data analysis procedure selects *key experiences,* critical events or transformational moments and "unpacks" them to identify the elements that compose them, thus illuminating the nature of those experiences. Researchers may use either or both of these techniques of data analysis as they seek to acquire clarity and understanding by distilling and organizing the information they have gathered.

Procedure 1: Coding and Categorizing

The major task of this process is to identify the significant features and elements that make up the experience and perception of the people involved in the study (stakeholders). *All* analysis is an act of interpretation, but the major aim in analysis is to identify information that clearly represents the perspective and experience of the stakeholding participants. At this stage, those involved in data analysis must "bracket" their own understandings, intuitions, or interpretations as much as possible and focus on the meanings inherent in the world of participants. This difficult task requires some practice and feedback to identify the ways in which we tend to view events through our own perspectives, and it points to the need to ground our analysis in participant terms, concepts, and meanings. This is tricky ground, especially when we come to coding procedures, where we must use a term or heading to represent the data within a category.

General

Reflection 5.5:

Ernie—Enacting the Verbatim Principle: Using Local Language

A member of a city neighborhood collective was most explicit about her experience of analyzing data in a project in which she participated. With a slight frown, she describes how "I never knew how difficult it was not to put my own words and meanings in. We had to really concentrate to make sure we used what people had actually said and not put it in our own words. It was hard" (*Stringer, 2004*).

In other settings I found I sometimes needed to challenge those responsible for writing research reports when I felt they were interpreting events from their own perspectives or in language from the academic or professional literature with which they were familiar. Though this was sometimes relevant for particular audiences or later phases of a project, my intent was to ensure that the voices, perspectives, and experiences of primary stakeholders were not lost.

To minimize the tendency of people to conceptualize events through their own interpretive lenses, researchers should, wherever possible, apply the *verbatim principle,* using terms and concepts drawn from the words of the participants themselves. By doing so they are more likely to capture the meanings inherent in people's experience.

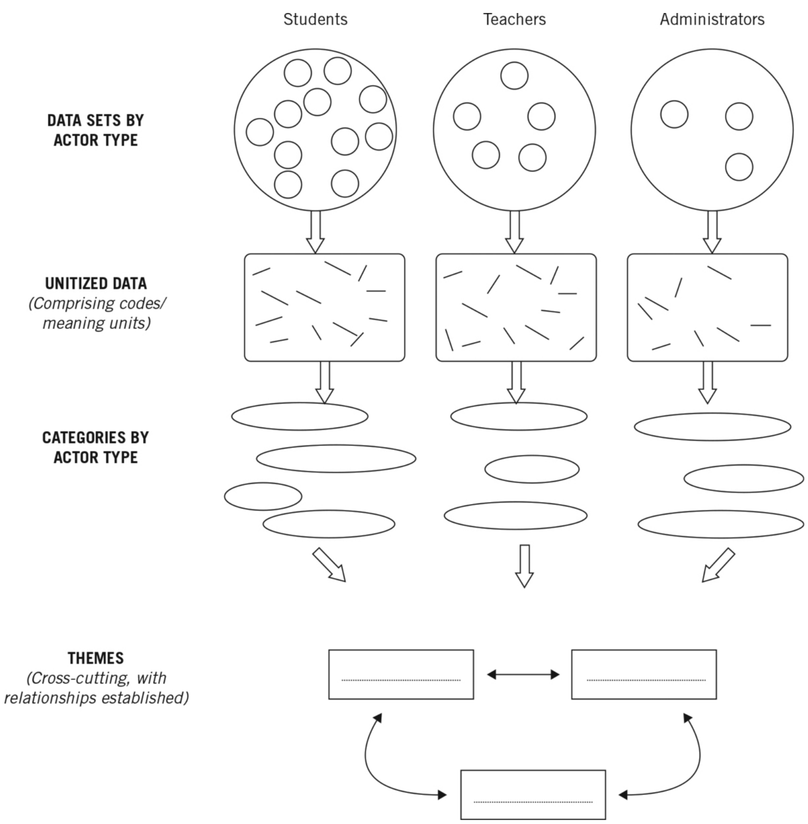
Because stakeholders are likely to have different experiences and perspectives on any issue, analysis of each stakeholding group should initially be kept separate and more general categories developed at later stages of a project. Thus, initial analysis will keep, for example, teacher, student, and parent perspectives separate to identify ways that these stakeholders see the situation. Even within these groups, however, there will be groups and individuals who describe and interpret events in different ways. Analysis should identify these diverse perspectives in ways that enable research participants to understand the issues they have in common and the ways in which they diverge. Likewise, city planners, businesspeople, and residents may have differing perceptions of a neighborhood development project that all need to be acknowledged and incorporated into planning procedures. Managers, professional staff, administrative staff, and customers or clients may differ in the way they describe their experience, affecting the way a business or agency operates.

Procedures for this form of *analysis* involve the following steps:

- Reviewing the data
- Unitizing the data
- Categorizing and coding
- Identifying themes
- Organizing a category system

Developing a report framework

In Figure 5.1, we share a diagram that shows a journey from data to themes.



Description

Figure 5.1 Journey From Data to Themes

Reviewing the Data

Researchers should first review transcripts or records of interviews, reading them to familiarize themselves with the contents and to get a feel for the views and ideas expressed. Other types of information will be incorporated in further cycles of analysis.

Unitizing the Data

As people talk about their experience and perspective, their narrative is composed of a wide range of related and interconnected ideas, activities, and events. They will often change direction or focus on the many parts of the story that compose the interrelated aspects of everyday experience. The next phase is to identify *units of meaning*, the discrete ideas, concepts, events, and experiences incorporated into their description of events. The purpose of this part of the process is to isolate the elements of which their experience is composed. A unit of meaning may be a word, phrase, sentence, or sequence of sentences that represents a simple idea or event.

Where the data are available in electronic form researchers may work with the text from their computers, highlighting similar units of meaning with the same color. Where it is in print form, however, participants may use a similar process with highlighting pens to mark out similar units of meaning with a color on photocopies of the original data. You can then literally cut out each of these pieces and paste it onto a card, labeling the card to indicate the origin of that unit—the interview from which it was drawn.

When pasting units onto a card, extra information may need to be added to make the meaning clear. For example, to a unit reading "Some parents refused to consider this," researchers would need to add in brackets "[starting a Parent Teacher Association.]" The intent is to identify units of meaning—statements that have discrete meaning when isolated from other information.

Coding and Forming Categories

Once the data have been unitized, the units of meaning may be sorted into related groups or categories. We often use this process in everyday life to organize information more efficiently. We might use the code "fruit" to refer to a group that includes oranges, apples, pears, and peaches. We might likewise use the code "clothing" to refer to a group of items that includes shirts, shorts, slacks, and sweaters. Units of meaning form the building blocks of categories that are formulated by cutting and pasting units with similar meetings to form categories.

Box 5.1 provides information about parent activities, experiences, and perspectives about a parent teacher association (PTA). It provides the basis for a category identified (coded) as "Parents' perspectives on a PTA." Information from other interviews could be added and the category re-sorted to identify different dimensions of their perspective. Each pile of cards, or category, could then be labeled to identify the particular dimension; for example, an initial set of categories based on the previously discussed data might be "Starting a PTA," "Parents with good ideas," and "Parents with interest and enthusiasm." As data from other interviews are included, however, these categories might be seen as inappropriate and the code revised. Categories might also emerge that enable a large number of activities to be included under a relatively small number of headings. For instance, analysis of interviews that focus on PTAs might reveal the following categories: "Organizing a PTA," "The structure of a PTA," "Parent activities," "Improving the school," and so on.

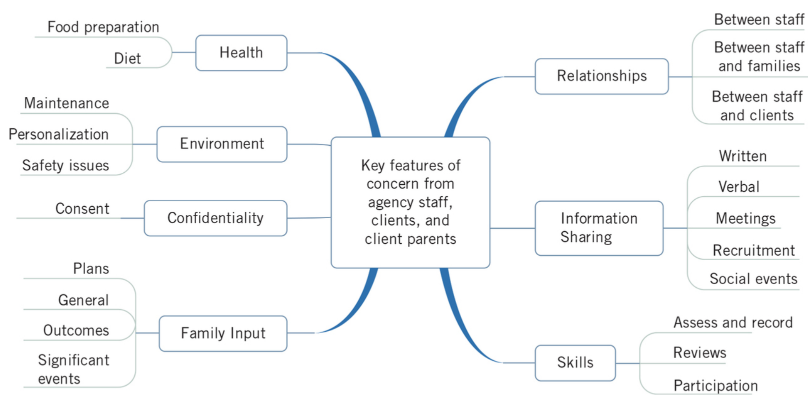
General

Box 5.1

Unitizing Data

Teachers and parents came to the next meeting / and talked of starting a PTA (parent teacher association). /Some parents refused to consider this /due to their experience of past associations. /The parents then identified other parents who had good ideas, /who had the interest and enthusiasm, /and who would work with teachers /to improve the school/. They decided they needed to inform other parents /of the possibilities for starting a Parent Teacher Association.

Figure 5.2 presents a code tree with codes and initial categories representing issues emerging from a project to investigate the operations of a human services agency. The analysis identified key features emerging from analysis of interviews with agency staff, clients, and client parents and the elements comprising each of those features.

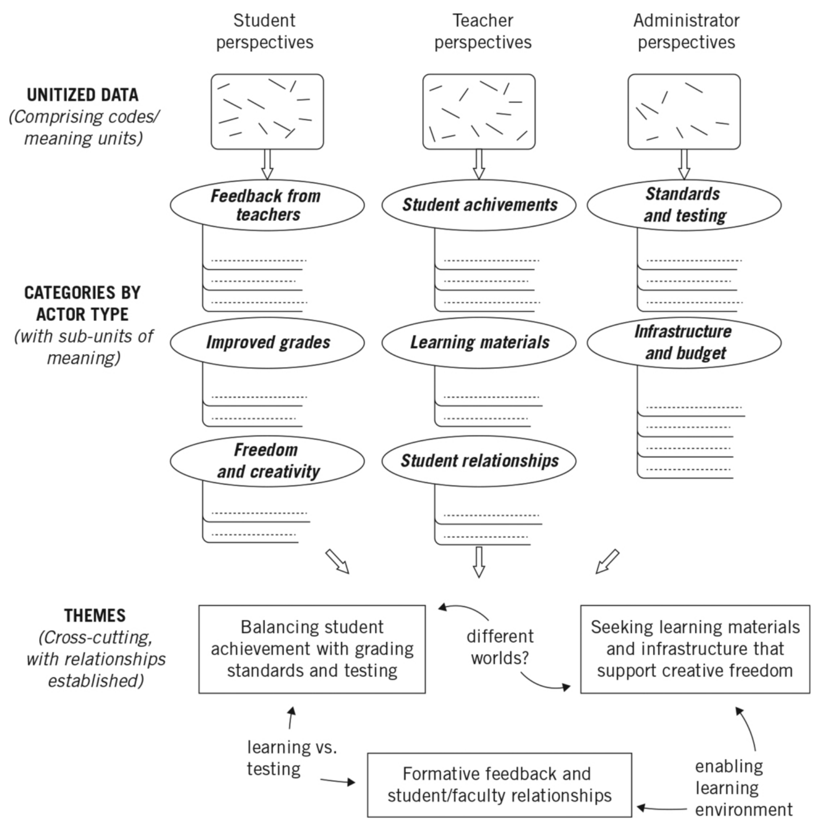


Description

Figure 5.2 Categories and Subcategories (Codes) Shown in a “Code Tree”

Identifying Themes

When initial analysis has identified and coded categories for a particular set of data, researchers should then identify the sets of categories that might be meaningfully associated and placed within an overarching *theme*. Within a school we may see that teachers, students, and parents are concerned about “test scores” even though their concerns are expressed differently. In Figure 5.3 students indicate an interest in “improved grades,” while teachers nominate a concern for student achievement. Both could be incorporated in the same theme labeled “Student Grades,” or a more descriptive phrase such as “Balancing student achievement with grading standards and testing.”



Description

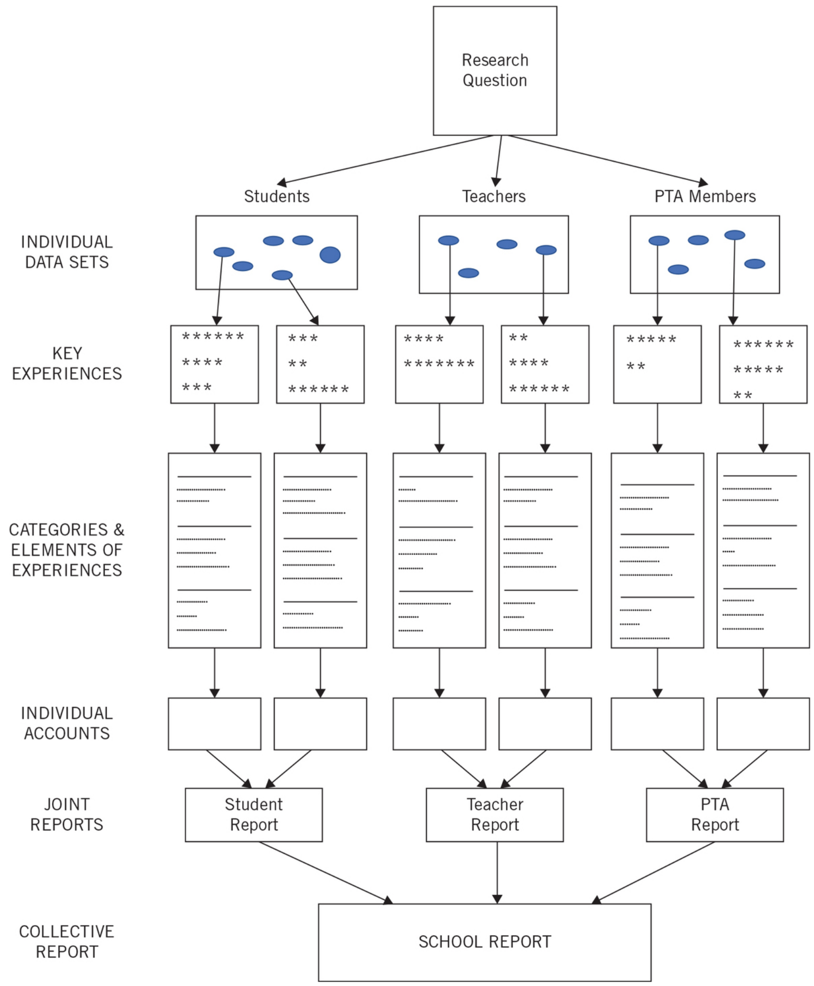
Figure 5.3 A Coding and Categorizing System for a School Evaluation

Research participants therefore need to identify themes—issues, experiences, or perspectives that people have in common—by comparing categories and subcategories across stakeholding groups.

Organizing a Category System

The codes, categories, and source data must then be recorded in some rational form, providing a clear picture of the categories and subcategories of information related to the topic investigated, and the relationships between them. presents a category system for a school evaluation.

In the school evaluation project depicted in Figure 5.4 we can see that each major perspective includes subcategories. For example, the category "Student perspectives" includes the subcategories "Feedback from teachers," "Improved grades," and "Freedom and creativity." Importantly, details within those subcategories are what we refer to as "units of meaning," which are accounts of people's experiences or perspectives of these issues. Although category labels in this experience provided no common elements across stakeholding groups, it is clear that some issues are related, and these have been identified as themes from across the three stakeholder groups. This category system provides useful information about the types of people whose perspective are presented, the issues concerning them, and relationships between some of those issues. The way of organizing these categories into a framework assists to clarify the significant features of experience emerging in the process of investigation. At a later stage, they may also provide the agenda for planning actions related to those agendas.



Description

Figure 5.4 A Framework for Analyzing Key Experiences

We wish to emphasize that there is no right way of organizing the data. They might as easily have been organized with "Student Achievement" as a major category, and administrator, student, and teacher perspectives presented as subcategories. Figure 5.3 is intended as a concept map, not a standard way to approach developing a category system.

Developing a Report

This type of category system provides an outline for reports or presentations that communicate the outcomes of this phase of research. Themes, categories, and subcategories convey the headings and subheadings that organize the narrative of the report. These may be preceded by an introduction that provides contextual information and the purpose of the report, followed by a conclusion that presents the outcomes of the investigation. In the code tree example in Figure 5.2, a report on the operation of the agency would have headings related to the major themes—Health, Environment, Family Input, Relationships, Information Sharing, Confidentiality, and

Skills. The content of the report would be drawn from the information included in the subcategories related to each of these themes. The theme “Relationships,” for instance, would speak to issues related to relationships between staff, between staff and families, and between staff and clients.

Member Checking

Member checking is the process of checking back with participants to ensure that any reports or descriptions reflect their language, concepts, experiences, and perspectives. Those responsible for recording data or writing reports should report back to relevant stakeholders at each stage of the process, checking whether they have accurately represented people’s perspectives and experiences.

Reporting back to stakeholders gives them opportunities to ensure concepts, terms, and categories resonate with their experience and perspective. This is especially important where there is a disparity in power relationships between stakeholders—for example, children, parents, administrators, service professionals—when the perspectives of the more powerful participants tend to dominate. Member checking provides the means for ensuring that less powerful groups have genuine opportunities to have their voices heard. The tendency for service professionals to dominate these processes is revealed in the following account.

Procedure 2: Analyzing Key Experiences, Epiphanic Events, or Critical Incidents

The purpose of this approach to analysis is to focus on events or experiences that seem to have a marked impact on a participant. Denzin (1989) talks of moments of crisis or turning-point experiences that have a significant impact on people. Such events may appear as moments of crisis, triumph, anger, confrontation, love, warmth, or despair that have a lasting impact on people. They may result in a “light bulb” or “aha” experience that provides feelings of resolution or moments of enlightenment that enable them to understand more clearly experiences that have troubled them over an extended period of time. Analysis of events where people overcome great obstacles to achieve something momentous, or when they work exceedingly hard to accomplish something important, can provide great insight into the underlying dynamics of people’s lives Figure 5.4.

The analysis of critical incidents has an extended history in the human service professions, for as Tripp (2012) indicates, this enables teachers to acquire the means to self-monitor their techniques and routines in order to increase the power of their professional judgment. Analysis of critical incidents now extends to a wide range of areas, including education, counseling (Juhnke, 2005; Tyson, 2013), and management (Hinkin, 2005).

As researchers interview people, they may divulge information about events that have special significance. By unpacking this information, they can reveal features and elements that make them so meaningful, and in the process extend their understanding of the way the issues affect their lives. In a similar fashion to the coding and categorizing routine, *key experience analysis* requires researchers to:

- Review the data
  - Read through all the data.
- Identify key experiences

Identify events or experiences that appear to be particularly significant or to have an especially meaningful impact on respondents.

Identify main features of each experience

For each event or experience, identify the features that seem to be a major part of that experience.

Identify the elements associated with each experience

For each feature, identify the elements that comprise the detailed aspects of that experience.

Identify themes

List experiences, features, and elements for each participant. Compare information across other participants to identify experiences and features common to groups of participants. Identify these as themes.

Write an account

Using themes as major headings, write an account of the way that the key experience has impacted on people's lives. This may be presented to appropriate audiences by the persons themselves or presented dramatically or artistically as a play, poem, song, or piece of art.

Case Example: Analyzing a Key Experience

The example in Reflection 5.6 demonstrates how a piece of data can be analyzed and the category system used as the basis for a report on workshop facilitation. The analysis commences with a piece of raw data and identifies a key experience and its associated features and elements. This is an excerpt from field notes written while observing a project team facilitating a planning workshop.

General

Reflection 5.6:

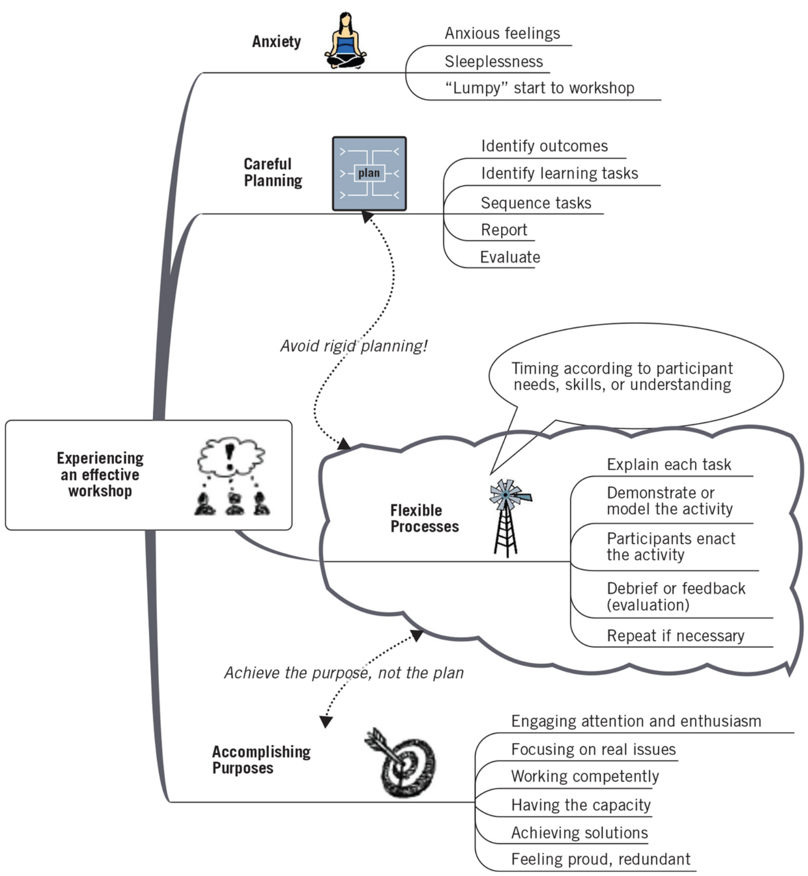
Ernie—Key Experience—An Effective Workshop

I remember the anxiety that used to sit in the pit of my stomach as I watched my junior colleagues commence a large-scale workshop, my mind racing with details of what needed to happen and the "what-ifs" that haunted me. My organizational mind was constantly working on plans to institute remedial steps if things failed to eventuate as they were intended. It was something that nagged me and caused me some sleepless nights.

I eventually learned that the start of a workshop was always likely to be a bit "lumpy" and that, provided facilitators were well prepared and flexible enough *to accommodate the needs and capabilities of participants, they could almost always accomplish their goals.*

As I watched team members facilitating the workshop, I appreciated the careful planning that had occurred and sat proudly as they worked competently with the participants, engaging their attention and enthusiasm. I watched the energy of the participants as they identified the real issues emerging from their work, the outcomes they desired, and the tasks they needed to accomplish. In doing so they demonstrated the flexible processes involved, explaining each task and providing participants with opportunities to trial the activity. I felt that I had become blessedly redundant and that my colleagues had the capacity, evolved from their previous work with me, to carry on the business at hand. They were clear, competent, and well spoken, with the capacity to achieve excellent results and to enable participants to achieve the solutions they sought through their participation.

In Figure 5.5 we share features and elements of an effective workshop, highlighting key ideas from Ernie's experience shared in Reflection 5.6.



Description

Figure 5.5 Features and Elements of an Effective Workshop

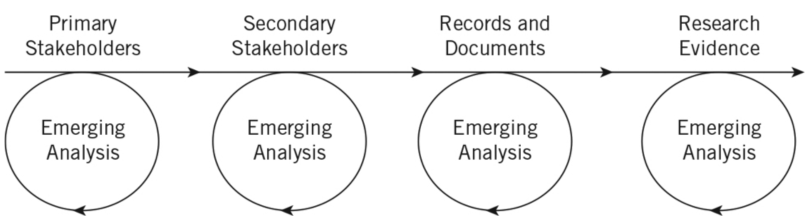
This example provides the key features of Anxiety, Careful Planning, Flexible Processes, and Accomplishing Purposes. The elements composing details of the first and last features are drawn from the previous data. A following interview revealed the elements composing Careful Planning and Flexible Processes. These features and elements could provide the basis for planning future actions or as the basis for a report that enables agency administration to understand how the team had presented an effective workshop.

PHASE II: EXTENDING AND ENRICHING THE ANALYSIS

The first cycles of an action research process enable researchers to refine their focus of investigation and to understand the ways in which primary stakeholders experience and interpret emerging issues. In following cycles, other information is incorporated that further clarifies or extends participants' understanding by adding information from other stakeholders and data sources. In a school research process, for example, the perspectives of parents might be added to those of students and teachers, and school or student records or the research literature might provide relevant information. In a health program, patient and health professional perspectives might be complemented by evidence-based information from the professional literature.

The purpose for this activity is to provide the means for achieving a holistic analysis that incorporates all factors likely to have an impact on achieving an effective solution to the problem investigated. Thus, the part that each major stakeholder plays will be taken into account as well as the substantial information from policy and program documents and the research literature.

The example previously presented of parent concerns for mixed-grade classrooms provides an example of this process. Parents were able to clearly articulate their desire to ensure that their children's education would not suffer from these arrangements and information from the research literature provided them with reassurance. The diagram in Figure 5.6. depicts different types of information that may be incorporated into cycles of an action research process.



Description

Figure 5.6 Incorporating Diverse Data Into an Emerging Analysis

Processes for Extending or Enriching Analysis

When people engage the significant issues embedded in long-standing or highly contentious problems, they sometimes need to engage in extensive research to identify the underlying issues involved in the situation. Analytic processes enable research participants to delve beneath the surface of events to reveal extended and productive understandings that enable them to make better sense of the situation and provide a stronger foundation for actions that follow. Four alternative frameworks are presented in the following sections: interpretive questions, organizational review, concept mapping, and problem analysis. Larger or complex projects may require more extended and detailed frameworks, such as those found in the literature on management, planning, community development, or applied anthropology (Desai, 2014; Kelly & Westoby, 2018; Morreo, 2019; Nahm & Hughes Rinker, 2016; Podolefsky, Brown, & Lacy, 2012).

Alternative 1: Interpretive Questions—Why, What, How, Who, Where, When

Questioning techniques relevant to the initial stages of a project are described in Chapter 4. These might be adequate for relatively simple projects, enabling participants to extend their understanding and resolve the problems and issues they have investigated. As more complex issues are investigated, however, research participants may need to extend their investigation to better understand the emerging complexity, the nature of the problem at hand, and important features of the context that sustain it. Interpretive questions might include the following:

- *Why* are we meeting? (purpose, focus, problem)
- *What* are the key elements and features of the problem?
- *How* is the problem affecting us? What is happening?
- *Who* is being affected?
- *Where* are they being affected?
- *When* are they being affected?

It may be useful for the facilitator to repeat each of these questions a number of times to enable participants to build more information into their interpretations.

More complex projects may require more detailed and extended questioning strategies to reveal important elements of the context:

- The history of the situation—how it came about
- The individuals, groups, and types of actors involved
- Interactions and relationships among the people involved
- The purposes and intents of the people involved
- The sequence and duration of related events and activities
- The attitudes and values of the people involved
- The availability of and access to resources and their use

The following types of questions may be relevant:

- Why?
  - Why are we studying this issue?
  - Why is it significant?
  - To whom is it significant?
  - What do we hope to achieve?

What?

What major activities, events, or issues are relevant to the problem?

What is each person or group doing or not doing?

What are their interests and concerns?

What are their purposes? What do they want to achieve? What do they want to happen?

What do they value?

What resources are available? (people, material, equipment, space, time, funds)

What resources are being used? By whom?

How?

How do acts, activities, and events happen?

How are decisions made?

How are resources used?

How are individuals or groups related to each other?

How do individuals and groups affect the situation?

How much influence do they have?

Who?

Who is centrally involved? (individuals, groups)

Who else is significant?

Who are the influential people? What is the nature of their influence?

Who is linked to whom? In what ways?

Who is friendly or cooperative? With whom?

Who is antagonistic or uncooperative? With whom?

Who has resources? Which ones?

Where?

Where do people live, meet, work, and interact?

Where are resources located?

Where do activities and events happen?

When?

When do things happen?

When are resources available?

When do people meet, work, and engage in activities?

When does the problem occur?

What is the duration of occurrences of the problem?

Not all these questions will be relevant to any one situation. The questions the facilitator selects will depend on the context of the problem and the setting. Research participants should record in detail answers to the questions and should write a summary on a chart that can be seen by all members of the group. Such charts help participants visualize the situation they are interpreting and provide records that can be employed in subsequent activities.

Alternative 2: Organizational Review

In some circumstances—where, for instance, different sections of the same institution or agency experience similar problems—it may be appropriate for the researcher to conduct a review of the whole organization. This activity is intended to reveal different interpretations of problematic features of the organization and sources of the problems. It is intended not as an evaluation of competence or assessment of performance but as a method for discovering points where action can be taken. Participants in the review process should focus on the following features of the organization.

Vision and Mission

Vision. What is the overarching or general purpose of the organization? Education? Health improvement? Assistance for the needy?

Mission. In which ways does the organization seek to enact its vision? Providing educational services, courses, and classes? Engaging in health promotion programs? Providing welfare services?

Objectives and Outcomes

Objectives. How does the organization specifically seek to achieve its purposes? In what activities will it engage?

Outcomes: What are the desired outcomes of these activities? What will actually happen? For whom?

Structure of the Organization

Roles. Are roles clearly delineated? Who works with whom? Who has authority over whom? Who supervises and gives directions? To whom?

Responsibilities. What types of people are responsible for which activities? Who performs which types of tasks?

Rules and procedures. Is it clear what needs to be done and how it is to be done?

Resources. Are the resources required for tasks adequate and available (e.g., time, materials, skills)?

Operations of the Organization

Is each person clear about their roles and responsibilities?

How effectively is each person enacting their roles and responsibilities?

What factors hinder the enactment of those responsibilities (e.g., lack of materials, time, skills, or support)?

Are there tasks and responsibilities to which no one is clearly assigned?

What is not happening that should be? What is happening that should not be? Where are the gaps? Where are the barriers?

Problems, Issues, and Concerns

What problems, issues, and concerns are expressed by stakeholders?

Who is associated with each?

How do stakeholders explain or interpret problems, issues, and concerns?

As participants work through these issues, they will extend their understanding of the organization and aspects of its operation relevant to their problems, issues, and concerns. The outcomes of their inquiries should be recorded in detail and summarized on charts for use in later stages of the research process.

Alternative 3: Concept Mapping

Long-term, entrenched problems frequently defy the remedial efforts of professional practitioners. Occurrences of drug abuse, eating disorders, lack of interest in schoolwork, youth crime, and other problems are so pervasive that they often appear beyond the reach of ordinary programs and services. They exist as part of a complex system of interwoven events and circumstances deeply embedded in the social fabric of the community.

Attempts to remediate these problems are unlikely to be successful if they focus merely on one aspect of the interrelated factors that make up the situation. Quick-fix, “spray-on” solutions rarely work. Participants need to reconceptualize such issues in ways that clearly identify the interrelationships among all the significant elements that affect the situation. The intent of this type of activity is to help participants find a way to pursue multiple holistic and inclusive strategies that assist people in dealing with the problems that affect their lives.

General

Reflection 5.7:

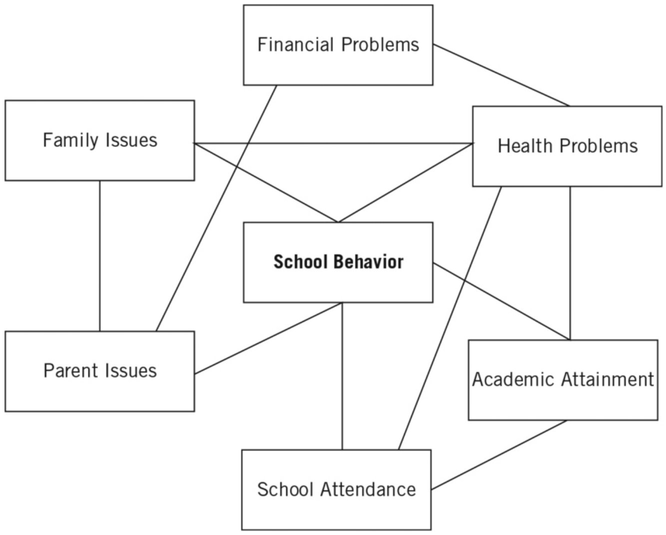
Ernie—An Organizational Review

I once worked with a community childcare agency whose mandate was to find appropriate foster homes for children and to ensure that the foster families were adequately supported. The agency was experiencing a number of difficulties in performing these functions. Staff members were stressed and overworked, and funding sources questioned the effectiveness of the agency's services. When we charted the purposes for which the agency had been formed and matched those against its actual activities, we discovered that staff were engaged in work of peripheral relevance to the agency's stated main function. They were attempting to provide a wide range of support services to foster families—furniture, clothing, food, and counseling—that could be provided by other agencies funded for those purposes. When they understood more clearly what was happening, staff and committee members decided to terminate many of those activities and to link clients to other relevant agencies when such needs arose.

In the first phase of the research process, delineated in Chapter 4, participants describe the problem and define key elements or characteristics of the situation. In concept mapping, those elements are plotted diagrammatically, so that participants can visualize the ways in which components of the situation relate to the problems they are investigating. To guide participants in formulating a concept map, the facilitator should take the following steps:

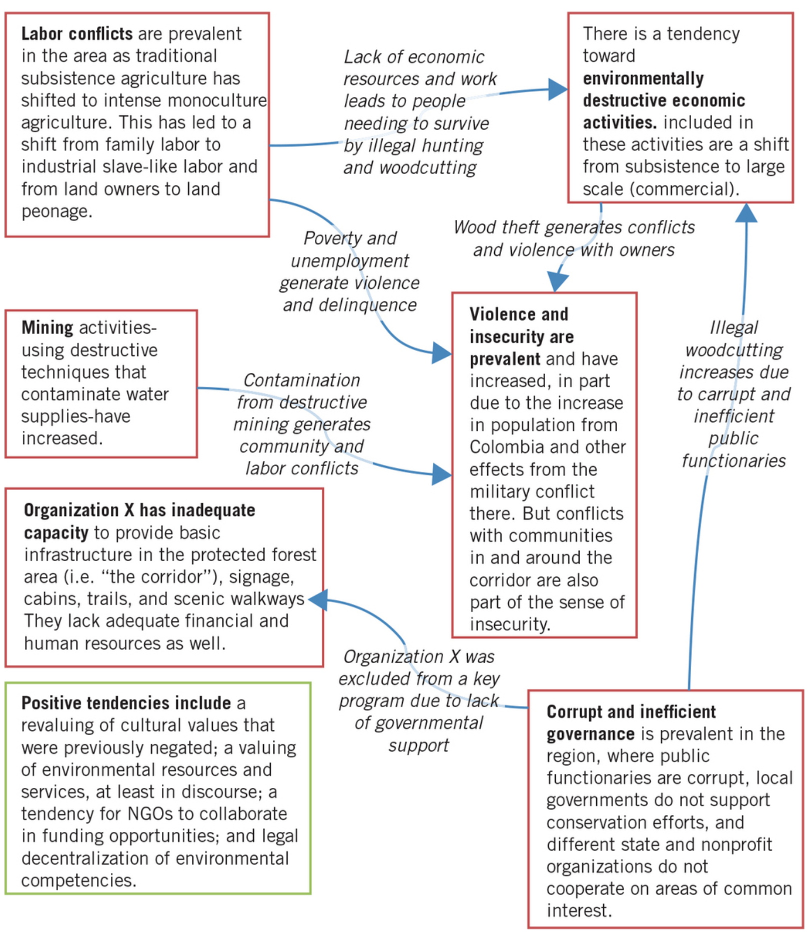
- Begin by printing on a large piece of paper or a board visible to all participants a word or phrase that characterizes the central problem and then enclose the word or phrase inside a geometric figure (e.g., a square or circle).
- Add to the chart other geometric figures labeled to represent elements associated with the problem.
- Link the figures containing the elements that seem to be related to each other.
- Extend the mapping process to include additional figures until each participant is satisfied that all significant elements have been included.

Concept maps help participants visualize the major influences that need to be taken into account and assist them in evaluating whether all relevant stakeholders have been included in the investigation. In Figure 5.7, the appearance of family issues signals the need to involve relevant family members in the inquiry process. The young people who are themselves the focus of the problem should be central to the concept-mapping process. Incorporating additional stakeholders in turn may extend the factors incorporated into the map and thus the elements that need to be considered when action is planned. Activities from other interpretive frameworks (e.g., interpretive questions) can be used to further expand this form of analysis. Figure 5.8 presents a more detailed map that reveals greater detail about the relationships between important features of a challenging situation.



[Description](#)

Figure 5.7 Concept Map of Poor School Behavior



Description

Figure 5.8 Concept Map of Relationships Between Systemic Issues (from Ortiz Aragón, 2013)

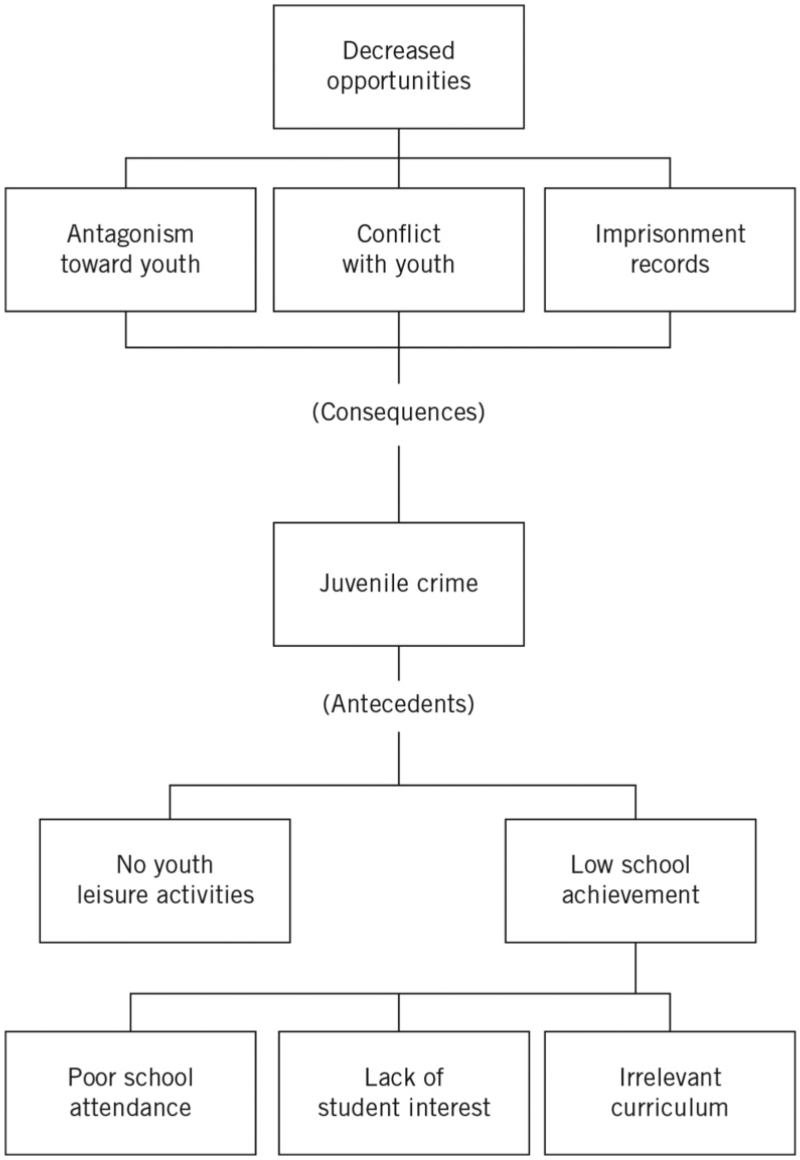
The explanatory frameworks produced in this process are not meant to be scientifically defensible. We are looking not for the best or the correct explanation but for one that makes sense to or can be accommodated by all the stakeholders. In all the processes described earlier, it is essential that each stakeholding group provide input about its own situation. Analyses based on other people's interpretations do not provide an appropriate basis for action. In Figure 5.7, for instance, teacher or administrator perspectives on the family are less relevant than the perspectives of the family members themselves. Outsider interpretations often are incomplete or inaccurate and are sometimes judgmental; they may tend to create divisiveness and hostility, which are antithetical to the participatory principles of action research.

Alternative 4: Problem Analysis—Antecedents and Consequences

An approach similar to concept mapping enables participants to identify the *antecedents* of existing problems (i.e., elements of the situation that led up to the problems) and the *consequences* that derive from those problems. In this process, the facilitator should have each stakeholder group identify the following elements and describe them on a chart:

- The core problem: What is the key issue about which stakeholders are concerned?
- Major antecedents to the problem: What led up to the issues being investigated?
- Other significant factors related to those antecedents: Who, what, where, and so on.
- Major negative consequences: What has happened in relation to the key issue?
- Other significant consequences: Are other things being affected?

Elements of information emerging from this process may be incorporated into a concept map that enables participants to focus on key issues requiring attention and provides the basis for actions to be taken (see Figure 5.9).



[Description](#)

Figure 5.9 Antecedents and Consequences of Juvenile Crime

General

Reflection 5.8:

Ernie—Antecedents and Consequences

A committee of agency workers and community representatives investigated the high incidence of juvenile crime in a small country town. A process of exploration revealed that criminal activity appeared to be related to the lack of leisure activities for teenagers and to poor school attendance. No one in town *accepted responsibility for organizing activities, there were few facilities available for that purpose, and the school provided little in the way of after-school programs or activities. Poor school attendance was directly related to poor school performance, uninteresting or irrelevant curricula, and family poverty.*

As a result of increases in juvenile crime, burglary, petty theft, and vandalism, there was a general increase in alienation of some groups of young people from other sectors of the community. There were increasing incidents of conflict between youth and members of the community, businesspeople, law enforcement personnel, teachers, and so on and deterioration in employment opportunities for young people. The long-term prospects of some youth also seemed likely to be affected by the negative outcomes of incarceration in prisons and other institutions and growing criminal records. This situation is drawn as a concept map in Figure 5.9.

COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES FOR REFLECTION, ANALYSIS, AND REPORTING

Researchers commonly work independently to analyze data and formulate reports on the basis of their own interpretive lenses. In the process they tend to lose the interpretive perspective of other participants and to fashion a report that often fails to adequately represent the perspective of those with whom they work. The following procedures provide the means to engage stakeholding groups in the processes of analysis, thus ensuring that the end result integrates their perspectives and priorities. Research facilitators help participants engage in meaning-making discussion and dialogue—hermeneutic dialectic processes—with the intent of developing mutually acceptable accounts of the issues and problems they are investigating. To facilitate these processes, researchers assist selected participants with organizing meetings, setting an agenda, reviewing descriptive accounts, and analyzing information to be used in formulating ongoing accounts and reports.

An Analysis Workshop

Setting the Agenda

In this phase of the process, participants learn something about the people involved, the purpose of the meeting, and the activities in which they will be engaged. The facilitator’s role includes the following duties:

- Inform people of the purpose of the meeting.
- Provide an opportunity for participants to introduce themselves and identify the groups to which they belong.
- Present a broad agenda for the session.
- Allow time for participants to discuss, clarify, and modify the agenda. Do not discuss the issues at this time but focus on the processes of the meeting.

Reviewing Descriptive Information

The purpose of this activity is to give participants a chance to review the descriptive information produced in previous meetings. This is especially important when stakeholding groups have done some initial work separately. Facilitators should provide opportunities for each stakeholding group to do the following:

- Send written versions of the descriptive accounts or give them to participants prior to the meeting.
- Present a verbal report that summarizes descriptive information produced by their previous activities.
- Present the key elements of these reports on a chart.
- Allow time for meeting participants to discuss and clarify the accounts, avoiding extended or detailed discussion unless there are contentious issues that need to be resolved.

Distilling the Information: Analysis

Using one of the processes for data analysis presented earlier, participants should work collectively to organize the information in the charted summaries into sets of categories. They should identify converging perspectives (i.e., those ideas, concepts, or elements common to all or a number of groups) and diverging perspectives (i.e., those ideas, concepts, or elements found in the accounts of only one or a few groups). Because this activity is time-consuming, it may sometimes be appropriate to formulate a working party to carry it out.

- Participants should select elements from the charts that are perceived to be significant features or characteristics of the issue investigated.
- Participants should sort elements into categories so that those associated in some significant way are clustered together. The idea is to rationalize the large number of individual ideas, accounts, or issues to create a smaller number of categories. In doing so, facilitators should ensure that the process of categorizing does not erase important information. A category labeled *youth issues,* for instance, might erase important distinctions between early and late teens or between males and females. Decisions about ideas that can be incorporated into particular categories and those that must remain separate should be made through discussion and negotiation.
- Participants may organize categories in a variety of ways. A color-coding system may be used, for example, wherein similar items are identified on charts with colored markers. Alternatively, each idea, issue, or concept may be copied onto a card, and the cards can then be sorted into piles according to their similarities or common characteristics. Groups may also use large self-adhesive labels, placing all elements on a large wall and allowing participants to move them around into groups associated together. Participants should know that there is no right way or correct answer for this process. The way they organize the information is the way that makes the best sense to them collectively.
- When participants have reached agreement on the categories and the information contained in each, they should classify each group of concepts according to a label or term that both identifies and describes the category.

Constructing Written Reports

The above processes provide material that forms the basis for reports and identifies actions to be taken by participants. Research facilitators should continue to meet with participating stakeholders—a working group to formulate a report. The working group should do the following:

- Review materials.
- Use the category system developed during analysis as a framework for writing a report.
- Use the outline to write a detailed written report. (Detailed records from meetings should provide the content of the report; see sections on reporting in previous chapters and in Chapter 7.)
- Provide the time and opportunity for all members of the working group to read the report and give feedback.
- Modify the report on the basis of their comments.
- Meet again with the working party if any members suggest significant revisions.
- Distribute the report to all stakeholders.

REPORTING THROUGH PRESENTATIONS AND PERFORMANCES

There are contexts and purposes that may be better served by more creative thinking about the best ways for communicating information to audiences of stakeholders. Although formal written reports may be useful in some contexts, it is possible that more innovative uses of narrative texts, staged performances, or electronic productions may enhance the work in which participants are engaged. Researchers need to keep the audience and the purpose clearly in mind as they assist people to formulate ways to communicate effectively the outcomes of our research processes.

Creative presentations and performances that provide dramatic or artistic accounts of people's experiences may stand alone as part of reporting procedures, providing stakeholding audiences with greater insight into the issues investigated. At other times, however, multiple stories or extended performances may need to be condensed into forms more appropriate for required reporting processes. In both cases, information may be analyzed or interpreted using the same methods described above, with research participants identifying key elements of experience and organizing them into categories and themes. These may be used as the basis for a written report, a presentation, or a performance that captures the experience of multiple participants with greater clarity. These issues will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7.

CONCLUSION

The processes of analysis in this chapter provide the means by which people can rethink an issue and formulate clear, sophisticated, and useful explanations and interpretations of the issues and events investigated. The specific ideas and concepts contained within these interpretive frameworks provide the basis for planning concrete actions to remedy the problems on which the research has focused.

For complex problems involving multiple stakeholding groups, the activities described in this chapter may be enacted within *long cycles* of an action research project. For simpler problems within discrete settings, such as classrooms, offices, and small organizations, they may be incorporated into processes that move more rapidly from description, through interpretation, to problem solving. It is good to keep the distinction between these activities in mind, however, to ensure that people are clear about the nature and purpose of the processes in which they are engaged.

As presented here, the procedures may seem long-winded and complex, but experience will show researchers when and how to consolidate or abbreviate them to ensure a brisk, purposeful flow of activity. Researchers should be wary, however, of simplifying the research process by confining it to a small inner circle or by omitting “troublesome” stakeholders. Participation boosts personal investment in the process, extends people’s understanding of the contexts and social processes in which they are involved, and minimizes the possibility that the research will bog down in conflict. Action research is not just a tool for solving problems but a valuable resource for building a sense of community.

REFLECTION AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Using information gathered during interviews:

1. Analyze the information using a coding and categorizing process. (If you have extensive notes, you may focus on one issue that emerged within the interview.)
2. Present the resulting framework of key features and elements to a friend, colleague, or working group.
3. Explain how that framework enables you to provide an account of the experience and perspective of the person you interviewed.
4. Reflect on and discuss the process of analysis. What did it feel like? What are some of your concerns or questions about the process? How was it informative or helpful?
5. Repeat that process using the technique for analyzing key experiences or critical incidents.
6. Reflect on and discuss that process. How were the outcomes of the two processes different?
7. Using features and elements from one of the frameworks, draw a concept map. Use one issue as the central element of the map.
8. Using features and elements from each framework, present short reports to your friend, colleague, or working group.
9. Reflect on your written reports. Are there more effective ways you might have presented that information to your friend, colleague, or group?
10. Analyze the notes from your observations using a coding and categorizing process. Prepare a framework that identifies key features and elements of the setting that can be used later for writing a full report.

CHAPTER REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to describe processes to **identify and organize significant information** judged to be particularly relevant to the issues being investigated.

Research participants analyze the emerging body of information to identify **key concepts** associated with the **research issue or problem**.

These are then organized into **conceptual frameworks** that enable participants to develop meaningful **descriptions and interpretations** of people's **experiences and perspectives**.

The frameworks enable participants to **make better sense** of people's **lived experience,** making use of **experience-near concept**s people use in their **everyday lives**.

The purpose of analysis is to provide the basis for improved, **empathetic understandings** that assist people in **modifying actions and behaviors** that affect their lives.

Phase I of analysis seeks to identify **significant elements** of **their experience** associated with the issue under investigation.

The chapter presents two methods of analysis:

- **Coding and categorizing** seek to identify significant **features and elements** associated with the issue investigated. Procedures involve:

    - **Reviewing** and **unitizing** the data
    - Placing the units into discrete **categories** that are **identified by a "code"**
    - These categories identify main **themes** and **associated elements.**
    - Themes and elements are organized into a **category system.**
    - These provide a structure to use when preparing **reviews and reports** or **making decisions** about actions to be taken.

- Analysis of **key experiences** or **critical events** focuses on **epiphanic moments** of **insight** or **crisis**. Procedures involve:

    - **Reviewing the data**
    - Identifying **key experiences**
    - Identifying **main features** of each experience
    - Identifying **elements of experience** associated with each feature
    - **Organizing** features and elements into a **category system**
    - Using these categories as the basis for writing accounts or reports

Phase II extends and enriches the emerging **analysis** by incorporating material from other sources. Processes for enriching analysis include:

- Asking **interpretive questions**: why, what, how, who, where, when
- Developing an **organizational review** entailing exploration of the following issues:
  - Vision and mission
  - Objectives and outcomes
  - Structure of the organization
  - Operation of the organization
  - Problems, issues, and concerns

Concept mapping involves constructing a **concept map** that reveals the **interrelationship between features** of the issues investigated.

Constructing a **concept map** shows the relationship between activities and events preceding the problematic issue and the outcomes that followed.

Collaborative processes for reflection and analysis provide the basis for **reporting on progress** and **determining actions** to be taken. An analysis workshop suggests the following procedures:

- Setting the agenda
- Reviewing descriptive information
- Distilling the information
- Constructing written reports

Descriptions of Images and Figures

Back to Figure

The image, which is separated into three segments by two greater than operators, is described asfollows:

- The left segment is labeled “Data in many forms” and has a cluster of differently sized solid circles, labeled “Bits & strings of meaning.”
- The central segment is labeled “Meaning attached” and has three rows of texts listed as follows:
  - Structured data
  - Data structured
  - Structured data

The right segment is labeled “Findings” and has a big, solid circle labeled “Interpreted data.”

Back to Figure

Details of the flowchart are tabulated as follows:

<table>
<tr><th>–</th><th>Students</th><th>Teachers</th><th>Administrators</th></tr>
<tr><td>DATA SETS BY ACTOR-TYPE</td><td>This segment in the illustration is a circle that has 11 smaller circles randomly distributed inside it.</td><td>This segment in the illustration is a circle that has 5 smaller circles randomly distributed inside it.</td><td>This segment in the illustration is a circle that has 3 smaller circles randomly distributed inside it.</td></tr>
<tr><td>UNITIZED DATA (Comprised of codes / meaning of units)</td><td>This segment in the illustration is a rectangle that has differently oriented and randomly distributed small lines.</td><td>This segment in the illustration is a rectangle that has differently oriented and randomly distributed small lines.</td><td>This segment in the illustration is a rectangle that has differently oriented and randomly distributed small lines. The lines in this box are lesser than the lines in the adjacent box.</td></tr>
<tr><td>CATEGORIES BY ACTOR-TYPE</td><td>This segment in the illustration comprises 4 horizontal ovals randomly and vertically stacked.</td><td>This segment in the illustration comprises 3 horizontal ovals randomly and vertically stacked.</td><td>This segment in the illustration comprises 3 horizontal ovals randomly and vertically stacked.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">THEMES (Cross-cutting, with relationship established)</td><td colspan="2">This segment in the illustration is a box that comprises a dotted line</td><td>This segment in the illustration is a box that comprises a dotted line</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="2">This segment in the illustration is a box that comprises a dotted line</td></tr>
</table>

Each of the three themes is connected to two other themes via double-headed arrows.

Back to Figure

Data shown by the image are tabulated as follows:

The center of the letter X is labeled “Key features of concern from agency staff, clients, and client parents”

The left arm of the letter X lists the following:

- Health
  - Food preparation
  - Diet
- Environment

Maintenance

Personalization

Safety issues

Confidentiality

Consent

Family Input

Plans

General

Outcomes

Significant events

The right arm of the letter X lists the following:

Relationships

Between staff

Between staff and families

Between staff and clients

Information Sharing

Written

Verbal

Meetings

Recruitment

Social events

Skills

Assess and record

Reviews

Participation

Back to Figure

Details of the flowchart are tabulated asfollows:

–	**Student perspectives**	**Teacher perspectives**	**Administrator perspectives**
UNITIZED DATA (*Comprised of codes / meaning of units*)	This segment in the illustration is a rectangle that has differently oriented and randomly distributed small lines.	This segment in the illustration is a rectangle that has differently oriented and randomly distributed small lines.	This segment in the illustration is a rectangle that has differently oriented and randomly distributed small lines The lines in this box are lesser than the lines in the adjacent box.
CATEGORIES BY ACTOR-TYPE (*with subunits of meaning*)	This segment in the illustration has an oval at its top labeled "Feedback from teachers." 3 dashed horizontal lines hang from the oval via a common solid vertical line. Each of the dashed lines is underlined by a solid line.	This segment in the illustration has an oval at its top labeled "Student achievement." 3 dashed horizontal lines hang from the oval via a common solid vertical line. Each of the dashed lines is underlined by a solid line.	This segment in the illustration has an oval at its top labeled "Standards & testing." 3 dashed horizontal lines hang from the oval via a common solid vertical line. Each of the dashed lines is underlined by a solid line.
	This segment in the illustration has an oval at its top labeled "Improved grades." 2 dashed horizontal lines hang from the oval via a common solid vertical line. Each of the dashed lines is underlined by a solid line.	This segment in the illustration has an oval at its top labeled "Learning materials." 2 dashed horizontal lines hang from the oval via a common solid vertical line. Each of the dashed lines is underlined by a solid line.	This segment in the illustration has an oval at its top labeled "Infrastructure & budget." 4 dashed horizontal lines hang from the oval via a common solid vertical line. Each of the dashed lines is underlined by a solid line.
	This segment in the illustration has an oval at its top labeled "Freedom & creativity." 2 dashed horizontal lines hang from the oval via a common solid vertical line. Each of the dashed lines is underlined by a solid line.	This segment in the illustration has an oval at its top labeled "Student relationships." 2 dashed horizontal lines hang from the oval via a common solid vertical line. Each of the dashed lines is underlined by a solid line.	
THEMES (*Cross-cutting, with relationship established*)	This segment in the illustration is a box that has the following text: "Balancing student achievement with grading standards & testing"		This segment in the illustration is a box that has the following text: "Seeking learning materials & infrastructure that support creative freedom"
		This segment in the illustration is a box that has the following text: "Formative feedback & student / faculty relationships"	

Each of the themes is connected to two other themes via double-headed arrows listed as follows:

Double-headed arrow labeled “Different worlds” connects the following themes:

Balancing student achievement with grading standards & testing

Seeking learning materials & infrastructure that support creative freedom

Double-headed arrow labeled “Enabling learning environment” connects the following themes:

Seeking learning materials & infrastructure that support creative freedom

Formative feedback & student/faculty relationships

Double-headed arrow labeled “Learning vs testing” connects the following themes:

Formative feedback & student/faculty relationships

Balancing student achievement with grading standards & testing

Back to Figure

Data shown by the flowchart are tabulated as follows:

–	**Research Question**					
–	**Students**		**Teachers**		**PTA Members**	
Individual Data Sets	This box in the illustration has 6 oval discs that are scattered inside it.		This box in the illustration has 4 oval discs that are scattered inside it.		This box in the illustrati 5 oval discs that are sc inside it.	
Key Experiences	This box in the illustration is connected to an oval disc from the previous box and has the following rows of asterisks: Row 1: 6 asterisks Row 2: 4 asterisks Row 3: 3 asterisks	This box in the illustration is connected to an oval disc from the previous box and has the following rows of asterisks: Row 1: 3 asterisks Row 2: 2 asterisks Row 3: 6 asterisks	This box in the illustration is connected to an oval disc from the previous box and has the following rows of asterisks: Row 1: 4 asterisks Row 2: 7 asterisks	This box in the illustration is connected to an oval disc from the previous box and has the following rows of asterisks: Row 1: 2 asterisks Row 2: 4 asterisks Row 3: 6 asterisks	This box in the illustration is connected to an oval disc from the previous box and has the following rows of asterisks: Row 1: 5 asterisks Row 2: 2 asterisks	This bo illustra connec an ova from th previou and ha followi of aste Row 1 asteris 2: 5 as Row 3 asteris
Categories & Elements of Experiences	This box in the illustration looks like a report/resume.	This box in the illustration looks like a report/resume.	This box in the illustration looks like a report/resume.	This box in the illustration looks like a report/resume.	This box in the illustration looks like a report/resume.	This bo illustra looks li report/
Individual Accounts	This box in the illustration is empty.	This box in the illustration is empty.	This box in the illustration is empty.	This box in the illustration is empty.	This box in the illustration is empty.	This bo illustra empty.

–	Research Question		
–	**Students**	**Teachers**	**PTA Members**
Joint Reports	**Student Report**	**Teacher Report**	**PTA Report**
Collective report	**SCHOOL REPORT**		

Back to Figure

The illustration shows a vertical, slightly curved line that has four branches on its right. The vertical line is labeled “Experiencing an effective workshop” and has an exclamation mark inside a cloud icon, which is above three bust icons, at its center. Each branch is labeled, has an icon, and has different number of subbranches. Data shown by the branches and its subbranches are listed as follows:

- Anxiety: It has a colorful icon of a meditating female and has the following branches:
  - Anxious feelings
  - Sleeplessness
  - “Lumpy” start to workshop
- Careful Planning: It has an icon that looks like two letter Es placed back-to-back. A Horizontal V is attached by its base to each tip of the two Es. At its center is a rectangular box that reads“plan” and has the following branches:
  - Identity outcomes
  - Identity learning tasks
  - Report
  - Evaluate
- Flexible Processes: It has an Aermotor-type windmill icon with a dialog box that reads “Timing according to participant needs, skills, or understanding” and has the following branches:
  - Explain each task
  - Demonstrate or model the activity
  - Participants enact the activity
  - Debrief or feedback (evaluation)
  - Repeat if necessary
- Accomplishing Purposes: It has an arrow-piercing-a-bullseye icon and has the following branches:
  - Engaging attention and enthusiasm

Focusing on real issues

Working competently

Having the capacity

Achieving solutions

Feeling proud, redundant

Flexible Processes is connected to Careful Planning and Accomplishing Purposes via dotted double-headed arrows labeled “avoid rigid planning” and “achieve the purpose, not the plan,” respectively.

Back to Figure

In the image, there are four circles that are labeled “emerging analysis.” The circles have a leftward arrowhead on their circumferences and are attached to a line above them that has four rightward arrowheads on it. Each arrowhead is preceded by different data types, which are listed from left to right, as follows:

Primary Stakeholders

Secondary Stakeholders

Records and Documents

Research Evidence

Back to Figure

In the image, a rectangular block labeled “School Behavior” is at the center. It is surrounded by and connected to the following rectangular blocks:

Financial Problems

Health Problems

Academic Attainment

School Attendance

Parent Issues

Family Issues

Some of the above blocks, which are connected to one or more blocks surrounding the “School Behavior” block, are listed as follows:

Financial Problems is connected to Health Problems and Parent Issues.

Parent Issues is also connected to Family Issues.

Health Problems is also connected to Family Issues, Academic Attainment, and School Attendance.

Academic Attainment is also connected to School Attendance.

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The following systemic issues are inside the same type of colored boxes:

> **Labor conflicts** are prevalent in the area as traditional subsistence agriculture has shifted to intense monoculture agriculture. This has led to a shift from family labor to industrial slave-like labor and from land owners to land peonage
>
> There is a tendency toward **environmentally destructive economic activities**. Included in these activities are a shift from subsistence to large scale (commercial)
>
> **Violence and insecurity are prevalent** and have increased, in part due to the increase in population from Colombia and other effects from the military conflict there. But conflicts with communities in and around the Corridor are also part of the sense of insecurity.
>
> **Mining** activities using destructive techniques which contaminate water supplies–have increased.
>
> **Organization X has inadequate capacity** to provide basic infrastructure in the protected forest area (i.e. “the corridor”), signage, cabins, trails, and scenic walkways. They lack adequate financial and human resources as well.
>
> **Corrupt and inefficient governance** is prevalent in the region, where public functionaries are corrupt, local governments do not support conservation efforts, and different state and nonprofit organizations do not cooperate on areas of common

The following systemic issue is listed inside a differently colored box:

> **Positive tendencies include** a revaluing of cultural values that were previously negated, a valuing of environmental resources and services, at least in discourse, a tendency for NGOs to collaborate in funding opportunities, and legal decentralization of environmental competencies.

The following arrows connect a systemic issue connect to one or more systemic issue:

> An upward arrow, labeled “Illegal woodcutting due to corrupt and inefficient public functionaries,” from **Corrupt and inefficient governance** box points to **environmentally destructive economic activities** box.
>
> A leftward arrow, labeled “Organization X was excluded from a key program due to lack of government support,” from C**orrupt and inefficient governance** box points to O**rganization X has inadequate capacity** box.
>
> A downward arrow, labeled “Wood theft generates conflicts and violence with owners,” from **Environmentally destructive economic activities** box points to **Violence and insecurity** box.
>
> A rightward arrow, labeled “Lack of economic resources and work leads to people needing to survive by illegal hunting and woodcutting,” from **Labor conflicts** box points to **environmentally destructive economic activities** box.
>
> A rightward arrow, labeled “Poverty and unemployment generate violence and delinquency,” from **Labor conflicts** box points to V**iolence and insecurity** box.

A rightward arrow, labeled “Contamination from destructive mining generates community and labor conflicts,” from **Mining** box points to V**iolence and insecurity** box.

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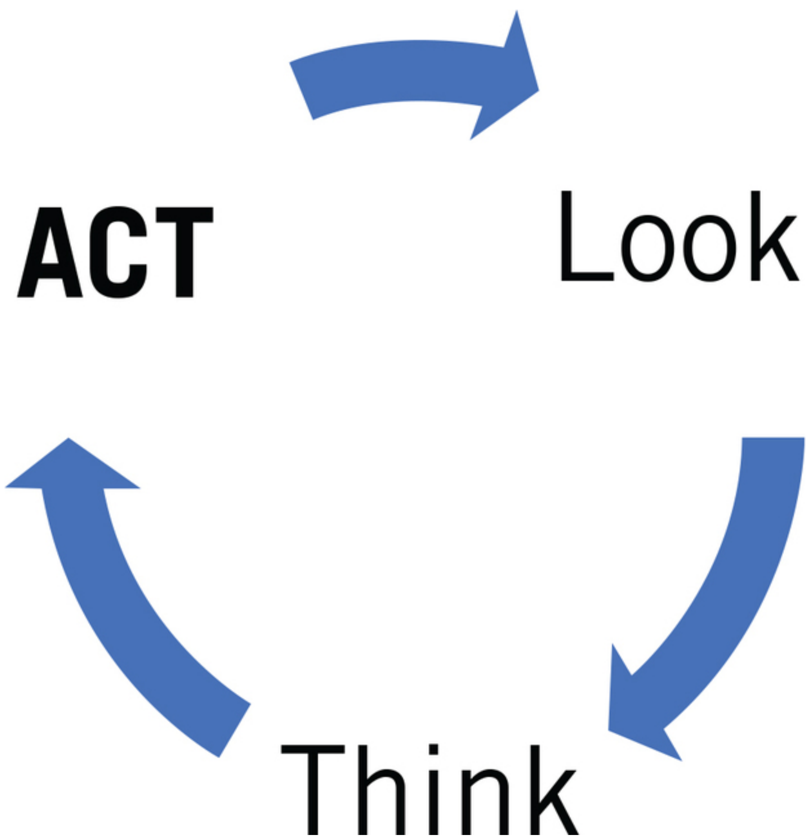
The details shown by the chart arelisted as follows:

- Juvenile Crime
  - Consequences
    - Antagonism toward youth
    - Conflict with youth
    - Imprisonment records
    - The three preceding bullet points are enclosed in a rectangle and collectively point to Decreased opportunities
  - Antecedents
    - No youth leisure activities
    - Low school achievement
      - Poor school attendance
      - Lack of student interest
      - Irrelevant curriculum

6 ACT: IMPLEMENTING PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

INTRODUCTION

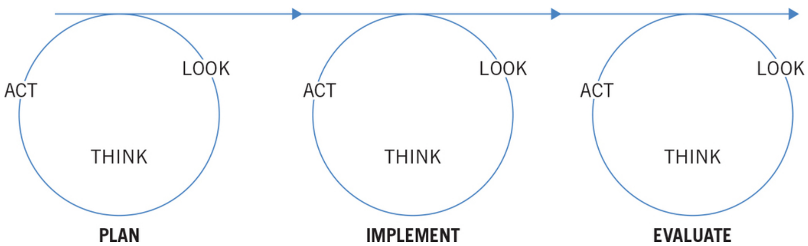
Action research is built on the premise that new understandings we generate will directly lead to plans, "next steps," or other actions to initiate changes to improve the well-being of primary stakeholders. In doing so, we may also improve our professional practices, finding out what works and what is ineffective (Mertler, 2019). In this phase of action research, participants work creatively to formulate actions that lead to a resolution of the problem(s). What can we *do*, they should ask, that will enable us to achieve better results or a more positive outcome? What can we *do* to ensure that we accomplish the outcomes we desire? Elements and categories that have emerged from the interpretive processes described in the previous chapter suggest key areas or aspects of the situation that need to be dealt with in any plan for taking action. Participants then develop action plans that identify what they will *do* and *how* to work toward a resolution of the issues under investigation.



Action plans often can be incorporated into the regular operations of professional or organizational life so that practitioners may work with students, clients, customers, or colleagues to devise lesson plans, care plans, case management plans, marketing plans, urban renewal plans, and so on. This chapter therefore presents systematic ways of planning and implementing intentional actions that distinguish action research from other approaches to inquiry.

REVIEWING AND REPORTING

We have previously described short-cycle and long-cycle action research. Long-cycle refers to action research processes that follow the Look–Think–Act; process as discreet phases, finishing with a major action planning and implementation phase (Act). Short-cycle action research refers to the ways Look–Think–Act activities occur more fluidly and in an ongoing and sometimes unconscious manner. Short-cycle action research speaks to the ongoing processes that resonate through every step of a project, participants taking an attitude of inquiry to continue to observe events (Look), carefully reflect on what they are seeing (Think), and determining next steps to be taken (Act; see Figure 6.1). As actions emerge, they in turn are subject to careful observation and reflection, the old adage "actions speak louder than words" reflecting the reality that we learn so much from the actions and events emerging from our activities. An important aspect of these short cycles of action research is the need to constantly review and evaluate developments as they occur, using these as the basis for planning next steps. They can be considered as being part of important ongoing feedback loops, or even as triangulation in more formal research processes.



Description

Figure 6.1 Look–Think–Act as a Long-Cycle Action Research Process

General

Reflection 6.1:

Ernie—Devising Effective Solutions

I've seen superb results achieved through action research processes. In classrooms I've seen students, previously unengaged and uninspired, excitedly and animatedly focusing on their work. I've seen teachers, exasperated with the apparently inflexible nature of their context, find concrete and productive ways of reframing their classroom activities. In one school a teacher reviewed the operation of parent–teacher conferences, describing the situation, subjecting it to analysis, and formulating solutions that emerged from this process.

"Dr. Stringer, I don't know what I can do about parent–teacher conferences. We only have 10 minutes with the parents for each child, and that's only time to go through the report, and time's almost up. We can't really engage in any decent conversation about the child's progress or any problems we're experiencing." [Look]

As she expanded on these comments, she started to explore the issue further. "It's very frustrating, because parents can really be a great help when they work with us. What I really need to do is to spend time explaining how I set up lessons, what I'm trying to achieve with their child, and the problems they are *having. They'd then understand what's happening and might be able to help their child do what needs to be done to improve their work." [Think]*

She then started to think of ways that she could achieve these purposes. "You know it's impossible to do all that in the time available. What I could do is to meet with groups of parents and explain my teaching processes and problems that their children experience. We could then talk about how parents could do some things to assist with this or provide their children with specific ways of helping them. We wouldn't need to . . . ." She then explored a number of ideas related to this and left, bubbling with excitement and enthusiasm. [Act]

Although I left that city shortly after, I heard later that she and other teachers had instituted a number of ways to improve parent–teacher conferences and that the process had proved so productive that the school had allocated more time to these activities. The action emerging from the teacher's review of parent–teacher conferences enabled her to discover how she could work with other stakeholders (teachers and parents) to resolve what had initially appeared an intractable problem.

SHORT-CYCLE REVIEWS AND REPORTS

Short cycles in an action research project require reasonably simple reviews of actions taking place to ensure that people keep track of their progress and inform other stakeholding participants of developments. Participants should meet on a regular basis to review their progress. Preliminary plans should be displayed at these meetings, and each of the participants performing tasks should be given the opportunity to do the following:

Review the plan (Focus question: Have you had any thoughts on our plan?)

Report on progress (How are you progressing with your tasks?)

Modify sections of the plan, if necessary (Are you having any difficulties? Do we need to change our approach? Do we need to change the tasks you've been assigned?)

Celebrate successes (What have we achieved?)

These processes also present opportunities for rethinking aspects of the description, interpretation, and planning processes and provide extra support for people experiencing difficulty. Participants may find, for instance, that they require more information, that the tasks they have been assigned turn out to be inappropriate in some way, or that their activities are being blocked. In these cases, plans will need to be modified to take into account the increased understanding that comes from each reiteration of the process, and they will successfully negotiate the complex web of meanings, interactions, and discourses that are part of any context.

Short-cycle reviews are described by Wadsworth (2011) in terms of open inquiry evaluation that examines actions emerging from each phase of a project. Procedural questions for this task include the following:

1. General questions: How are we doing? What are we doing? What's working? What's not? How do we know?
2. Problem-posing and problem-solving questions: How could we improve what we are doing?
3. "Opening up" questions: Why are we doing this?
4. Focusing on immediate problems: What do we need to deal with first?
5. Reviewing purposes: What did we set out to do? Are we heading in the right direction?

6. Reviewing intended actions: What are the next steps we need to take?
7. How can we let other stakeholders know what's happening?

Each of these specific questions allows participants to generate usable knowledge to provide feedback and prioritize next steps. The knowledge generated can be used as a reflective mirror that helps interpret progress and informs future action in a timely manner. Short briefing documents, mind maps, reflective documents, stocktaking meetings, and other processes that document, share, and generate feedback on important developments in an action research process may be used to support short-cycle learning. In Chapter 7, we describe short-cycle reporting in more detail.

Issues deeply embedded in the structures and processes of social and organizational life, however, may require more extended and systematic actions to resolve the problems under investigation. In these cases, participants need to carefully plan the actions that will define the pathways that provide direction and purpose to ongoing action. These are not rigidly definitive but subject to modification and refinement as participants extend their knowledge and increase their understanding of the issues and dynamics embedded in events. Actions, therefore, are seen as *emergent* rather than fixed and directive. The following section therefore suggests planning procedures for processes for determining actions that suit the participatory and flexible approaches to investigation characteristic of action research.

ACTION PLANNING

People often assume that a professional analysis provides the best way of envisioning a problem and that all that is needed is a "recipe" or a set of prescribed actions they can put into operation. The problem with imposed recipe-like solutions is that they fail to take account of the underlying issues that have made the experience problematic for participants in the first place. Recipe-based solutions often are based on the worldview or professional expertise of practitioners and fail to recognize the deep understandings that people have of their own experience and the underlying issues that are a central part of the problem. Professional knowledge can only ever provide a partial and incomplete analysis of the situation and needs to complement and be complemented by the knowledge inherent in participant perspectives. This is especially true in situations where practitioners interact with people whose personal history, culture, or social background is markedly different from their own.

For these reasons, it is essential for participants, especially primary stakeholders, to participate in planning the tasks and activities that will enable them to achieve a resolution to the issues at the heart of the action research process. The following procedures are based on long-cycle action research (i.e., a more intentional action planning stage) and provide a framework of action that involves three phases:

Planning, which involves setting priorities and defining tasks

Implementing activities that assist participants to accomplish their tasks

Evaluating, in which participants review their progress

In the planning phase, research facilitators meet with major stakeholders to devise actions to be taken. As stakeholders devise a course of action that makes sense to them and engage in activities that they see as purposeful and productive, they are likely to invest considerable time and energy in research activities, developing a sense of ownership that maximizes the likelihood of success.

Identifying Priorities for Action

Sometimes the results of analysis identify a single issue needing attention, and research participants may formulate a plan immediately. Often, however, there are multiple related issues requiring action, so participants will need to make decisions about the issue on which they will first focus and some order of priority for other issues. To accomplish this, participants should do the following:

- Identify the major issue(s) on which their investigation focused
- Review other concerns and issues that emerged from their analysis
- Organize the issues in order of importance
- Rate the issues according to degree of difficulty (it is often best to commence with simpler activities that are likely to be successful)
- Choose the issue(s) they will work on first
- Rank the rest in order of priority for action
- Construct an action plan

Constructing Action Plans

After prioritizing their actions, participants plan a series of steps or tasks that will enable them to work toward resolution of the issues(s) they have been investigating. Each issue is first restated as a goals and objectives. In the example in Reflection 6.2, the issue of "increasing juvenile crime" might be restated as a goal: "to reduce juvenile crime." The features and elements related to this issue, revealed through the processes of analysis, are restated as objectives. The analysis of juvenile crime depicted in Figure 5.9 (Chapter 5, p. 190) suggests that features related to increased juvenile crime include "lack of youth leisure activities," "poor school attendance," and "lack of after-school programs." These would be stated as a set of objectives: "to develop youth leisure activities," "to improve youth school attendance," and "to organize after-school programs." Teams of relevant stakeholders would then develop a plan for each issue and bring them to plenary sessions for discussion, modification (if necessary), and endorsement.

General

Reflection 6.2:

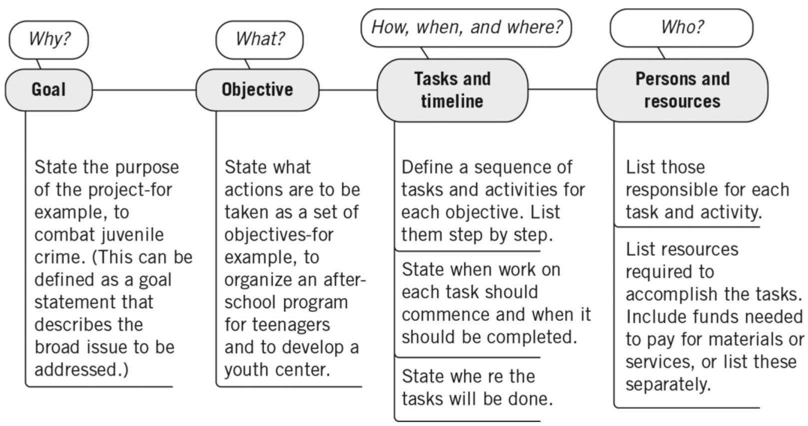
Ernie—Action Planning

A social worker engaged to investigate issues related to increasing juvenile crime in a rural town (see Chapter 5, p. 190) identified vandalism, petty theft, and increased court appearances by local youth as major concerns. The investigation also revealed that there were very few sporting activities in the town due to the lack of an appropriate venue. Further, after-school activities that had previously engaged many children and youth had ceased due to lack of funds. These and other related issues had resulted in young people engaging in activities including damage to property or petty theft, or other actions that kept them away from school.

After conversations with local youth, teachers at the school, local government officials, police, and community members, she organized a committee made up of members from each of these groups. The committee reviewed the evidence she had accumulated and decided to focus on ways to engage youth in more productive activities. The committee agreed that a youth center would provide a venue for sporting and other social activities, nominating that as a major priority. They also decided to seek funds to reinstate the after-school *program that had provided young people with interesting and useful activities. Committee members believed that these would be effective in reducing youth crime and other concerns related to local youth*.

A related set of *outcome statements* can provide the means for evaluating the success of the planned activities. Such outcome statements describe the outcomes more clearly—using the previously mentioned objectives, for example, results in outcome statements that answer how many leisure activities have been organized, how well attended they were, and within what time line they occurred; the specific extent to which school attendance is to be improved; and what type of after-school programs were there, with what attendance, within what time line. Throughout these processes, each planning group should include a member from each of the major stakeholding groups wherever possible. The issue of poor school attendance, for instance, should have a team that includes teachers, youth, school administrators, and parents.

A simple six-question framework—why, what, how, who, where, and when—provides the basis for planning (Figure 6.2).



Description

Figure 6.2 Six-Question Framework

Action plans should be recorded on a chart, whiteboard, or screen so that people have a clear picture of how they will achieve their goal(s) (Figure 6.3). They may also be recorded in a computer so that members and other stakeholders may keep track of progress. The action plans provide a concrete vision of the active community of which they are a part and enable participants to check on their progress as they work through the stages of the project together. Once planning is completed, participants can check that each issue has an action plan and that each person is clear about their responsibilities. They can also check the availability of material and human resources required for the tasks they must complete.

Objectives and Outcomes (What)	Tasks (How)	Person(s) (Who)	Time (Who)	Location (Where)	Resources	Funds
Objective 1 Establish a youth center. Outcome Youth are participating in sporting activities.	a. Obtain permission to use old school building. b. Repair and renovate. c. Plan operation of sports center. d. Plan sports activities. e. Implement the plan.	Mrs. Farole Parent volunteers Students volunteers	Start 3/4/21 Finish 6/2/21	Old school building	Paint Timber Tools	$15,000 School district Town council Government grant
Objective 2 Establish after-school programs. Outcome Youth are actively participating in after-school activities.	a. Establish an art program. b. Establish a music program. c. Establish a tutoring program.	Mr. Baldwin Jose Marina Venus	Start 4/1/21 Finish 6/2/21	Local school	Art materials Sports equipment	$3,500 School district Fees

Description

Figure 6.3 An Action Plan

CASE EXAMPLES OF OUTCOME STATEMENTS

Outcome statements describe what will be achieved—the end result of the activities delineated in the plan. Where objective statements present a list of intentions, outcome statements describe what is actually to be achieved in relation to the overall goal of the project—the impact it will have on the people involved. The following examples map out the outcomes for the youth center and after-school program plans that emerged as actions to be taken to decrease youth crime (Figure 6.3).

Youth Center Outcomes

By June 2, 2021, the youth center team will have done the following:

- Obtained permission from the principal and the school board to use the disused independent classroom for a youth center
- Completed repairs to flooring and repainted the classroom
- Formulated a plan for the operation of the youth center as a venue for youth sports activities
- Started a program of youth sports

After-school Program Outcomes

By July 3, 2021, the after-school program team will have done the following:

- Established art, music, and tutoring programs
- Identified and engaged volunteers to run the programs
- Planned the programs
- Obtained relevant supplies and materials

Prepared and delivered promotional materials to the school, local youth clubs, sports clubs, and churches

Ensured an adequate supply of furnishings and equipment

Quality Check: Maintaining Our Principles of Practice

The heart of action research is not the techniques and procedures that guide action but the sense of unity that holds people to a collective vision of their world and inspires them to work together for the common good. The planning processes detailed earlier provide a clear set of tasks and activities, but they are not complete until these activities are checked against a set of principles. The essence of this part of the planning process is not only to check that the tasks have been described adequately but to ensure that each of the participants is aware of the need to perform them in ways consonant with community-based processes.

General

Reflection 6.3:

Ernie—Empowering Planning Processes

Action planning can be an energizing process for those involved. In my work in East Timor, I was heartened by the sense of excitement and anticipation that resulted from the development of action plans. In a parent–teacher association (PTA) workshop in one school, I watched the interest building as parents worked in small groups to identify activities in which they could engage to assist in improving the work of the local school. Their interest grew to excitement at the planning session, their faces glowing with anticipation as the plans emerged so that they could clearly see the step-by-step processes through which they could accomplish their goals. A group of farmers, having decided they would build a small "fish pond (farm)" to raise money for the school, grew quite animated as they formulated their action plan with the assistance of a facilitator:

"What do you want to do?"

"We want to build a fish farm."

"How will you do this?"

"We need to find some land to build the fish farm."

"How can you get land?"

"I know someone who will donate the land."

"What will you do next?"

"We must build the dikes to hold the water."

"Who will do that?"

"We can do that ourselves."

"What else will you need to do?"

"We need a net to cover the pond so the birds won't get the fish."

. . . and so on.

After the facilitators had recorded all the information, they drew an action planning framework on a chart taped to the chalkboard and inserted details. Missing elements led to more questions that resulted in a complete plan for the development of the fish pond. The sense of pride and accomplishment among men in the group was evident, for here they could see clearly how to put their ideas into practice—a great sense of empowerment.

I have a photograph that shows the men standing by their pond some months later, proudly showing visitors the completed project. They were clearly invested in the school, and later I heard that they sold their fish in the local market to provide funds to buy materials needed for the reconstruction of classrooms that had been burned down.

Each participant should have the opportunity to discuss their tasks and activities so that all describe what they will do and the way in which they will go about doing it. Facilitators should assist this process by having participants check their activities against the criteria for the well-being of the people (see Chapter 1). Each person should be sure that their tasks and activities are enacted in ways that will enhance other people's feelings:

Pride: Feelings of self-worth (Will these activities enhance people's images of themselves?)

Dignity: Feelings of autonomy, independence, and competence (Are we doing something for people instead of enabling them to do it, either by themselves or with our assistance?)

Identity: Affirmation of individuals' social identities (Are the right people performing the tasks? Are women, for instance, performing tasks related to women's issues?)

Control: Feelings of control over resources, decisions, actions, events, and activities (Can people perform the tasks in their own way?)

Responsibility: People's accounting for their own actions (Are we trusting them to perform the tasks in ways that make sense to them?)

Unity: The solidarity of groups of which people are members (Do they have to alienate themselves from their group to perform the tasks?)

Place: Places where people feel at ease (Can they do the tasks in their own places?)

Location: Locales to which people have historical, cultural, or social ties (Do we need to relocate some of our activities?)

Mary Brydon-Miller and her student colleagues have developed a similar process of determining quality of relationships by matching values to action research processes. The *ethical reflection grid* (Brydon-Miller, Rector Aranda, & Stevens, 2015) uses a participatory process to identify ethical values that participants (e.g., primary stakeholders and researchers) find important and then uses those values to identify behaviors that will be important in each phase of an action research process. Participants review the quality of their processes by reflecting on the ethical values embedded in the project in which they are engaged. The following are examples of ethical values and questions that participants—utilizing the ethical reflection grid—may indentify to guide them in their action research process:

Authenticity: Are we putting ourselves in the picture and letting participants know us as we get to know them?

Critical thinking: Are we accepting arguments at face value or encouraging participants to ask difficult questions?

Flexibility: Are we open to areas of focus that we may not be expecting?

Justice: Are we making sure primary stakeholders are central in the process?

Enjoyment: Are we able to keep it light and enjoy the process and encourage others to do the same?

Practicality: Are we focusing enough on that which is practical to our stakeholders?

Action research teams can revisit these values at each phase of the project to reflect on the extent to which they have upheld their ethical values and to develop questions for the next phase. In similar terms, teams may check whether their activities are consonant with the principles outlined in Chapter 1:

Relationships: Are processes encouraging productive working relationships between people?

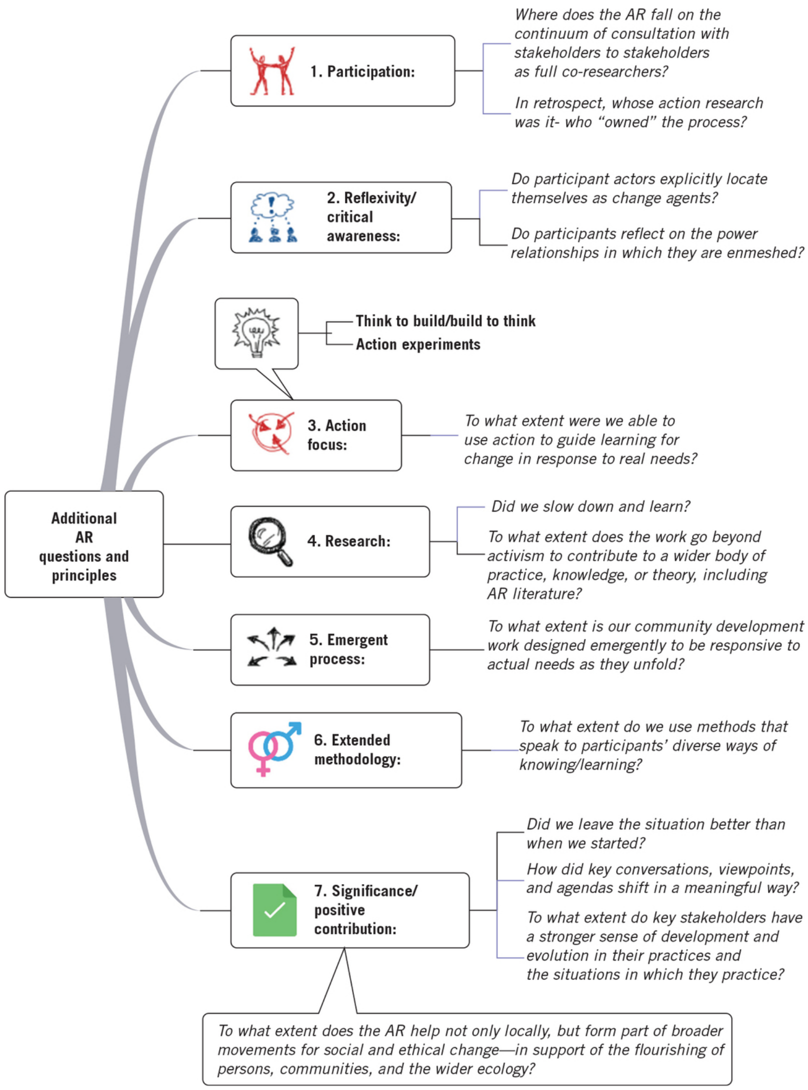
Communication: Are regular times for sharing information included in plans?

Participation: Do major stakeholders engage in tasks set in the plans?

Inclusion: Are all major stakeholders included in the plan?

The time and energy spent on this quality check constitutes a sound investment of personal resources, as it is likely to minimize delays and blockages by ensuring that all stakeholders are acknowledged and respected. The participatory and inclusive relationships enacted in action research provide the benefit of a harmonious, supportive, and energizing environment that is not only personally rewarding but also practically productive.

Figure 6.4 presents another useful guide to check the intrinsic quality of any action research process. It provides a conceptual framework with associated questions that participants may use to judge whether their actions are true to the principles of action research.



Description

Figure 6.4 Additional Action Research Questions and Principles (Draws From Bradbury-Huang, 2010; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007; Reason, 2006; Stoecker & Brydon-Miller, 2013)

IMPLEMENTING PLANS: PROCESSES TO GUIDE THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The management literature is replete with concepts such as supervision, leadership, and control, which are antithetical to the principles of community-based research. Hierarchical styles of management embody processes that engage centralized decision making, in which people in superior positions define courses of action to be taken, and relationships of dominance and subordination, in which obedience to authority is assumed to provide the best way to get things done. Management of a community-based process, however, requires a different approach to operation and organization. As facilitators assist participants in organizing and implementing activities, they should consciously enact the key concepts and principles of action research, continually providing participants with information about what is happening, maintaining positive working relationships, and including all stakeholders as active participants in planning and decision-making activities.

Supporting

In the early stages of activity, people often find themselves, to some extent, out on a limb. If the preliminary work has included all people affected by the research process—the stakeholders—then the performance of new tasks or different approaches to routine tasks will usually proceed with few impediments. Even so, people usually take risks when they change their usual routines and processes, and sometimes they experience criticism and disapproval. In addition, the best of plans cannot take all contingencies into account, and performing new tasks may turn out to be much more difficult than people had anticipated. To a greater or lesser extent, they may experience feelings of doubt, threat, or anxiety that impede their ability to continue with research activities.

The main job of the research facilitators and team coordinators is to provide the practical support that enables people to continue their action research activities. They should talk regularly with team members, giving them opportunities to reflect on their activities and provide feedback on progress. Their role is not to evaluate or judge performance, but to act as consultants, providing information, advice where asked, or other relevant assistance. Their behavior and demeanor should present them as resource persons rather than “boss” or organizational superior.

Communicating

Facilitators should communicate with each participant regularly and organize simple ways in which participants with similar or related tasks can communicate. Such interactions may take the form of prearranged regular visits, telephone calls, arrangements for emergency contact, and informal social contacts—meeting for coffee at lunch or after work, and so on. It is important that each person be linked with others so that participants can discuss their problems, celebrate accomplishments, maintain focus, and sustain their sense of identity with the research project.

Styles of communication are also important. When talking with others, we provide not only direct information but also many subtle, powerful messages that signify our orientation to the listener. The way we speak and the words we use carry implicit messages about the relative status and worth of the speaker and listener and the nature of their interaction. In general terms, therefore, it is better for research facilitators to use inclusive forms of language that have a connotation of togetherness—the first-person plural *we* rather than the first-person singular *I* or the third-person *you* or *they*. Facilitators who ask, “How do you want to do this?” subtly alienate themselves from the process. “How can we do this?” is a more inclusive form of the same question that implies the facilitator is an equal member of the team.

For the same reason, one should designate tasks using language that signals roles rather than status. Use terms such as *teams* or *groups* rather than *departments* or *divisions* (note the images those words evoke). It is better to have “convenors” or “coordinators” than “directors,” “supervisors,” or “heads.” Both researchers’ behavior and the symbolic universe within which it is encompassed should enhance the empowering intent of research activities. The language we use has an impact on the way we work.

Examine the following questions and statements for the implicit messages embedded in them:

> How can we make kids stop wearing that sort of clothing?
>
> How can we get parents to become more involved in the school?

> I think that you need to develop an antismoking campaign.
>
> I don’t like the way you’ve done this.

Each of these implies relationships of control, authority, and exclusion that are all the more powerful because we usually accept the form of the message as we concentrate on its content. Language orients us to our world and to each other; appropriate language thus becomes a fundamental cornerstone of action research.

Making Decisions

Significant decisions about policies, purposes, objectives, tasks, organizational structure, general procedures, and the allocation of funds and resources should be made at meetings attended by all stakeholders or their spokespersons. All stakeholders should know what is happening and have the opportunity to contribute to discussions about issues. This process sometimes can be tedious as stakeholders are brought up to speed on the organizational limitations within which many of their activities are bounded. Equality of worth, however, is bound up with equality of knowledge. If parents, clients, and other community members do not understand the circumstances under which they are working, they are not in a position to become fully active participants in the research process.

This approach may seem a time-consuming and sometimes inefficient way to go about decision making, but the investment can pay off bountifully in the long run. On the one hand, people clearly informed about purposes and procedures are more likely to invest themselves energetically in activities and to work tenaciously to maintain their ownership of the research process. Decisions made by an inner circle of experts, administrators, or “loaded” committees, on the other hand, are apt to be viewed with suspicion and to achieve only low levels of support.

General

Reflection 6.4:

Ernie—Achieving Consensus

I once attended a meeting that required 3 days of intensive work to articulate a plan for a regional organization that had become effectively inoperative. Representatives from the different stakeholding groups in the region attended this meeting and worked through the issues meticulously and deliberately.

Because extensive preparatory work had been conducted with all stakeholding groups, there was considerable agreement on most issues. Nevertheless, many details had to be worked through carefully to ensure that the functions and operations of the regional body did not interfere with the work of local groups. At each stage of the proceedings, time was allocated to allow participants, as individuals or as representatives of their groups, to voice concerns or bring forward issues that needed to be addressed.

After 3 days, consensus was reached about the basic constitution of the regional body, and representatives elected interim officeholders who would initiate the new body. Years later, that organization is still operating effectively, although it deals with contentious matters among groups of people often in conflict. The time taken to work through the issues with all stakeholders has been repaid many times over.

Research facilitators and other participants should make decisions by consensus following procedures that ensure everyone is clear on what is planned and how it will work. Resolutions made on the basis of a vote often leave the agendas of marginal groups neglected and sap the energy of a community. Although major decisions about policy, purpose, and objectives are made corporately by stakeholders, detailed planning of tasks and activities should be left to the people responsible for carrying them out. This provides a sense of responsibility, competence, and autonomy that heightens people's feelings of ownership of the research process.

Personal Nurturing

As people work through their assigned tasks, their worlds are often changed in some fundamental way. They sometimes gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their need to trust both their own judgment and that of those around them, and the extent of the risks they are taking. In such circumstances, people often need personal reassurance and affirmations of their competence and worth. Facilitators should be constantly sensitive to the need to provide affirming comments to people engaged in research activities, not in a patronizing or mechanical way but authentically and specifically.

General

Reflection 6.5:

Ernie—Affirming Actions

I once asked a young teacher to speak to a university class about the work she was doing in her classroom. At first she hesitated, recommending that instead I ask another person who is an "expert" in the field. "Amy," I said, "I've heard you talk about your work and really like the ideas you have and the way you link them to the practical, daily realities of teaching. I think you would be much better for the job than an 'expert' who may have many good ideas but can't make the direct links you can. In addition, the young women in the class will be able to identify directly with you, because you are like them in many ways." Not only did she agree to speak to the class but she also provided an excellent presentation that was applauded by the class.

Reflective Practice

Visits and conversations provide researchers with opportunities to ask questions that can help participants performing tasks describe and reflect on their activities. Such questions may touch on some of the following areas:

Relationships: How have people responded to this (new) activity? Are they supportive? Has anyone caused any problems for you?

Patterns of work and organization: Can you combine your activities with your work? Does this cause any problems? Do your tasks conflict with other people's ways of working?

Communication: Who have you talked with about your tasks or activities? Have you talked with your supervisor/fellow workers/teachers/clients? What have their responses been? Who would be useful to talk with from time to time? Who can support you?

Difficulties and solutions: Are you having any problems? Have you overcome them?

Progress: How are things working out for you? Have you made much progress? What have people been saying about your activities?

Facilitators should not judge the performance of the participants, even if asked to do so. There is a great difference between saying, “Things don’t appear to be going very well” and asking, “How are things going for you?” Facilitators should encourage participants to review each aspect of their tasks, talking through the processes in which they are engaged and touching base on the principles. For example, “Who have you talked with about this? Will you be able to continue with this task? How are people responding to your activities?”

Assistance

When participants experience difficulties, research facilitators may need to provide assistance. They can assist directly with some activities, providing or seeking out information, doing small tasks, or acquiring needed materials. Research facilitators should not take over tasks but merely provide sufficient help to enable the participants to initiate or complete them successfully. Researchers need to develop the facility to do things *with* people and not *for* them; they need to be especially wary of the temptations that arise when working with others in areas in which the researchers have expertise. It is usually more important that the people involved develop the skills to maintain the process rather than just get the job done. When facilitators take over a job, they implicitly highlight the incompetence of other participants and disempower them in the process.

Conflict Resolution

Conflicts, whether minor disagreements or major arguments, are not uncommon in action research. The researcher who has maintained a relatively neutral stance in the research process can take the position of a disinterested party in a dispute. In these situations, the researcher’s mediating role is to assist the parties in conflict in coming to a resolution that is satisfactory to everyone. The task is to manage the conflict so that all parties can describe their situations clearly, analyze the sources of conflict, and work toward a resolution that enables them to maintain positive working relationships.

Modeling

Mahatma Gandhi said, “Be the change you wish to see in others!” The way in which research facilitators enact their supportive role provides direct cues to other participants regarding their own ways of working. Researchers’ availability and the manner in which they provide assistance and support should implicitly demonstrate community-based processes. Their openness and authenticity should illustrate the difference between a community-based approach and a patriarchal, bureaucratic, controlling style of operation.

Conversations with other participants provide opportunities for facilitators to pass on information but also to encourage people to reflect on their own activities. Modeling is one of the most powerful means of instituting the social processes inherent in community-based research. The doing is worth much more than the saying.

Networking

A support network is a key ingredient in the success of a project. This is true not only for the research process itself but for each of the participants involved. As people plan their tasks and activities, they can nominate the people who are likely to support them and take steps to establish relationships with them. Participants will do much of this work themselves, but the facilitator's knowledge of the broader context will often enable them to link workers with other people sympathetic to their activities or who can provide important information or other resources. Linking participants to a supportive network provides them not only with emotional support but often with organizational and community support.

General

Reflection 6.6:

Ernie—Walking the Walk

I recently taught a successful graduate course called Community-Based Ethnography. Of all the student feedback I received, the most consistent comments related to the way in which I taught the course. One student noted, "The instructor not only teaches about community-based research; he does it."

A member of a community in which I worked once criticized a consultant who had failed to live up to his expectations. "He can talk the talk," he said, "but he can't walk the walk."

Connecting participants in networks of support enables them to engage more people in research activities and extends the breadth and power of the research process itself. When people display interest, it may be appropriate to ask them if they would like to participate in activities or to help research workers perform their tasks. These connections not only extend the support network for individual participants but generate the energy that sustains a community-building process.

As research facilitators assist other participants in developing supportive links, they should be wary of inserting themselves as permanent intermediaries in the linking process. When they continue to act as "middlemen," research facilitators inhibit the development of positive working relationships between participants and others with whom they work. They maintain control and increase their own power in the situation at the expense of those they are assisting. Figure 6.5 depicts a situation in which information transfer, discussion, or interaction cannot take place except through the research facilitator. A linking, supportive network, conversely, provides multiple opportunities for exchange, conversation, and consultation (Figure 6.6).

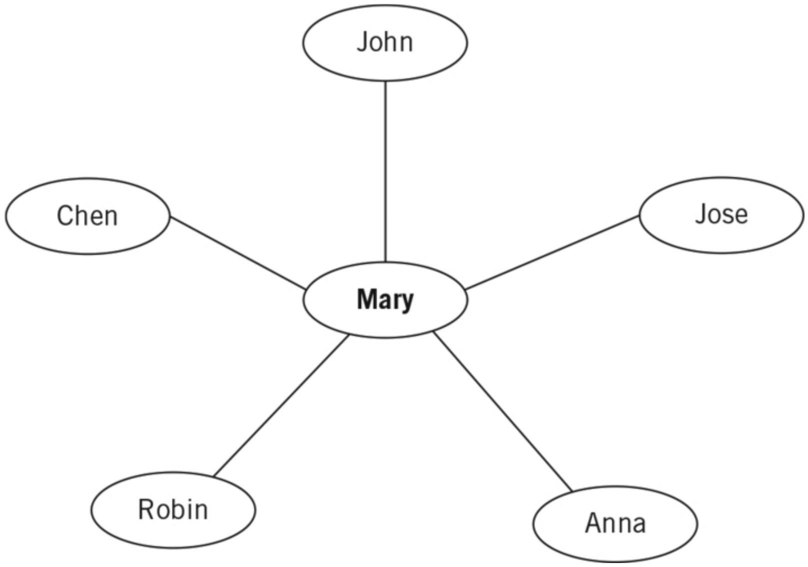


Figure 6.5 A Controlled Network

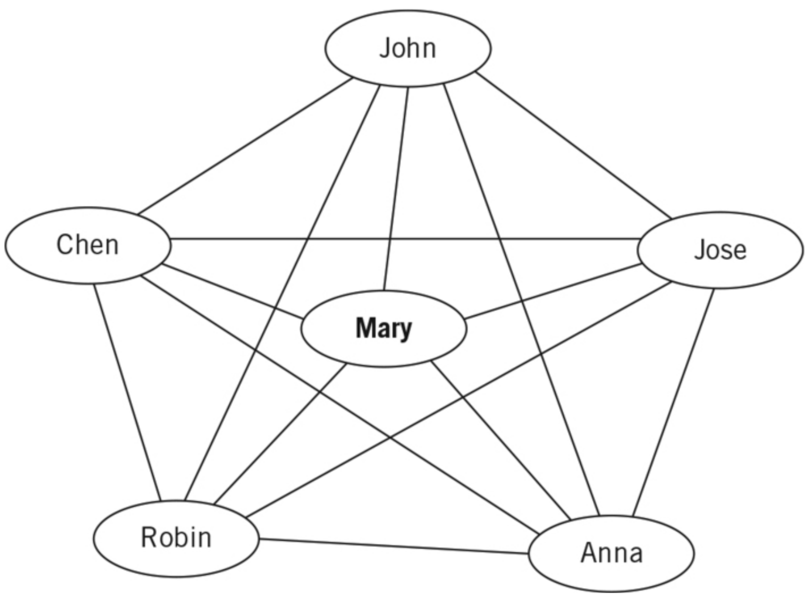


Figure 6.6 A Connected Network

EVALUATION IN ACTION RESEARCH

Long cycles of action research associated with complex and extended projects often require formal evaluation reports to inform hosting organizations or funding agencies about the extent to which progress has been made or outcomes achieved. Often these are enshrined in project plans in terms of *impact statements* and specific measurable outcomes described as *key performance indicators (*KPIs). While these are important components of an evaluation they do not provide sufficient information to understand both the complex dynamics involved or the nature of the diverse outcomes achieved.

Plans and programs based on centrally devised, mechanistic procedures that focus purely on measurable outcomes fail to take into account the realities of the complexity of human interaction. As Wadsworth (2011, Preface) notes, “When professional evaluators share ‘war stories’ of the wastage of their efforts, what I suspect is really at issue is the dearth of built-in ways for people throughout social systems that have engaged their services to stop and think about what they are doing, to inquire into the effects, to discuss this among themselves, and then to narrow the distance between the desired and the actual.”

General

Reflection 6.7:

Ernie—The Net That Works

I once assisted a group of community development workers in forming a support network for themselves after they had attended a planning conference. Because they were located in communities many hundreds of miles apart, opportunities for interaction were limited. I arranged a regular telephone conference call in which they could discuss issues, share ideas, and generally “unload.” Later, each of them commented on how important that contact was. It lessened their feelings of isolation and enabled them to stay on track when other agendas and problems threatened to divert their energies.

I have also encouraged other groups to develop small support networks that can meet easily on a regular basis. Meeting for coffee, during lunch breaks, or for dinners, these groups can provide a relaxing and safe environment in which the members can talk through their problems and gain emotional support as they do so.

The search for so-called objective evaluation based on measures of accountability and compliance to procedure and outcomes measures based on impact (Did the project achieve the desired ends as stipulated in outcome measures?) has proven inadequate. It has resulted in reductionist approaches to evaluation that break both the processes and outcomes into discrete measures, often dictated by either funders or the institutional controlling authority. This atomization of intent and its translation into behaviorally measurable parts fails to capture the more holistic aspects of human endeavor that are part and parcel of any research or development project. What can be easily measured may fail to capture the more enduring and centrally important features of a project.

There is a need, therefore, for both *formative* and *summative* approaches to evaluation, the former providing information about what and how events emerged, while the latter focuses more particularly on the end results. Too great an emphasis on the latter often only helplessly describes retrospectively what has already happened rather than also providing understandings that inform participants about what might be of more value in future practice. Wadsworth (2011) speaks of the continuing need for small-scale but essential everyday evaluative activity of all those engaged in human activities, efforts, and services.

Sometimes there is considerable pressure to provide a “definitive” evaluation, especially from people who wish to use statistical information to justify expenditure or achieve institutional goals. This often reduces complex events to a simple set of measurable impacts using those as the sole criteria for judging the extent or degree of outcomes that have been accomplished. While these procedures may be sufficient for application to simple issues or problems, more systematic and analytic processes of evaluation are required for the more complex issues involved in most fields of human endeavor. The simple statement of measures and outcomes will fail to reveal the human, social, and cultural dimensions that impinge on events or the often unintended but productive consequences emerging. More adequate forms of evaluation can enhance the knowledge base that enables an organization to build more productive approaches to its work (Edmondson, 2018; Kline, 2015; Senge, 2006).

Statistical information can provide significant information that clarifies our understanding of events and enables researchers to clearly evaluate the outcomes of their activities. It provides information that reveals important features of the issues investigated—numbers of students enrolled in a course, youth attending a program, mothers attending a child care clinic, and so on—as well as the actual impacts of the project in relation to its purposes.

Reliance on these types of measure as the sole criteria for evaluating the success of a project, however, may mask important information that informs the continuing development of professional or organizational operations. For this reason, planning procedures need to establish performance outcomes or impact statements that signal the successful accomplishment of the purposes of the project—the "what" of evaluation—but also include information about the processes of the study—"why" things happened as they did.

General

Reflection 6.8:

Ernie—The Limitations of Quantifying the Worth of Human Conduct

An evaluation of a program designed to provide Aboriginal people with means to enter university studies discovered that only a small number of program graduates actually entered university studies. The bigger picture, however, was that the program had provided participants with a wide range of skills that led many into types of employment they would otherwise not have been able to contemplate. Moreover, many returned at a later date and with the greater experience gained through their employment were able to successfully complete a university course.

In my own university teaching, formal evaluations focused on the technical issues defined according to common practices expected of university faculty—preparation, lecture presentation, adequacy of assessment procedures, and so on. These procedures suggested that my teaching was moderately effective in these terms but failed to reveal the impact of my teaching on my students. Using techniques that retained individual anonymity but allowed students to express their experiences more broadly (Stringer, 1997) revealed a much different picture. The great majority noted the quality and extent of their learning, something that their results corroborated but perhaps, more importantly, described the personal impact of learning processes that had a continuing positive effect on their student and professional lives (Stringer, 1997).

More recently I acted as an external evaluator for an application for tenure and promotion by a university faculty member. My judgments were circumscribed by an extended list of criteria by which the university wished to judge the worth of the applicant. Although the applicant did well according to those criteria I could not help but wonder whether the vitality of her professional and academic life were hampered by a focus on the closely defined features designated by the process. Teaching and research are human endeavors that require careful nurturing of relationships and actively engaged learning processes. To attempt to encompass those complex qualities in terms of measurable outcomes threatens to result in a mechanistic definition of social

> *and professional life that threaten the very human purposes to which we ultimately aspire—knowledge and understanding*.

In many contexts, there is an unfortunate tendency for centrally mandated outcomes to be used as the sole basis for planning and evaluation. These can in themselves be illusory and sometimes reflect a distorted vision of the context and the research process. Numbers by themselves can be misleading and often oversimplify the state of affairs by reifying—creating an illusory preeminence about—certain aspects of a project or program. A focus on statistical tables that quantify limited features of the study or disregard the complex realities of the context of the project may fail to inform stakeholders of important lessons learned in the course of the project.

A number of evaluation strategies more appropriate to action research are summarized by Yoland Wadsworth (2011). She speaks of the need to enhance the ability of people to engage more thoughtful and reflective evaluation practices that increase the potency and effect of their work. She presents *open inquiry* evaluation that focuses on continuously identifying and solving problems, and *audit review* evaluation that checks practices in light of endpoint outcomes.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Setting Up a Project

Markiewicz and Patrick (2015) offer a step-by-step guide to monitoring and evaluation. Their approach to formative evaluation is led by both theory and practice, providing clear and practical descriptions in a participatory, logical, systematic, and integrated way. The first steps to evaluation—managing the evaluation process—emphasize the importance of a holistic approach that recognizes the full spectrum of organizational life. The steps include the following:

- Understand and engage stakeholders
- Establish decision-making processes
- Decide who will make the evaluation
- Determine and secure resources
- Establish ethical and quality evaluation standards
- Document management processes and agreements
- Develop planning documents for the evaluation
- Regularly review the evaluation
- Strengthen the evaluation on an ongoing basis

Here are some other features of the evaluation:

- The need to clearly define aspects of the process—a description of the project, the theory that underlies its operation, and potential intended and unintended results
- Framing the project according to primary intended users of the evaluation, its purposes, evaluation questions, and the criteria by which success will be judged
- A clear description of sampling and measures to be used

Each of these sections is accompanied by a definition of the tasks to be accomplished to ensure an adequate and authentic approach to evaluation. In these and other cases, evaluation is seen not just as an endpoint to a project to describe what has been achieved, but an analysis that provides information that is intended to improve activities and practices in order to achieve more effective outcomes. The strength of any evaluation, in action research terms, is the extent to which it provides the knowledge and understanding of processes and procedures that will lead to more effective professional practices and successful organizational operations.

Audit Review Evaluation

Audit review evaluation uses a more focused approach that judges the effectiveness of practices and procedures used and the endpoint outcomes. An audit review focuses on the following:

Objectives and outcomes: Have we done what we set out to do? What are the *indicator*s of success?

Gaps and irrelevancies: What were we not doing? What were we doing that we shouldn't?

Needs: Reviews needs.

Distills information: Provides comprehensive but targeted and clearly articulated information.

Reveals problems: Reveals problems that still exist.

Reviews practices: Examines practices in light of stated objectives or outcome statements.

A major purpose of an audit review is to provide agencies that have supported or sponsored a project with information that indicates that their resources have been well used. It is important that universities and other institutions and agencies are given credit for their assistance and included in ways that encourage them to continue to support similar projects.

Celebration

A good action research project often has no well-defined ending. As people explore their lifeworlds together and work toward solutions to their common problems, new realities emerge that extend the processes of inquiry. Problems merge, submerge, or become incorporated into larger projects. Still, there is usually a time when it is possible to stand back, metaphorically speaking, and recognize significant accomplishments. The time for celebrating has arrived.

Celebration is an important part of community-based work. It not only satisfies the human, emotional elements of the experience but also enhances participants' feelings of solidarity, competence, and general well-being. It is a time when the emotional energy expended in particularly difficult activity can be recharged and when any residual antagonisms developed during the project can be defused and relationships among stakeholders enhanced.

Celebrations should reflect the principles of action research as participants mingle, talk, and eat and drink together. Music or dance will assist the air of celebration, if the context allows it. Formal, sit-down dinners are usually not a good way of celebrating because they anchor people to tables, inhibit interaction, and usually are costly. Buffet lunches or potluck dinners are better, but barbecues, brunches, and other types of parties are equally appropriate ways of celebrating. Any celebration should be held at a time that will maximize the opportunity for all stakeholders, especially those who performed activities, to attend, and in a place where the members of the least powerful groups will feel comfortable.

Speeches should be kept to a minimum, as the purpose of the gathering is to allow participants to celebrate their accomplishments *together*. There should be a time, however, when "significant people" provide brief, formal benedictions to the project. Key people from within the process may speak to emphasize the collective accomplishment of all stakeholders and participants.

It may also be appropriate for other significant figures, such as the mayor or other politicians, church leaders, senior managers in government departments and community agencies, local sports heroes, or other important community figures to contribute, though they should be briefed to keep their messages short. The message from such people should be that the broader community or organization recognizes the participants' accomplishments and contributions.

Speeches that highlight the accomplishments of single individuals and the giving of awards to limited numbers of participants are anathema to community-based processes. When the efforts of a few individuals are recognized, those who have made "less significant" contributions may feel that their work has been inferior. In some way, all should be recognized for the contributions they have made to the success of the project. Celebration is a time when all participants congregate to acknowledge their collective achievement and say, in one form or another, "Look what we have accomplished together."

CONCLUSION

This chapter describes the phase of a research project where "the rubber hits the road." It is the point at which we start moving from investigation and understanding toward more intentional or systematic action. This is the moment where we set out to do something about the problems that have been the driving force behind all the activity. We have described routines that suggest ways to work with stakeholders to plan tasks and activities, implement them, sustain them, and evaluate them. The end point of the process should be the resolution of the problems with which we started.

Social life is rarely as simple as that, however. We usually find that a myriad of issues emerge when we start to investigate a problem that can transform the problem itself and our orientation toward it. Steps taken to solve one problem sometimes take the lid off a whole range of related issues and problems that emerge as we engage the broader context and the number of stakeholding groups involved.

Generally, however, clearly articulated plans based on systematic and inclusive processes of inquiry have a high probability of achieving successful results. The investment of the time required to enact action research is amply rewarded by the significant outcomes that usually result. Where people say, "Oh, I'd like to be able to do that, but it would take too much time," they usually reinscribe the problem by using standard routines or procedures that have a long history of failure. Quick-fix solutions may give the impression that "we're doing something about this," but such approaches almost always fail to deal with the underlying issues that create the problems in the first place. By systematically identifying the significant elements that make up people's experience of problematic events, and planning concerted action that deals with the real issues affecting people's lives, we can achieve effective solutions that enable stakeholding participants to achieve significant positive outcomes and, in the process, enhance the quality of their lives.

REFLECTION AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Identify an issue or problem that emerged from one of your interviews or that was apparent in the setting you observed. Alternatively, you may focus on an issue or problem from within your own work setting. Reflect on the following questions and discuss them with friends, colleagues, or classmates.

1. How would you go about formulating a solution to the issue or problem?
2. Who needs to be involved?
3. Working with a group (if possible, the people you interviewed or observed), formulate a solution.
4. Using the framework presented in this chapter, map out an action plan to enact that solution. Make sure you identify the people involved and the steps, actions, or activities in which they will be engaged. Include uses of social media to facilitate or strengthen planned activities.
5. Review the action plan with your group. Identify strengths and weaknesses of the plan according to the principles and practices suggested in this text. Modify the plan to strengthen it.
6. Identify a process for monitoring, supporting, and reviewing the implementation of the plan. Identify who should do these activities and when.
7. With your group, map out an action plan for evaluating the planned activities.

CHAPTER REVIEW

This chapter focuses on the **actions** research participants can take to **resolve issues and problems** affecting the lives and well-being of **primary stakeholders**.

In the process, they may make **changes** that improve their **professional practices**.

From time to time, participants **review their progress** (Look and Think), then **plan the actions** needed to move the project forward (short-cycle research).

Open inquiry evaluation suggests procedural questions for these tasks:

- **General questions** about activities—What are we doing? What's working? What's not? … and so on.
- **Problem-solving questions**—How can we improve what we're doing?
- **Purposes**—What did we set out to do? Are we heading in the right direction?
- **Immediate issues**—What do we need to deal with first?
- **Intended actions**—What next steps do we need to take?

Short cycles of research take place against a backdrop of **long-cycle planning** that continues to search for an **effective long-term solution** to the research problem or issue. At each stage, **planning involves the following**:

- Identifying **priorities for action**
- Constructing an **action plan** that delineates **goals, objectives, outcomes, tasks, participant responsibilities, sites** where action will take place, **time lines,** and **resources required**

Participants regularly ensure they are maintaining the **principles of their practice**, checking that their actions and behaviors

- are **authentic**, based on **critical thinking**, **flexible, just, enjoyable, and practical** and
- enhance people's feelings of **pride, dignity, identity, control, responsibility, unity, and sense of place** by
  - maintaining effective **relationships**, **communicating** regularly, **participation** is ongoing, and all relevant people remain **included**.

Those responsible for guiding research processes **assist and support participants** by providing **practical support**, **communicating** with each person regularly, ensuring that **decisions** are made collaboratively, **assisting people** experiencing difficulties, and assisting them to continually **reflect on their wor**k and to resolve conflicts that emerge.

Participants should **connect with others** in small **networks** to enable them to enhance and support each other's work or maintain relationships with other stakeholders.

Toward the end of a project, participants will engage in an **audit review evaluation** that summarizes the **outcomes** they have achieved and the **effectiveness** of practices engaged.

Participants and other stakeholders should **celebrate** what they have **accomplished together** and acknowledge the **contribution** of all concerned.

Descriptions of Images and Figures

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Starting from the left, the circles in the image are labeled plan, implement, and evaluate. Each circle is identical and has look, think, and act marked on its top right, bottom right, and top left, respectively.

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The framework of questions and answers shown in the image are listed as follows:

- 6 questions framework
  - Why?
    - Goal
      - State the purpose of the project—for example, to combat juvenile crime. (This can be defined as a goal statement that describes the broad issue to be addressed.)
  - What?
    - Objective
      - State what actions are to be taken as a set of objectives—for example, to organize an after school program for teenagers and to develop a youth center.
  - How, when & where?
    - Tasks and timeline
      - Define a sequence of tasks and activities for each objective. List them step by step.

        State when work on each task should commence and when it should be completed.

        State where the tasks will be done.

Who?

Persons and resources

List those responsible for each task and activity.

List resources required to accomplish the tasks. Include funds needed to pay for materials or services or list these separately.

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In the image, the action plan is shown in a tabular format, which is replicated as follows:

Objectives & Outcomes (What)	***Tasks (How)***	***Person (s) (Who)***	***Time (When)***	***Location (Where)***	***Resources***	***Funds***
Objective 1 Establish a youth center. Outcomes Youth are participating in sporting activities	a. Obtain permission to use old school building. b. Repair and renovate. c. Plan operation of sports center d. Plan sports activities e. Implement the plan	Mrs. Farole Parent volunteers Student volunteers	Start 3/4/21 Finish 6/2/21	Old school building	Paint Timber Tools	$15,000 School district Town council Government grant
Objective 2 Establish after-school programs. Outcomes Youth are actively participating in after school activities.	a. Establish an art program. b. Establish a music program. c. Establish a tutoring program.	Mrs. Baldwin Jose Marina Venus	Start 4/1/21 Finish 6/2/21	Local school	Art materials Sports equipment	$3,500 School district Fees

Back to Figure

The illustration shows a vertical, slightly curved line that has 7 branches on its right. The vertical line is labeled “Additional AR Questions and Principles.” Each branch is labeled inside a curved rectangular box, has an icon/sketch accompanying the label, and has different number of subbranches. Data shown by the branches and its subbranches are listed as follows:

1. **Participation:** It has a sketch of two people standing with arms around their shoulders and waving with their other hands.

-*Where does the AR fall on the continuum of consultation with stakeholders to stakeholders as full co-researchers?*

-*In retrospect, whose action research was it—who "owned" the process?*

2. **Reflexivity/critical awareness:** It has an exclamation mark inside a cloud icon, which is above three bust icons. These icons look like sketches.

    -*Do participant actors explicitly locate themselves as change agents?*

    -*Do participants reflect on the power relationships in which they are enmeshed?*

3. **Action focus:** It has a sketch of a circle with three inward arrows entering it from different directions.

    -*To what extent were we able to use action to guide learning for change in response to real needs?*

    This branch also has a comment box above it, which has a sketch of a lit light bulb in it, attached to it. The subbranches of the comment box are listed as follows:

    -**Think build/build to think**

    -**Action experiments**

4. **Research?** It has a sketch of a magnifying glass

    -*Did we slow down and learn?*

    -*To what extent does the work go beyond activism to contribute to a wider body of practice, knowledge, or theory, including AR literature?*

5. **Emergent process:** It has a sketch of five curved arrows originating from a common point and pointing at five different directions. The common point is not visible, and no arrow points downward.

    -*To what extent is our community development work designed emergently to be responsive to actual needs as they unfold?*

6. **Extended methodology:** It has a sketch of intersecting male and female gender icons.

    -*To what extent do we use methods that "speak" to participants' diverse ways of knowing/learning?*

7. **Significance/positive contribution:** It has a checkmark icon at the center of a document icon.

-Did we leave the situation better than when we started?

-How did key conversations, viewpoints and agendas shift in a meaningful way?

-To what extent do key stakeholders have a stronger sense of development and evolution in their practices and the situations in which they practice?

This branch has a comment box that reads:

"To what extent does the AR help not only locally, but form part of broader movements for social and ethical change -- in support of the flourishing of persons, communities, and the wider ecology?"

SECTION III FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL—ACTION RESEARCH FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

FROM THE POLITICS OF HATE TO THE PRAXIS OF HOPE

> Around the world, the social fabric unravels. Intolerance, misogyny, racism, ugliness, anger and authoritarianism gain ground. Many feel a loss of control over what is important, including sanity itself. They no longer trust their political leaders. Wages are falling. Health care costs are rising. Demagogues, appealing to popular desires and prejudices paint apocalyptic scenes. Hate groups target women and persons of color. Leaders embrace a survival of the fittest ideology, reject mainstream science, and contend that human-caused climate change is a hoax. This is the world qualitative inquiry is called to change, and to resist. (International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, 2020)

In these troubled times, there is a need for the university as an institution to develop a praxis of hope that engages people at all levels in the task of building humane and equitable societies. By simply resisting the forces of a problematic, market-based ideology through traditional academic means, we run the risk of merely reinscribing the production-oriented activities of generalized research and ineffectual academic publication. This section of the text suggests the need to reconstitute our understanding of the nature of knowledge and to reframe the way we enact an approach to research that over time enables us to impact on all levels of social life—personal, local, and global.

In the chapters that follow, therefore, we seek to recognize the nature of knowledge to include the rational, deliberative aspects of our academic and professional work but also to raise awareness of the wealth of knowledge to be gained from taking practical actions in family, community, organization, and institutional settings. The following chapters suggest strategic and transformational actions we can take to make a real difference in people's lives and in our professional practice. A framework based on developmental processes at the personal, micro, mezzo, macro, and meta levels suggests the strategic thinking through which we can engage in truly transformational work.

An implicit set of principles associated with this work suggests the need for research facilitators and other participants to take an attitude of compassion and humility, seeking to actively engage all those who are part of the network of relationships we build as we work together. The developmental approaches to action research we articulate provide the means to systematically and purposefully build the foundations of an embodied and action-oriented praxis of hope as a counternarrative to the politics of hate now so evident in public life. In the process, we join with scholars and practitioners who articulate changes in the operation of universities, agencies, and organizations needed to counter the impact of neoliberal orthodoxies that continue to undermine movements toward a more civil society (Boden et al., 2015; Connell, 2019; Greenwood & Levin, 2006).

NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY AND THE UNIVERSITY

> In this moment we, as academics, are depersonalized, quantified and constrained in our scholarship via a suffocating array of metrics and technologies of governance. (Spooner, 2017, p. 2)

Through the 1980s and continuing today proponents of neoliberalism have advocated policies of unrestricted entrepreneurial freedom, free markets, free trade, a radically reduced state, and a vigorously promoted consumerism. Deregulation, privatization, market forces, and consumer choice provide the mechanisms through which corporations and institutions provide the setting in which economic growth and increased profits could be maintained through the increased consumption of goods and services (Smart, 2010).

Recent theoretical debates focus on the impact of neoliberal ideologies that promote visions of social life determined by economic imperatives and driven by market-based social processes in which “the techniques and values of accountancy have become a central organizational principle in the government and management of human conduct—and the new kinds of relationships, habits and practices this is creating” (Denzin & Giardina, 2018, p. 3). From this perspective, concepts drawn from the language and processes of accountancy provide the basis for a contemporary audit culture in which the logics of the market structure life in the new neoliberal university. Costs therefore become the prime directive of decision making, as do the ability for outcomes to be measured according to their appeal to institutional audiences rather than broader criteria associated with social benefit.

In this context, performance metrics used to calculate status in national and international rankings provide the means to evaluate the well-being and worth of each university and each member of its academic staff. The face of the university is thus being determined by such numbers as research funds attained, awards gained, books and papers published in rated journals, student numbers, and so on, these providing the basis for determining the rank of the university and the worth of the individual for promotion and tenure.

As Hammans (2009) suggests, scholars are increasingly compelled to assume market-based values in all of their judgments and practices, effectively reconstituting themselves as entrepreneurs of themselves, “selling” themselves through promotion and tenure submissions or funding applications that have questionable bearing on their social or academic worth (Kaufman, 2019). In these circumstances, market interests predominate so that research, as Roberts (2013) suggests, becomes not an integral part of one’s being as an academic but a matter of survival, aligning ourselves with the “production” measures of the institution rather than the well-being of the people we serve.

These dynamics also operate in teaching, where universities are subject to the same processes instituted in education systems at state and national levels. Hogan (2019) provides a detailed exposition of the manner in which more recent reincarnations of an older meritocratic project threaten to further embed the neoliberal project. Social determinants of education based on social class are presented as the rationale underpinning recent developments in education systems worldwide. Citing a broad array of current scholarship, he provides substantial evidence for propositions that proponents of current educational arrangements are

> empirically unable to accurately explain past or current relationships between (1) family background and school attainment, and (2) school attainment and adult occupational and income attainment. (Hogan, 2019, p. 5)

Hogan goes on to assert that while the creation of fairer societies is high on the political agenda of the UK and other developed economies, especially through initiatives to improve the life chances of those from less advantaged backgrounds, they have not delivered their intended outcomes. The response of policymakers to this failure has been

> not to focus on the structural social and economic roots of the problems but to focus on the cultural framing of the problem in terms of a "deficit" model of working-class aspirations and achievement (Valencia 1997). This reflects a determined neoliberal effort to shift responsibility for lack of educational and occupational attainment away from the state, government policy, economic change, market failure and deficient institutional design towards the responsibility that individuals have for their preferences and choices—their subjectivity—that then becomes the focus of government policy and what Foucault terms the "arts of government" or "governmentality" (Foucault 1991, 2008).

In recent decades, policymakers have concurrently engaged in the systematic redesign of institutions, creating quasi-markets in student enrollments and their associated funds, thereby placing schools in competition with each other. The introduction of nationally centralized testing regimes has likewise had the effect of establishing “league tables,” further enhancing the notion of schools in competition with each other, with ambitious middle-class parents competing for places for their children in higher ranked schools.

These were part of the broader agenda whereby, according to Harvey (2005), neoliberalism as an ideological project acted economically and politically to enhance the profitability of capital and the wealth of owners/shareholders and managers by rolling back the state in favor of the “free” market. Hogan proposes that this was part of moves to displace the state with the market in critical domains of economic activity and reengineering state and public institutions such as housing, education, health, and welfare services. In these circumstances, the value of research is not determined by social benefit but by the extent to which it contributes to the marketability and hence the status of the institution and those who control its operation. One of the challenges in the academic world, therefore, becomes the struggle to find approaches to research that not only focus on the “deliverables” articulated in the texts of tenure and promotion but to do so in ways that clearly and authentically benefit the people who were subjects of investigation—in action research terms, the primary stakeholders.

GENERATING KNOWLEDGE: EMERGENT PROCESSES OF UNDERSTANDING

In order to achieve these ends, action research suggests a complementary approach to research that assumes investigations are not based on a fixed plan of action but on an emergent process that continuously builds greater knowledge and understanding of the issues and dynamics of the context. Unlike experimental and quasi-experimental approaches that clearly define the variables involved, their relationship to each other, the measures to be used, and the processes by which those measures might determine the outcomes of the study, action research often has no clearly defined beginning, in terms of a fixed problem to be solved or a set of designated procedures to be followed. In some cases, action research projects allow time to look beneath the surface of the nominated problem to discover underlying issues and dynamics that have significant influence on the situation to be explored. The emergent processes of action research therefore do not necessarily remain focused on the initial question or problem but engage in exploration and follow leads that can reveal underlying dynamics and diverse systems of knowledge operating in the social settings investigated, considering, among other issues, the complex interactions between the people, institutions, and agencies involved.

The lack of determinacy in these processes may appear lacking in rigor to some, but the overriding intent is to acknowledge the complexity of the context by revealing underlying issues affecting the social dynamics of the setting. Carefully detailed plans may be inadequate if they fail to recognize significant issues deeply embedded in the setting or accept without question the existing workplace practices. Continuing cycles of investigations work to reveal issues requiring attention and the actions that need to be taken to work toward a resolution of the problem(s) on which the study is focused. As the following section reveals, however, resolution of complex problems deeply embedded in a sociocultural context may require the systematic application of developmental processes that deliberately work through the layers of complexity to provide participants with the means to achieve the outcomes they desire.

THE BROADER CONTEXTS OF ACTION RESEARCH: INTERNATIONAL AID AND DEVELOPING NATIONS

Earlier sections of this text focus on procedures and practices largely relevant to small-scale projects at more localized levels. Action research, however, is at least as effective when applied to issues that challenge corporations and governments at state, national, and global levels. The context of aid to developing nations, for instance, provides a theater in which clashes of culture have undermined the best-intentioned efforts of more wealthy nations to improve the lot of poorer peoples. The period following World War II was characterized by the diminishing power of European nations as shattered societies and weakened economies saw former subject nations becoming independent of colonial rule. The need to rebuild shattered economies resulting from the war and to enable newly emerging nations to establish systems of government and economic development that could sustain the well-being of the people became increasingly evident.

This era saw the rise of international efforts to provide war-torn and emerging nations with the materials and resources to establish more effective systems of governance. Through the United Nations, agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund provided substantial resources to countries experiencing widespread and extreme poverty. These measures were complemented by national agencies designed to provide international aid for nations to build the means to develop effective and sustainable economic and social development. *Development* had become an issue that was not just a catchword related to economic growth but established internationally as a basic human right. In 1986 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Right to Development (United Nations 1986), defining it according to a set of foundational principles (see p. 273) meant to guide the transition of nations from subsistence to modern modes of production.

These principles, framed in response to the continuing failure of many developmental programs over an extended period, were widely applauded at the time and have seen significant changes to approaches to international aid to developing nations. More recently, however, the imposition of centralized economic changes has seen these principles eroded. Joseph Stiglitz (2002), former senior vice president of the World Bank, more recently provided an analysis indicating that many of these principles have been ignored or given short shrift in the years following. He is particularly critical of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which has continued to impose sometimes harsh conditions on countries and has failed to comply with the conditions associated with economic aid:

> A half century after its founding, it is clear that the IMF has failed in its mission. It has not done what it was supposed to do—provide funds for countries facing an economic downturn, to enable the country to restore itself to close to full employment. Worse, many of the policies that the IMF pushed, in particular, premature capital market liberalization, have contributed to global instability. And once a country was in crisis, IMF funds and programs not only failed to stabilize the situation but in many cases

> actually made matters worse, especially for the poor.
> (Stiglitz, 2002, p. 15)

Stiglitz is clear that the policies themselves are not necessarily the only part of the problem, but their success is inhibited by the nature of their imposition that requires rapid social transformations that threaten the cultural identity and values of local populations. He advocates a more gradual process whereby traditional institutions and norms, rather than being overwhelmed, can adapt and respond to new challenges. While praising many of the positive outcomes of globalization, he states that the countries that have benefited most have been those that were able to take charge of their own destiny and recognized the role governments can play in development rather than relying on the notion of a self-regulated market that would fix its own problems.

Stiglitz further suggests that for many millions of people globalization has not worked, as their jobs disappeared and their lives became more insecure. They have felt increasingly powerless against forces beyond their control and have seen their democracies undermined and their cultures eroded. If globalization continues to be conducted in the way that it has, he suggested (Stiglitz, 2002; Stiglitz, Fitoussi, & Durand, 2019), it will not only not succeed in promoting development but continue to create poverty and instability. Without reform, the backlash will mount and discontent with globalization grow.

These words seem insightful in the current era, where the rise of populist governments and increasing movement of masses of people have created conditions that threaten everyone. Development, says Stiglitz, is not about helping a few people get rich or creating a handful of protected industries but is about transforming societies, improving the lives of the poor, and enabling everyone to have a chance at success and access to health care and education.

This analysis is given credence by more recent analyses by Piketty (2014) that covers data from a period covering three centuries across more than 20 countries. Based on 15 years of research done in collaboration with a large group of scholars, he sought to understand the historical dynamics of wealth and income. Fundamentally, he concludes that capitalism automatically generates arbitrary and unsustainable inequalities that radically undermine the meritocratic values on which democratic societies are based:

> When the growth rate of the return on capital significantly exceeds the growth rate of the economy, . . . then it logically follows that inherited wealth grows faster than output and income. People with inherited wealth need save only a portion of their income from capital to see that capital grow more quickly than the economy as a whole. Under such conditions, it is almost inevitable that inherited wealth will dominate wealth amassed from a life-time of labor by a wide margin, and the concentration of capital will attain extremely high levels—levels potentially incompatible with the meritocratic values and principles of social justice fundamental to modern democratic societies. (p. 26)

While he suggests there are political remedies for reducing the increasing disparities in wealth between a small wealthy elite and the mass of the population, he also suggests the need for social and cultural remedies to counter this divergence of wealth. In particular, he focuses on the diffusion of knowledge and investment in training and skills. As indicated in the following chapters, however, diffusion of knowledge and skill does not sit solely in the provenance of formal education and training processes but also includes developmental processes through which the population at large can accomplish greater understanding of the issues and events in their own lives and the skills to effect necessary changes that therefore become evident.

STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESSES

The major issues emerging from the above critiques focus on the need to modify and adapt centrally planned programs and services to accommodate the complex social and cultural dynamics in developing or emerging nations. The chapters in this section suggest the ways action research can be strategically applied in these contexts, as well as in the complex circumstances of cultural diversity in many modern nations. In many situations, "one-size-fits-all" programs and services still struggle to cope with the circumstances of significant segments of the population where poverty, social disruption, and violence continue to threaten the well-being of the people. Developmental processes based on the strategic application of action research, we propose, provide the means to more effectively achieve the objectives of centrally mandated social programs and services, providing greater stability, peace, and harmony that accompany well-ordered and effective systems of social justice.

Chapter 7: **Reporting: Informing Stakeholders and Other Audiences** acknowledges the reality that research and organizational reports fail to communicate effectively with the many people whose lives are affected by the issues under investigation. We therefore focus on reporting procedures that enable all participants to remain informed about events, activities, and outcomes of an action research process. The chapter suggests ways of fashioning and presenting reports, proposals, and evaluations to more effectively inform stakeholding audiences of the nature of the project, the progress that has been made, and issues and actions emerging from the project. It presents systematic reporting procedures for more formal audiences but also suggests how reports can be framed and presented in ways more aligned to the needs and interests of the diverse constituencies commonly associated with an action research project.

Chapter 8: **Developmental Approaches to Social and Organizational Change** responds to the common mantra "Think locally, act globally." It presents ways of framing action research to increase the potential of small-scale projects to become the means to induce organizational and social change. Using processes emerging from international efforts to provide for the economic development of poorer nations, it outlines procedures for developing the capacity of people from all levels of society to become agents of change that improve their well-being and the quality of their lives. The chapter then suggests the organizational processes that can be engaged to manage the large-scale projects and programs that can emerge from local action. It suggests approaches to strategic planning processes that are not only pragmatically effective but also able to accomplish effective and sustainable outcomes, while maintaining the integrity of collaborative action research processes.

Chapter 9: **Action Research and Digital Media** speaks to the recent striking developments in information technology and social media, creating possibilities for information exchange that could not have been contemplated in past eras. The chapter presents a rich array of digital media resources to increase the capacity of action research participants to share information, coordinate their efforts, and extend the reach and power of their work.

We end this introduction by modifying the quote that commences this section, rewording it to present a *praxis of hope* we feel to be inherent in the processes of action research:

> Around the world, diverse people, cultures and ideas interweave into a colorful and resilient social fabric. Tolerance, equality, brother and sisterhood across races, beauty, happiness and participatory democracy gain ground. People are regaining control over what is important, including cultivating their relationships and their own inner spirit. People trust their political leaders! Wages are improving for all who have felt economic vulnerability. Health care costs are falling. Peacemakers and leaders, appealing to ideas that bring out the best in us, paint positive and unifying visions of the future. People in power listen to and treat women and persons of color equally. Leaders embrace a vibrant community ideology, celebrate and pay heed to relevant science, and seek to urgently repair human-caused climate change. This is the sustainable world qualitative inquiry and action research are called to cultivate and continually regenerate.

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7 REPORTING: INFORMING STAKEHOLDERS AND OTHER AUDIENCES

> I learned from African and Asian folk that street theatre, story-telling, song and dance, puppetry and picture-making all play an important part in modern community development education. These are the methods that really communicate to the people. They do not need to have a way of ciphering the analytic codes of trained [professional] workers. The social realities they need to deal with are directly presented or represented in art forms and pre-scientific ways of conceptualizing. They can relate responsibly and work out what to do. (Adapted from Goodluck, 1980)

GIVING VOICE: REPORTING IN ACTION RESEARCH

The approach to action research presented in this book is derived from interpretive research processes suggested by Denzin (1989, 1997). It is based on the assumption that knowledge inherent in people's everyday, taken-for-granted lives has as much validity and utility as knowledge linked to the concepts and theories of academic disciplines or bureaucratic policies and procedures. Action research recognizes that lived experience or practical knowledge is a higher form of knowledge than conceptual or theoretical knowledge (Heron, 1996, 1999; Heron & Reason, 2008). Practical knowledge includes details of feelings, contradictions, dilemmas, and multiple interpretations that make up the rich texture of human social life. Lived experience provides the cultural currency that people can use to help transform the way they interpret events in their lives (Ortiz Aragón & Giles Macedo, 2015). The intent is to concede the limitations of expert knowledge and to acknowledge the competence, experience, understanding, and wisdom of ordinary people. Action research therefore seeks to give voice to people, promoting the ideas and perspectives of those who previously were silenced as research subjects, or even those that literally cannot speak for themselves (see Lit Corner 7.1).

General

Lit Corner 7.1:

“No More Stolen Sisters”—Taking Symbolic Action to Communicate Wide-scale Disappearance of Indigenous Women Across the United States

Coaches and members of the Ignacio High School girls' basketball team in southern Utah in the United States have posed for pictures with each having a red or black handprint painted over their mouths to express solidarity with the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women movement. According to a study by the Urban Indian Health Institute (Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, 2018), Ploen notes that of the 5,712 cases of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls reported in 2016, only 2% (116) were even entered into the U.S. Department of Justice database. Besides the fact that most of the team members are Native Americans, one team member had an aunt murdered when she was young, while another had an aunt disappear, a case that was never solved. Ploen explains the significance of the red handprint:

"In Native American culture, red is the only color that spirits can see. By painting it over their mouths, it gives a voice to those who are gone, as well as to the athletes."

The handprint allows for an inclusive approach, because although not all members of the team are of tribal descent, they are all in solidarity on this issue. By engaging in symbolic activism, the team and coaches hope to inspire more action on an issue that potentially affects all of them and their broader community.

Communicative actions so far have included a basketball game that enabled another team to join in solidarity with the Ignacio girls; a collage with articles, images, and statistics placed at the gym; and posters of missing women put up at a local community center. The group plans a children's pow-wow to bring further awareness to the issue and active participation in the 2020 National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Native American Women. The actions so far have sparked other activists to play a larger role in the future and a new partnership with allies in Colorado. Importantly, the symbolic and artistic emphasis, including Native American rituals, has been central to generating attention and a sense of solidarity from others with the initiative.

(Adapted from Ploen, 2020)

Like other forms of interpretive research, action research seeks to reveal and represent people's experience, providing accounts that enable others to interpret issues and events in their daily lives. In the process, action researchers provide information that enables those responsible for making policy, managing programs, and delivering services to make more informed judgments about their activities, thus increasing the possibility that their policies, programs, and services might be more appropriate and effective for the people they serve. Action research reports consequently will differ significantly from those derived from much current research because of the following interpretive assumptions:

> Researchers seek to empower principal stakeholders by engaging them as active participants in all phases of the research project, including the planning and implementing processes. It has been described as research *for, by,* and *with* the people.
>
> The principal purpose of research is to extend people's understanding of an issue by providing detailed, richly described accounts that reveal the problematic, lived experience of stakeholders and their interpretations of the issue investigated.
>
> Stakeholders create joint accounts, derived from creative processes of negotiation, that provide the basis for therapeutic action to resolve the issue or problem investigated. These processes seek to ensure tangible outcomes of direct benefit to the principal stakeholders.
>
> Stakeholder perspectives are complemented by viewpoints found within the academic and bureaucratic literature to enrich, but not displace, stakeholder views.
>
> The outcomes of research make the experience and perspectives of ordinary people directly available to stakeholders—professional practitioners, policymakers, managers, and administrators—so that more appropriate and effective programs and services can be formulated.

We can see that action research reporting is an important "means of engendering change, to engage people in further critical reflection, dialogue, learning, imagination and action" and not only a way to communicate findings (Abma et al., 2018, pp. 184–185). Thought of as "sharing knowledge for change," giving voice includes keeping experiences and possibilities for collaboration alive by highlighting how communicative spaces and reciprocal, equal, and tolerant relationships have grown, and how they may continue to be used for collective interpretation and sense-making (Abma et al., 2018, pp. 184–185).

INFORMING STAKEHOLDERS

One of the most important aspects of a participative approach to action research is the necessity for all stakeholding groups to remain actively informed about ongoing activities and events. For simpler projects, this is accomplished by each participating group reporting to others of the progress of their activities (see Chapters 4 through 6). These might be considered as short cycles of the Look–Think–Act routine—formative evaluations occurring on a regular basis. In these cases, relatively simple reports provide the means to inform all participants about activities, either taken or intended, or issues requiring attention that have emerged. A relatively straightforward project within an office, agency, school, or clinic will engage those actively engaged in project activities in the process of reporting. In these instances, there is a need to ensure that the report is presented in some way to stakeholders who are less actively involved—clients, students, workers, colleagues, supervisors, administrators, and so on. All should take steps to include feedback from participating stakeholders so they remain "on the same page" and continue to feel included in the project.

General

Lit Corner 7.2:

The Importance of Practitioners Seeing Themselves as an Audience

Action research is in part about encouraging practitioners to become researchers of their own practice (Efron & Ravid, 2019), so it follows that the research products generated in action research processes should be relevant to those same practitioners. Mertler (2019) explains that much educational research, for example, is routinely written and published in a way that does not consider actual teachers' realities, practices, and student learning (p. 254). This is problematic because one of the purposes of educational action research is for teachers "to improve their practice and foster their professional growth by understanding their students, solving problems or developing new skills" (Efron & Ravid, 2019, p. 4). Conducting action research will not automatically address this issue, in part because action research data often consist of long-hand accounts in myriad forms, which tend to be less structured than data generated by surveys or statistics, and therefore harder to process and represent (Karlsen & Larrea, 2016, p. 118).

It is important to remember, however, that action research can generate knowledge about how and why changes in practices and activities occur that cannot be easily obtained through other methodologies (Karlsen & Larrea, 2016, p. 118). This is due to the distinctiveness and validity of participants own "local" knowledge, for which there is no substitute (Efron & Ravid, 2019, p. 4). Capturing this knowledge in ways that are recognizable and usable to participants, however, links research to practice, giving practitioners a new empowering voice, as they experience professional and personal growth and encourage others to engage in research by showing their perspectives have been taken into account (Mertler, 2019, p. 255). Failing to make often tacit action research knowledge visible and usable may hinder the learning process of practitioner-researchers and the consolidation of action research processes in specific environments (Karlsen & Larrea, 2016, p. 118).

For larger and more complex projects, the same general procedures maintain the interest and affiliation of stakeholders in the actions and outcomes of the project. In these cases, larger and more diverse audiences may require different forms of reporting that consider the different interests and capacities of the various stakeholding groups. Key stakeholders—organizational executives, funding agencies, community leaders, and political audiences—may require lengthy formal reports, enabling them to evaluate the quality and impact of a project. Other audiences may require a variety of reporting processes, informing people of progress and outcomes in ways that maintain their interest and engagement. In some instances, a project may need to reach larger sectors of a population to extend the impact of their activities, requiring researching stakeholders to fashion the means to disseminate information to broader community, organizational, or political audiences. This chapter therefore describes the means by which these needs might be met.

AUDIENCE-APPROPRIATE REPORTS

Written Reports

Written reports are often such a regular part of organizational and institutional life that little thought is given to their production. A person given the task of producing a report often does so according to institutional frameworks that dictate both the nature and style of the communication. These types of report tend to focus on issues relevant to the operation of the agency or institution but may fail to capture the ongoing reality or nature of the people and the project. Action research participants need to engage reporting procedures that clearly prioritize the issues and processes emerging from stakeholding participant priorities and perspectives. Reports need to be framed and written in ways that speak clearly to the intended audiences, including primary stakeholders particularly (see Chapter 5). Those responsible for writing the report may use the following procedures to maintain its participative intent:

- Define the audiences and purposes of the report—Who is it for and what do they need to know?
- Review the history of the situation to provide information about the context of the study—What has previously happened?
- Review the processes by which the study was done.
- Use key *themes* emerging from analysis as headings for the report.
- Incorporate *elements* identified with each of these themes to provide the content within that section.
- Evaluate the progress of actions taken and describe issues to be resolved.
- Prepare the report in a format and language that can be easily read by primary and other stakeholders.
- Present an interim report to relevant stakeholders.
- Provide the time and opportunity for them to read the report and give feedback.
- Modify the report on the basis of their comments.
- Distribute the final report to all stakeholders.
- Use information within the report as the basis for ongoing planning.

Report writing is both an art and a craft. The craft requires writers to be clear, succinct, and accurate in reporting the events and activities that define the ideas and activities within the project. Long-winded and overly detailed reports deplete people's energies and do not encourage concentrated reading. Dry, technical, and formalistic reports likewise risk a failure to capture the attention of participants. The art of reporting is to provide information in a form that reveals the visceral realities of the context, the project purposes, and the activities involved.

PRESENTATIONS

Basic Principles

Written reports provide a useful and simple way to communicate with multiple audiences; they often tend to be impersonal and limited in the extent to which they can communicate effectively to more general audiences. Words are slippery, often having implied meanings or associations that may lead to unintended interpretations or fail to communicate important features of the activities and events presented. Additionally, many practitioners either lack the time to read lengthy reports, and a detailed, well-written report that cannot easily be read may fail to provide stakeholders with the information they need.

While verbal presentations have their own weaknesses, they provide the means to communicate the importance of the more human features of a project—issues of emotion, value, culture, identity, interaction, and so on—that are central features of the context or processes described. A clearly articulated and well-planned presentation has the capacity to provide audiences with a better understanding of the visceral realities that are central to the human responses to events. An effective presentation has the potential to not only deliver information but command attention and evoke an empathetic response from intended audiences.

PowerPoint, Keynote, and other digital presentations provide extended visual resources to enhance a presentation. They have the downside that audience attention is focused on a screen, limiting the ability of presenters to fully engage the audience.

Information on the planning and delivery of effective presentations is easily obtained from the internet. Tips for effective presentations are provided from the following source:

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https://www.skillsyouneed.com/present/presentation-tips.html

This suggests a basic set of skills that provide the basis for effective presentations:

- Show your passion and connect with your audience.
- Focus on your audience's needs.
- Keep it simple: Concentrate on your core message.
- Smile and make eye contact with your audience.
- Start strongly.
- Tell stories.

Other similar sources suggest a framework of activity that will result in an enjoyable and informative presentation:

https://hbr.org/2013/06/how-to-give-a-killer-presentation

Frame your story.

Plan your delivery.

Develop stage presence.

Plan the multimedia.

Put it together.

A number of websites focus on the delivery of effective presentations. A useful one is the following website:

https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/presentations/delivering-presentation

This suggests the need to give attention to three aspects of a presentation. The first—and most important—part is to make an emotional connection with the audience, because without it the presenter's message will not be fully heard. The second is to generate and maintain a high level of energy to hold the audience's attention through the whole presentation. The third is to focus the content on the payoff for the audience.

Participatory Presentations

The power of a presentation is greatly increased if client or community participants are included in its planning and delivery, providing a sense of authenticity that is otherwise difficult to achieve. By participating in these ways, primary stakeholding participants not only increase their understanding of the processes in which they have been engaged but also develop both the skills and confidence to speak for themselves, in their own voice. These are part of the developmental intents of action research described in the following chapter, the inherent capacity-building processes increasing the strength and resilience of participating stakeholders. Research facilitators should be wary of taking responsibility for providing presentations themselves, especially in situations where community participants are wary of speaking in public. They should seek ways of organizing a presentation so that local participants, especially primary stakeholders, play significant or leading roles. This can be achieved in a number of ways by creative productions that enable less experienced people to provide moving and highly successful presentations. Simple and informal approaches, perhaps with a little humor inserted strategically, can be remarkably effective. The examples in Reflection 7.1 provide but a small insight into the creative ways people can overcome their fear of speaking publicly.

General

Reflection 7.1:

Ernie—Overcoming the Fear of Public Speaking

Junior administrative staff at a university faculty workshop would only present information about their work through a video. In the video, each staff member spoke individually, but with a paper bag over their head. Though it occasioned loud laughter from the audience, they were *successful in having their issues heard and dealt with by the college administration*.

A teacher in an action research class chose a project in which she worked with the parents of intellectually challenged students to prepare a case to a government agency that had threatened to withdraw funding from a successful transition-to-work program. She used a presentation to our class to practice their bid to have funding maintained. She introduced the topic and then a parent presented information indicating how important the program was for her son. Her intellectually challenged son then gave a short, simple presentation that demonstrated clearly what the program meant for him. We heard later that they were successful in having funding for the program maintained.

Aboriginal women from a remote community provided a presentation at a regional conference that depicted their highly successful school breakfast program. Standing together and speaking from a script they had compiled collaboratively, each of the women presented a few sentences describing aspects of the program. Accompanying images projected on a screen provided the audience with a clear understanding of the work in which they had been engaged.

Indigenous farmers in a remote region of East Timor escorted a group of UNICEF and Education Department executives to the school garden and fish farm they had created to earn money to assist in redevelopment of their school. Designated senior men and women described each section of their development and the way the funds raised had been used in the school, a presentation that greatly impressed their audience.

In each of these cases, the sense of pride and empowerment among the people concerned was quite evident, as was the feelings of ownership they displayed. Presentations can not only be highly effective in providing audiences with a deeper understanding of the issues presented but also have the effect of building the capacity of the people to take more control of issues and activities affecting their lives.

OTHER FORMS OF MEDIA PRESENTATION

The capacity of people to present themselves and their activities to public and organizational audiences is one of the significant features of the current era. A wide range of computer applications now provide the means for action research participants to reach extended audiences that have an interest in or are affected by the issues with which they are engaged. They provide the means to greatly enhance people's ability to represent their lives in visual form, greatly extending our ability to represent people's experiences in ways that capture the reality of their lives and the context in which events are played out. Multimedia presentations may be produced relatively easily through the use of cameras, phones, and other devices that enable the production of photographs, films, charts, posters, books, magazines, newsletters, and so on. They provide ways in which research participants can provide more empathetic understandings of their situation and the key issues that impact their lives.

Using Photographic Images: PowerPoints, Charts, Booklets, Posters, Handouts

"A picture is worth a thousand words." Written text is often an inadequate means of developing an understanding, and simple photographs often provide a powerful means of presenting images of events and other phenomena—resources, offices, housing, and so on—relevant to the issue under investigation. Although the images themselves can provide a useful ongoing record, they also enhance reports and presentations produced as part of an investigation.

General

Reflection 7.2:

Ernie and Alfredo—Enjoyable and Effective Presentations

We have both realized the power of the productive use of artistic and multimedia presentations to portray the experience of participants in projects in which we have participated. We have seen and heard wonderfully informative and meaningful presentations from school students, teachers, musicians, workers, service professionals, parents, physically challenged people, and many others that allowed them to report on their experiences. Using a variety of artistic methods, including verbal presentations to audiences complemented with drawings, photographs, charts, and other visual materials, they have been able to portray the realities of their lived experience in ways that greatly strengthened and extended their audience's understanding of their situation. Some have used multimedia presentations, including video recordings, to graphically depict the realities of their contexts, while others have used booklets constructed through online tools to present the cases they wished to make. Drawings have also been used to elicit stories and accounts that, again, enabled participants to use visual representations that resonate with that old adage—"a picture is worth a thousand words."

A particularly powerful use of photographs is provided by participatory visual methods such as PhotoVoice, PictureVoice, PaintVoice, and ComicVoice (see Chapter 9). These include techniques of photo elicitation, wherein participants describe and comment on photographs of events or contexts in which they have participated and are assisted to create visuals that capture their individual or group experiences and perspectives. Participants can take control of the camera, taking images that seem most relevant from their perspective, and learn how to develop visual materials—books, charts, posters, menus, cards, and so on. Simple visual materials produced with common word-processing programs can be enhanced by more sophisticated productions as people develop their skills. Applications such as iBook and similar programs provide the means for people, with a little assistance, to produce materials that greatly enhance an action research process.

Where photographs are used, it is usually necessary to first ask those being photographed permission to do so. If the photographs are to be published or shown publicly, then written permission is needed, in accordance with the ethical guidelines suggested in Chapter 3.

General

Reflection 7.3:

Ernie—From Photos to Booklets

In a remote Australian Aboriginal community, inadequate schooling had left people with limited capacity to publicize the wide range of developmental activities in which they were engaged. Research facilitators worked with community groups to record their activities photographically and then to provide descriptions of events and activities in their own words. These were *then developed as simple booklets using computer-generated applications. The books became widely read in the community, residents taking much pride in the wide range of positive activities represented, and non-Aboriginal service personnel and visitors commented on the positive nature of the images presented. These were in marked contrast to the decidedly negative framing of events often characteristic of reports from government and nongovernment agencies.*

Initially, only small numbers of the booklets were produced, but they created wide interest, with people portrayed gathering in groups with their friends, relatives, and children to read through each page. Other groups requested the opportunity to produce a booklet of their work or other community activities, so that in the following year 30 booklets were produced. People portrayed in each book were given a copy of their booklet and the Aboriginal Committee responsible for their production determined that each school in the region and each classroom in the community should be given a copy of each booklet. Reports from schoolteachers and administrators indicated that the booklets were among the most popular reading of children in those schools.

Videos

Video recording through phones and similar devices enables participants to record images, events, activities, or situations related to their investigations. This provides the means for them to have more control of the way their worlds are represented to outsiders, framing and focusing events and activities according to their own perspectives of what is significant and how it should be represented. The development of videos is within the grasp of many people through computer programs that enable them to develop simple but powerful films to capture their experience and provide the means for more empathetic understanding of their situation or the issues they investigate.

The conditions for photographs also apply to video recording, especially as these types of production are much more intrusive. Handheld devices provide the means to record events quite simply. Special attention to the impact on events and activities will need to be taken into consideration for productions requiring more sophisticated setups and sound and image equipment. In addition, the conversational ambience easily attained for audio recording is more difficult to attain when people are confronted by a camera. Generally speaking, video recordings quite often require a level of artificiality as people are set up in particular ways and, in some situations, require rehearsals to enable them to speak and act with clarity and a degree of authenticity. Though the technology has increased in simplicity in recent years, videos often require levels of expertise not generally available, so their use must be tempered by the capacity of research participants to generate and use material and equipment effectively.

Having said that, a well-produced video has great potential to provide empathetic understandings that capture the lived reality of people’s experience.

General

Reflection 7.4:

Ernie—Developmental Processes for Media Production

In Warburton, an Aboriginal community in a remote region of Western Australia, a group of women started a school breakfast program that eventually evolved into a community catering service. In order to be able to tell others of the way these activities had emerged and their significance, they *initially developed a simple script that described the operation of the breakfast program. They first used the script for presentation in a webinar (a web-based seminar) that spoke to audiences in many parts of the nation. This script was then used as the basis for developing a book that included photographs of key elements of the breakfast program and was published as an iBook. Further development of their script resulted in a poster that formed the backdrop for conference presentations to a variety of community and agency audiences. Video footage shot by the women and a facilitator provided the means for an agency worker, who had the required skills, to work with them to develop short but highly effective videos of aspects of their work together. At all stages the women, who necessarily spoke to their audiences in English—a second or third language to the women—continued to extend their capacity to speak publicly in situations where formerly they would have been embarrassed. The visual materials, however, provided the means that enabled them to keep their presentations relatively brief, simple, and highly effective.*

Drama and Artistic Performances and Presentations

Chapter 4 spoke of the potential for eliciting information through the use of drama, role-play, song, poetry, dance, art, and similar activities. These types of performance can likewise be very effective, providing the means for communicating more effectively with a wide range of audiences. They not only are often interesting but provide the means for generating empathetic understandings that are difficult to attain through written reports, enabling audiences to enter the lived experience of participants through display or performance. The use of dramatic and artistic media often enables audiences to achieve greater understanding of the deeply complex dynamic, interactive, and emotional qualities of their everyday lives. Through performance and display, children, family, and community participants are able to represent their own experience through simple but evocative presentations they are capable of fashioning themselves. This is especially true of poor and other culturally marginalized groups, where the complexities of written text are significant barriers to communication.

Denzin (1997), Prattis (1985), and Minh-ha (1992) suggest that poetry, music, and drama provide the means for creating illuminative experiences for presenters and audiences alike, stimulating awareness of the different perspectives and multiple discourses occurring in any social space. Possibilities for interrogating people’s everyday realities by setting them against each other through the telling, acting, or singing of stories has the potential to reveal commonalities and differences of experience and perspective that provide the basis for therapeutic action. While these types of production may fail to provide the certainty of experimental research or reinforce the authority of official voices (Atkinson, 1992), they present the possibility for creating more compassionate understandings that promote effective change and progress (Rorty, 1989).

As Stringer (2008) suggests, performances provide the means to complement or enhance written reports and verbal presentations in the following ways:

- Studying the world from the perspective of research participants
- Capturing their lived experience
- Enabling participants to discover truths about themselves and others
- Recognizing multiple interpretations of events and phenomena
- Embedding experience in local cultural contexts
- Recording and representing deeply held emotions—love, pride, dignity, honor, hate, envy, and so on—and the agonies, tragedies, triumphs, and peaks of human experience embedded in people’s actions, activities, and behavior

Representing people's experience symbolically, visually, and/or aurally to achieve clarity and understanding

Developing and Rehearsing Scripts

Even groups with the least apparent capacity are able to produce presentations that engage the attention and support of audiences. The key is to work carefully with primary stakeholders to have them identify the issues to which they wish to speak and the part they are able to play in the process. With the assistance of facilitators, they should do the following:

Review the outcomes of their research

Identify the audience and purpose—the major focus of their presentation

From their research, identify the major categories and key elements they wish to include

Write a script using this information

Edit the script to ensure clarity

Create artifacts or materials required in the presentation

Copy the script in a form appropriate for each presenter

Identify the roles people will play in the presentation

Rehearse the presentation

General

Reflection 7.5:

Ernie—Music, Drama, and Art to Convey Stories

For many years now, I have been impressed with the capacity of people to artistically and dramatically express their experience and/or to provide audiences with clear and informed presentations depicting their own activities and achievements. They include students at all levels of schooling from kindergarten through high school who have the capacity, with the help of their teachers, to produce wonderfully engaging and informative performances.

I've seen a kindergarten class that used music and drama to tell stories of their experience and middle school students who used song, drama, and other presentations to deal with issues of bullying in their school. I've been particularly impressed with the productions of a community group who provided presentations at conferences that were complemented by visual materials—charts, booklets, artwork—and video productions that were dramatically effective. Recently, I heard a senior health researcher describe a large and well-funded program focused on decreasing smoking in a large U.S. city, a project including television advertisements, billboard displays, newspaper advertisements, and researcher presentations to senior community leaders. He admitted that the overall results of these efforts appeared to be negligible, except in one area where a high school group had produced a play focused on the issue of smoking. This, he indicated, had *been presented to a wide range of audiences in the area and indications were that teenage smoking had decreased in that area of the city. He was most impressed by the quality of the production and the outcomes they had achieved.*

General

Reflection 7.6:

Ernie—The Benefits of Informing Stakeholding Audiences

I have seen many cases in which community groups engaged in effective developmental work constantly face withdrawal of their funding. These groups lack the skills or resources to construct reports that enable funding agencies to understand what they have achieved or to write proposals that clearly articulate their potential. I myself have been guilty of failing to provide reports that clearly described my activities in terms meaningful to departmental officers and the guidelines within which they necessarily worked. Although I complained bitterly when funding for my activities was withdrawn, I can see in retrospect that I had failed to keep one of our principal stakeholders clearly informed about my activities in terms that made sense to their directives.

I have also listened to the agonized accounts of students and colleagues who felt assaulted by comments such as "That's not [real] research!" from people who did not understand interpretive or action research processes and the associated procedures and types of outcome. This chapter speaks to people in these situations.

FORMAL REPORTS FOR INSTITUTIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL AUDIENCES

Stakeholders who operate within institutional or organizational contexts often require formally structured reports presenting technical features of the research process and detailed descriptions and analyses of the outcomes of an investigation. Government departments, funding organizations, and universities are examples of institutions likely to require such reports. Because continuing funding of projects, programs, and services often rests on the power of reports, this section of the chapter presents a framework for constructing formal reports that do justice to the rigor and efficacy of action research approaches to investigation.

The purpose of formal reports, theses, and dissertations is to communicate the outcomes of inquiry to major institutional stakeholding groups. They speak specifically to an academic or bureaucratic audience and must therefore be presented in forms acceptable within these contexts. Even when writing for these audiences, however, practitioners achieve academic quality in writing when the "originality, rigor, and significance" of their research and its "potential impact in the lives of others can be properly appreciated within the global community of writers" (McNiff, 2014, p. 5).

Because of the status enjoyed by science in the modern world, many organizations, institutions, universities, schools, government departments, and business corporations try to replicate the formats required of experimental scientific research in their reporting procedures. In doing so, however, they often lose significant information or present it in a form that fails to adequately represent the complexity and significance of events or to capture the agonies, achievements, tragedies, and triumphs that constitute the reality of people's lives.

Because interpretive, action-oriented research differs in significant ways from experimental scientific investigation (see Denzin, 1997, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), it requires somewhat different reporting procedures. This section therefore suggests ways of presenting formal reports that not only are true to the principles of action research but also enable individuals, organizations, and community groups to communicate effectively with bureaucratic and academic audiences.

THESES AND DISSERTATIONS

Theses and dissertations derived from action research have purposes that differ from those of the traditional objective accounts sanctioned by the scientific community. Recent developments suggest new ways of formulating written reports that more effectively represent people's experience and enable audiences to understand more clearly the impact of events on people's lives (De la Garza, 2011; Denzin, 1997; Four Arrows, 2008; Ortiz Aragón, 2013; R. K. Wright, 2011). Denzin (1997) points to the need to formulate more evocative accounts that provide empathetic understandings of events and experiences, research reports that look and sound more like fictional works—novels or short stories—than the impersonal, objective accounts common in many official reports. This challenge has been taken up in many quarters, however, so that dissertations in many parts of the world have taken forms significantly different from those of past eras (see Reflection 7.8 as an example).

General

Reflection 7.7:

Ernie—The Failures of Formality

One of the problems of reporting is the extent to which formal reports silence the voices of the people who are studied. For years now, I have been confounded, especially in my own work, by the inability of official reports to capture the sometimes excruciatingly damaging, damning, or disappointing features of people's lives—or the moments of triumph, small or large, that signal significant, life-changing events. The ponderous language of the reports often obscures the experiences of participants and the significance of events portrayed in the body of the text. As one report notes, the words of a government report indicating that "the sewage system in the community is inadequate" do not capture the same image as "children playing around raw sewage that flows past their houses."

General

Reflection 7.8:

Alfredo—My Dissertation Presented as Story-Based Organizational Ethnography

My dissertation (Ortiz Aragón, 2013) is written as analytical organizational ethnography and includes art, pictures and narrations of skits, and detailed stories in the participants' own voices. For example, I share here a paragraph that speaks to how an exercise that involved participants' drawing what they have had difficulty adapting to when they experienced major moves (changes in their places of residence) and also things that came easier to them in these moves. This paragraph combines my narration in normal font, with participant voices in italics woven in to help me explain a key point:

> "The exercise stimulated multiple senses and emotions as people found themselves reflecting on sights, sounds, and smells associated with previous residences. Simona, for example, becomes nostalgic for her home in Guatemala City: *'On the table there is a stack of fresh tortillas, and I was telling you yesterday how much I miss them (laughter). I grew up with tortillas and on the corner by my house, towards the plaza…, every day I would walk by and smell the tortillas and hear the sound of the tortillas being made' (Simona).* She has a hard time drawing her new city Lima—of which she is not a huge fan with its infamous gray skies—because she has not yet formed a detailed image of what Lima represents for her. Similarly, José expresses 'tremendous joy and happiness' in reflecting upon the beautiful historic home he left in Amsterdam (see illustration), as compared to his current apartment in Lima that requires 100 keys for security!"

Description

The continual use of long-hand participant quotes, pictures, and diagrams, along with my break with a traditional five-chapter dissertation structure, allowed me to convey interesting storylines and keep participant voices alive throughout the dissertation.

New ways of writing, however, often are confined by traditional formats that structure reports in ways marginally compatible with the intent of the writer. Although traditional reporting structures associated with experimental science seem incompatible with the narrative forms suggested by experimental ethnographic writing, it is still possible to find ways to fulfill the needs of institutional and bureaucratic audiences while remaining true to the intent of action research. Box 7.1 compares a framework for organizing experimental and survey research reports with a framework relevant to interpretive, action-oriented inquiry. The intent of the former is to provide concise descriptions of observed relationships between variables, often related to the testing of a null hypothesis. The latter provides the means to present narrative accounts derived from the processes of action research. The following sections provide more detail on the content of each of the sections depicted in Box 7.1. A later section takes more liberties with the structure of the report, providing structure and content more appropriate to interpretive and action research (see Box 7.2 on p. 264).

General

Box 7.1

Ways of Organizing Experimental and Interpretive Research Reports

Experimental/Survey Research

Section 1: Introduction

The introduction identifies the problem, provides background information, presents the research question(s), and states the hypothesis to be tested.

Section 2: Literature Review

The literature review presents a summary of published research studies that have explored the problem. It identifies outcomes, gaps, and inconsistencies in the research.

Section 3: Methodology

The methodology section presents the research design and describes the operationalization of hypotheses, sampling procedures, instrumentation, and procedures for data collection and analysis.

Section 4: Results

The results section presents the outcomes of the study, revealing and interpreting the results of data analysis.

Section 5: Conclusion

The conclusion discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the study, sometimes also presenting recommendations for applying the results of the study.

Interpretive and Action Research

Section 1: Focus and Framing

This section identifies the problem or issue on which the research focuses and describes the context in which it occurs, the question requiring a solution, and the objective of the study.

Section 2: Preliminary Literature Review

This section summarizes published research related to the issue, identifying the outcomes, perspectives, theoretical assumptions, and gaps in the existing literature.

Section 3: Methodology

This section describes the processes and philosophical assumptions of action research. It provides details of research procedures, including choice of participants (sampling), data gathering, data analysis, and reporting processes. It also describes procedures for ensuring rigorous and ethical research practices.

Section 4: Outcomes or Findings

This section presents detailed accounts that provide an empathetic understanding of how participants experience and interpret the issue investigated. It highlights major themes that need to be addressed, the actions taken by participants to provide practical solutions to the issue(s) studied, and the outcomes of their activities and events.

Section 5: Conclusion

This section compares and contrasts the participant perspectives with those in the research literature. It reveals the way research findings from the study are consonant with or challenge the information presented in the literature. Implications of the study for policies, professional practices, and future research are also included in this section.

General

Reflection 7.9:

Ernie— Research Report Frameworks

The frameworks in this chapter are derived from attempts to assist graduate students to formulate dissertation reports within a large research-oriented university. Because most faculty had been trained in experimental and survey research and had little understanding of interpretive or naturalistic inquiry, they were puzzled by the students' apparent inability to formulate research reports according to standard procedures common in most universities. The frameworks we designed together enabled university faculty to better understand the equivalence of our modified research reporting procedures and thus to make sense of it within their own systems of meaning.

I have presented this model in a number of university contexts and received positive feedback from many people, both faculty and students, who indicated that it provides a simple way of formulating a research report acceptable to the evaluative requirements of university life.

General

Box 7.2

Alternative Research Report Structures

Report Structure 1

Section 1: Introduction

Research purpose, focus, context, and participants; brief synopsis of the methodology; the nature and structure of the report, including a brief synopsis of each chapter

Section 2: Deconstruction or Review of the Literature

Description and critique of existing perspectives from academic and bureaucratic literature

Section 3: Results/Accounts

Accounts that reveal ways stakeholding participants describe and interpret their experiences of the issue studied

Section 4: Contextualization

Contrasts and comments on the differing perspectives presented in the results section and the literature review; suggests implications for policies, programs, and professional practices

Appendix: Methodology and Research Process

Describes the research paradigm and gives details of the research processes

Report Structure 2

Section 1: Introduction

Same as Structure 1

Section 2: Results—Accounts and Narratives

Accounts that reveal ways stakeholding participants describe and interpret their experiences of the issue studied

Section 3: Deconstruction and Review of the Literature

Description and critique of the existing perspectives from academic and bureaucratic literature

Section 4: Contextualization—Discussion of Findings

Same as Structure 1

Appendix: Methodology and Research Process

Same as Structure 1

FORMAL REPORTS FOR INTERPRETIVE AND ACTION RESEARCH

This section presents formats commonly used to report on the outcomes of a research project, comparing the components used for experimental/survey research with those more appropriate for interpretive and research (Box 7.1). As we have suggested, these formats constrain our ability to represent the more dynamic realities of an action research project, so later sections describe procedures more appropriate to the purposes of action research (Box 7.2, see p. 266). The major purpose of reporting is to ensure that stakeholders are fully informed about the processes and outcomes of research activities, and the form of the report consequently depends on the needs of particular stakeholding groups. A typical formal report for agency or institutional purposes includes the following elements:

1. *Introduction*. Presents the problem and purpose on which the research focuses.
2. *Literature review*. Provides an overview of current understandings or explanations of the issue investigated.
3. *Methodology*. Incorporates a rationale for the approach to research and describes the research procedures used.
4. *Research outcomes or findings*. Provides a narrative account of the processes and outcomes of the research—in effect, the story of participant experiences and perspectives.
5. *Conclusion*. Compares and contrasts findings in the study to those presented in the literature and discusses their implications.

Section 1: Introduction—Focus and Framing

This section of the report presents an overview that enables readers to understand why the study was instituted and the issue on which it focuses. It frames the study by locating it within the boundaries of a particular social context—for example, classroom, home, community, or office—and describes the people involved—for example, students, teachers, young people, parents, and so on. The following information is presented:

- The problem or issue on which the research focuses
- The context in which that issue or problem is played out
- The question that requires an answer or solution—that asks, in effect, “Why is it so?”
- The purpose of the research—generally, to seek an answer to the research question
- The significance of the study—why the issue is important or why the problem needs to be resolved

Section 2: Literature Review

This section describes what has been learned about the issue from previous studies reported in the research and professional literature. It presents the outcomes of studies that have investigated the issue on which the current study is focused. These studies are also subject to critical analysis to reveal the concepts, theories, and underlying assumptions on which their claims and viewpoints are based. This process digs below the surface of the reports to reveal the implicit systems of knowledge (discourses) and cultural practices embedded in the theoretical literature and the programs and services on which they report.

The literature review includes studies reported in literature derived from the following sources:

> *The academic disciplines*: academic texts, research reports, and academic journals
>
> *The professions:* publications and journals of professional bodies, such as teachers' unions, social worker associations, public service journals, and so on
>
> *Government agency policies and programs:* government records, legislation, departmental documents, policy papers, annual reports, research reports, sectional reports, client service literature, reviews, evaluations, procedural manuals, and so on

The review and analysis of this literature sets the stage for a later process (see Section 5) in which official and academic viewpoints are compared and contrasted with research participant perspectives. The review also points to gaps or inadequacies in the literature, thus revealing the need for the current study.

Section 3: Methodology

Introduction

The third section of a report presents a rationale for the approach to research used in the study (philosophical assumptions) and describes in detail the people involved (sample), the context in which it takes place (site), and the procedures used to conduct the research (research methods). It informs readers why this approach to research is appropriate to the issue investigated and indicates steps taken to ensure that the study was rigorous and ethical.

Methodological Assumptions: Philosophical Rationale

Because interpretive, action-oriented approaches to inquiry have been accepted only recently as legitimate in academic and official settings, the first subsection may require a more extended treatment than is expected of experimental or survey research reports. It provides information that identifies the research paradigm and provides readers with details of the purposes, processes, and outcomes of naturalistic or interpretive research. In doing so, it is useful to cite sources that enable readers to extend their understanding of the paradigm (e.g., Bradbury, 2015; Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This subsection should implicitly answer the following questions: "Why have we used this approach to research?" and "Is it a valid and rigorous research process?" It may be helpful to clarify the nature of the research process by comparing and contrasting naturalistic or interpretive inquiry with the experimental and survey research often presented in academic and bureaucratic reports. It is useful to know the extent to which intended readers value and have experience with interpretive action research.

Research Methods

The third subsection details the way the study was carried out. It enables readers to clearly understand how researchers went about the work of investigating the issue, including who was involved, what information was collected, and how the information was analyzed. This section is called the research design in experimental and survey research.

General

Reflection 7.10:

Ernie—Including Relevant Information for Stakeholders

Some years ago, I evaluated a program run by a government department, presenting a report that described in rich detail the operation of the program and the responses of participants. When I formally presented the report, the head of the department informed me rather frostily that "this is not an evaluation!" Although I thought I had negotiated details of the evaluation prior to accepting the contract, the departmental officers responsible had moved on to other positions. Their replacements did not understand the nature of the report I had written, in part because of my own failure to provide those details *in my report. I now know that my report should have clearly articulated what readers could expect as outcomes of the evaluation process.*

Positionality of the Researcher

It is especially important to describe and explain the role of the research facilitator. Readers should understand how the relationship between the research facilitator and other participants helped shape the processes and outcomes of the investigation. The researcher may be described as a consultant, resource person, scribe, or coparticipant whose role is to assist people rather than control them. The research is done *with* the people, not *on* or *about* them. This section is relevant to the general interpretive purpose of representing the experience and perspective of participants and to the values inherent in action research. The term *participant* is a departure from the term *subject* normally used in experimental and survey research and reflects a change in the status and role of people involved. Participants in action research actively engage in monitoring and directing the processes of inquiry.

Participants

Readers should be informed of the number and type of people who participated in the investigation (called "the sample" in quantitative studies) and the way the participants were chosen (sampling procedures) so they will clearly understand the sources of information. Researchers particularly need to identify the principal stakeholders—those most affected by the issue—and other important groups who have contributed to the study.

General

Reflection 7.11:

Ernie—Reporting to Stakeholders

In a school-related project, students and parents were identified as the principal stakeholders. Other significant stakeholders included the principal of the school and other principals in the district, teachers, and the district superintendent. Information from these sources enabled research facilitators to build an understanding of how the issue affected the lives of the students and their parents and how the issue fit into the local school context.

Information (Data) Gathering Techniques

As discussed in Chapter 4, this subsection describes the type of information acquired and how it was recorded. It is sometimes useful to cite authors who have suggested those procedures—for example, "This study used interviewing, data collection, and data analysis procedures suggested by Spradley (1979, 2016). Initial open-ended questions that enabled participants to describe and interpret experiences in their own terms were complemented by. . . . " The following types of detail may be included:

Interviews: the type of interviewing procedures used, with whom, number and duration of interviews, during what period, and where and when interviews occurred

Observations: activities, events, or locations observed, related to which people, how, at what time, for how long (or actors, acts, activities, events, objects, places, and times)

Quantitative data: data obtained from surveys, measures within the study, or from sources within the literature

Documents, media, and artifacts: documents, official reports, minutes, procedures, materials, policies, letters, and records scrutinized; films, videos, and media reports reviewed; artwork, working papers, and other objects produced by participants; samples; and so on

Recording: how information was recorded—field notes, audio and video, photographs, photocopies, and so on

Analysis: Procedures for Distilling and Interpreting Information

This subsection of the report provides readers with an understanding of the ways that research participants analyzed or interpreted information. It describes details of procedures used for selecting, categorizing, and labeling information (see Chapter 5). Readers need to clearly understand how interpretive procedures (data analysis) relate to the processes and products of investigation—that is, how analytic procedures provided the material on which the report is based.

Rigor

This section provides readers with evidence that the research has been carried out rigorously, that the procedures and processes of inquiry have minimized the possibility that the investigation was superficial, biased, or insubstantial. Because traditional criteria for evaluating the rigor of experimental and survey research are inappropriate, action researchers report on the set of issues that establish the study's trustworthiness (see Chapter 3)—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Limitations

Researchers should indicate any limitations that arose from the pragmatic realities of investigation. It is not usually possible to include all the people who should be included, to interview them for the extended periods warranted by interpretive inquiry, to follow up on all relevant issues, and to deal with all the contingencies that arise. Human inquiry, like any other human activity, is both complex and always incomplete. We need to acknowledge the extent of that incompleteness in our written accounts of the work.

Ethical Issues

This section of the report describes steps taken by research facilitators to maintain the rights and privacy of research participants, including procedures that guard against unwarranted intrusion into their lives, maintain their privacy, and establish appropriate ownership and uses of the products of investigation. It may also describe how research processes were enacted in ways sensitive to the cultural values and protocols of research participants (see Chapter 3).

Section 4: Research Outcomes or Findings

Section 4 is sometimes described as the "results" section of the report, enabling researchers to present what they have discovered in their investigation. Unlike experimental research that usually reports on observed relationships between variables, interpretive research presents narrative accounts that reveal the ways people experience the issue investigated and the context within which it is held. This section presents richly detailed, thickly described accounts that enable readers to empathetically understand the lived reality of research participants. These accounts are constructed from information collected and analyzed during the study (see Chapter 5). They should include the perspectives of people from all major stakeholding groups.

Interpretive procedures described in Chapter 5 present features and elements providing the basis for detailed, coherent accounts that do the following:

- *Describe* events, activities, and contexts from the perspective of the participants (This may include sequential accounts of events and acts, activities, objects, times, places, purposes, and emotions relevant to the issue investigated.)
- Present the way participants *interpret* events, activities, and so on, including how things occur and explanations for those occurrences (why they occurred as they did)
- Describe the *actions* taken by participants to resolve the issue or problem

Accounts may incorporate aspects of the study described in the following sections.

Setting the Scene: Describing the Context

As with any story, readers need to understand where the story is set, the people involved, and other relevant background information. One way of organizing this section of the account is to first set the scene and then tell the stories that have emerged. Another method is to begin with individual stories, weaving in descriptions of the setting as the person's story emerges. The purpose at this stage is to present a more detailed account extending the general information provided in Section 1. Descriptions should reflect participant views of the setting rather than the "objective" voice of the researcher so that accounts ring with participant voices, using their concepts and language to describe the people and the setting. Any of the following descriptive features might be included:

- *Actors*: people significant or relevant to the story
- *Acts and activities:* the things people do, activities in which they engage
- *Events:* significant events or incidents that take place
- *Place:* where those activities or events take place
- *Time:* when they occur and for how long
- *Purpose:* what people are trying to accomplish, why they do what they do
- *Emotion:* how they feel about what happens, what they do
- *Objects*: buildings, goods, materials, clothes, cars, books, reports, and so on

In setting the scene, writers should focus on those features of the situation that appear important from the participants' perspectives. This enables readers to see the context through the eyes of the participants and to understand their perspective. In some instances, large chunks of data may be included in the text to strengthen this process.

Constructing Accounts and Narratives: Telling People's Stories

Common reporting practice formulates generalized accounts by combining information acquired from a number of individuals or groups. The problem with generalized accounts is that they fail to capture the lived reality, the actual on-the-ground experience of the people whose lives they are reporting. By aggregating the data, report writers risk losing those significant events or features of experience that really make a difference in participants' lives. A method more appropriate to an action-oriented, interpretive approach to research commences with stories of individuals.

As the story emerges, use descriptive features (e.g., actors, acts, and activities; see earlier list) that seem most suited to illuminating the person's experience. Focus on those aspects of the context that are significant from the person's perspective, rather than on commentary derived from others. Narrate a story that the person would recognize as their experience told from their perspective.

Accounts should provide sufficient material to enable intended audiences to understand the experience and perspectives of key people in the primary stakeholding group. The stories that emerge in the report should also provide understandings of the ways that other significant stakeholders experience the issue investigated. A report of an investigation of school dropouts not only would focus on the perspectives and experiences of students who left school early but also should provide an understanding of the perspectives of peers, teachers, parents, school administrators, and others having a stake in the issue.

Constructing a General Account

Most reports contain a section that summarizes what has been discovered during the processes of investigation. This section provides an opportunity to understand the issue in ways that enable participants to work toward a resolution of the problem(s) on which the research has focused.

Once individual accounts have been formulated, list the key features that formed the basis for each account and review them. Categorize the features according to previously described procedures, that is, identify features or themes common to all or a number of the stories. Names or headings may differ but refer to similar features; for example, "arguing," "fighting," and "criticizing" might be incorporated within a category labeled "conflict." Extended descriptions of this process are provided in Chapters 4 and 5.

After those features or themes are identified, organize them into headings and subheadings that provide the framework for a narrative that tells how groups of people experience the issue being investigated. Accounts will focus on experiences and perspectives that people have in common but may also refer to the different perspectives people have of events. At this time, do not explore, analyze, critique, or otherwise comment on their experience. The intent at this stage is to reveal and accept nonjudgmentally and uncritically the ways people describe and interpret their experience.

Section 5: Conclusion—Discussion of Findings

Whereas the previous section presented accounts of participants' experiences and perspectives, the final section places those experiences and perspectives in a broader context. This is the "so what" section of a formal report or dissertation that enables writers to articulate newly emerging understandings of the issue and to compare and contrast them with perspectives from academic literature or bureaucratic documentation. In effect, it presents succinctly what has been discovered and explores the implications of those findings. This section does the following:

- Summarizes the outcomes of the study
- Places stakeholder viewpoints in the broader social context of the issue by comparing and contrasting their perspectives with those presented within the literature
- Explores the implications of the study for policies, programs, services, and practices related to the people and issue investigated
- Suggests actions that may be initiated or extended or modifications of activities or procedures that will improve existing programs or services
- Suggests the need for further research to enhance or extend the outcomes of the current study

Its purpose is to show clearly how stakeholder perspectives illuminate the issue investigated and to suggest changes in organizational or programmatic practices implied by the outcomes of the research. In the academic world, it may also propose ways in which existing theoretical perspectives are enhanced or challenged by the new understandings emerging from the research process.

General

Reflection 7.12:

Ernie—Reporting on Research Impacts

I was involved in a project that investigated the training needs of workers in a human services agency. The research clearly revealed the types of skills and knowledge required and suggested ways that skills development training could be organized. A review of existing literature on adult education and the human resources procedures of the agency augmented this information. It was creative work, requiring careful planning that encompassed the training needs revealed in the research process within the human resource development procedures of the agency. This resulted in a powerful training program that in the long term significantly enhanced the capabilities of the agency. The program was so successful that it became a model used by many agencies and organizations nationally and is still in use many years after its development.

FOREGROUNDING PARTICIPANT VOICES: ALTERNATIVE FORMAL REPORT FORMATS

We previously alluded to the need to develop more effective means for communicating the outcomes of research and development work. We have suggested ways in which the knowledge, understanding, and more pragmatic outcomes of our research efforts might be represented, including poems, dramas, narratives, fiction, memoirs, autobiographies, autoethnographies, films, and so on. This requires us as writer–researchers to draw on and develop literary devices able to evoke more clearly the deeply felt and experienced realities of people's day-to-day lives.

It has become increasingly evident, as we have helped people write formal dissertations, that the style and nature of the language and the very structure of formal reports often inhibit the clear and adequate representation of people's experiences and perspectives. The report structure presented earlier engages both author and reader in an extensive discussion, first of the study itself, then of the literature related to the issue, and finally of the methodology and research processes. By the time readers arrive at the heart of the report, they have waded through many pages of writing that provide essentially background information. The voices of the principal stakeholders have become muted and sometimes lost in the academic or bureaucratic issues that tend to predominate in reports of this variety.

We suggest the need, even in formal reports, to creatively modify the structure of the document so that the experience and the voice of research participants remain clearly in the forefront. The frameworks in Box 7.2 are adapted from those presented in the first sections of this chapter. Although they require some modifications and adaptations to the content of some sections, the rearrangement seems more clearly suited to an approach to research seeking to give voice to those studied.

The objective of these report structures is to provide ways of reporting that focus on the central objective of a report—the perspective of the principal stakeholders. The intent is to ensure that the most important information derived from the processes of inquiry—the perspectives, agendas, experiences, interests, and ideas of research participants—are given greatest prominence.

Structure 1 removes the methodological section from its prominent place in the report and places it as a technical appendix in the rear of the report. This change removes a potentially lengthy technical discussion from the body of the report, placing it in a less intrusive position in the text, while still providing that information for audiences who may be concerned about the technical features of the research process.

When Structure 1 is used, the report needs to expand the first section a little to include basic information about the nature of the report. This informs readers of the nature of research carried out and the results they might expect in the report. If people read this type of report expecting to see results in the form of causes and effects depicted as variables accompanied by tables of frequencies, they may not orient their reading to the type of text presented or realize the consequence of the report.

Structure 2 takes this process a step further, removing the sometimes intrusive voices of bureaucratic and academic research reports as the frame for research participant perspectives. Thus the outcomes of the research process are reported in Section 2, leaving discussion of the literature for the following section. This enables the literature to be reviewed in light of the perspectives emerging from the research process, thus conceding the limitations of expert knowledge and emphasizing the primary relevance of the experience and know-how of people in their everyday lives.

The commonalities and differences between participant perspectives emerging in the study and perspectives on the issue reported in the literature become one of the focal points of Section 4. We are, in effect, exploring the implications of the outcomes of the study. Where the outcomes concur with perspectives in the literature, we are able to validate our findings, to some degree. Other discussions can emerge from instances where research outcomes differ from perspectives within the literature. Some people suggest that the literature review section of the report be deleted altogether, introducing perspectives from the research literature only in the final section in counterpoint to the major findings of the research and as a point of discussion for its implications.

REFLECTION AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

1. Using a framework derived from your previous analysis, decide how you would like to report to the people you worked with. You may write a report for your colleagues and supervisors but also think about how you could provide feedback to others who have participated. It might be a written report, a presentation, a picture, or a series of photos. It should include the "voices" of people you interviewed or the setting you observed.
2. Write a draft of your report and share it with key people you interviewed or observed. Ask them to comment on the report's accuracy or fidelity—whether it faithfully represents their reality or perspective.
3. Modify the report as necessary and provide it to key participants for their information.
4. Discuss the report with them.
5. Using the report as a base, prepare and present a presentation for a group of your colleagues or classmates. Use some of the creative techniques for presentation suggested in this chapter.
6. Alternatively, if you are reading this text as part of a class:
   1. Prepare a report about your experience to the class using techniques and processes learned in the class.
   2. Using some of the creative techniques suggested in this chapter, prepare a presentation for your classmates. If possible, use music, art, photos, drama, or other ways of providing an empathetic understanding of what was happening in the setting you studied. If you have the capacity, you may choose to make a short video.
7. Within your work group, reflect on and discuss the reports and presentations.
8. Summarize what you have learned from the experience.

CHAPTER REVIEW

Action research reports use a wide array of **reporting procedures** designed to speak to the **diverse audiences** associated with action research.

Reports provide detailed, rich, and **evocative accounts** revealing the **lived reality** of **primary stakeholders** and providing the basis for **practical solutions** to significant problems that are the focus of investigation.

Reports enable **research participants** and **other stakeholders** to remain **actively informed** about ongoing activities and events associated with the study.

Written reports use procedures appropriate to **different stakeholding audiences** and are compiled using participative processes associated with action research. Participating authors do the following:

- Define the **audiences** and purposes of the report
- Review the **history of the situation**
- Review the **processes of investigation** used in the project
- Report on **key themes** emerging from the process, using **elements** associated with each theme for **content** details
- Report on the progress of **actions taken** and **issues resolved**
- Use **language and formats** easily **understood by stakeholding audiences**
- Provide opportunities for **stakeholders** to provide **feedback**

Verbal reports and presentations are sometimes more effective, having the capacity to evoke a more **empathetic response** from audiences.

PowerPoint presentations provide extended possibilities for using **visual resources** to enhance the impact of presentation.

Carefully planned presentations use skills to **connect with an audience** and provide strong and interesting **processes of delivery** that do the following:

- Make **an emotional connection** with the audience
- Maintain a **high level of energy** to hold the audience's attention
- Deliver content that has a **payoff for the audience**

The **power of presentations** is greatly enhanced by having **stakeholding participants speak for themselves**.

A wide range of media may be used to **enhance** the impact of a **presentation**.

These include the use of **photographs, PowerPoint presentations, charts, booklets, posters, or handouts**.

They can easily be produced using appropriate **applications** now available on the Internet.

Videos require more resources of **time, skills, and funds** but have the capacity to make **dramatic visual impac**ts and reach a wide **variety of audiences**.

It is also possible for research participants to present **dramatic and artistic performances** that capture the realities of their lived experience and their everyday lifeworlds.

Performances may include **drama, role-play, poetry, song, dance, art, and other visual media**.

Formal reports often are required by **institutions, organizations, and agencies** that have supported or sponsored a project.

Formats for **academic theses and dissertations** have commonly used formats originally designed for research reports in the physical sciences:

- An **introduction** presenting the research **problem and purpose** of the study
- A **review of the literature** providing an overview of current literature related to the issue under investigation
- A description of the **methodology** used in the study
- Research outcomes or findings that provide a narrative account of the outcomes of the study
- A **conclusion** that discusses the **implications** of the study

Standard formats are **limited** in the extent to which they **capture the visceral realities of human experience** or **report effectively on the issues** involved in the **complex dynamics** of social life.

Action researchers now use **alternative formats** focusing initially on the **experience, perspectives, and complexities of the social world** revealed in the study, leaving **technical detail**s of the study to be described later, sometimes as an **appendix**.

In doing so, however, they provide detailed **information required in traditional formal reports**.

Descriptions of Images and Figures

Back to Figure

The cities shown in the painting are described as follows:

- The left of the painting shows Amsterdam: It has a bright sun, a mansion with a garden and flags on the mansion’s left and right wings, small stick figures with bikes and toys in front of the mansion, dialog boxes with texts written in a foreign language.
- The right of the painting shows Lima: It has a fenced area with a tall building on its left, a short building on its right, and a children’s play area in its center. It also shows three vehicles on a road, dialog boxes with texts in a foreign language, and a garden with palm trees.

8 DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACHES TO SOCIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

ACTION RESEARCH AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT: FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL

This chapter speaks to ways of accomplishing processes of organizational and institutional change that are a necessary prerequisite of human social development. Previous chapters have described ways that social, cultural, political, and intellectual processes impinge on our professional and personal lives. These include global movements that operate at the political and corporate level to influence the ways in which human services and programs are organized and implemented at the local level. Large-scale institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have had a significant influence on the development of government policies at national and state levels, having significant impact on the operations of government and nongovernment agencies and institutions at state, regional, and local levels (Karns et al., 2015; Rittberger et al., 2019). Financial and managerial imperatives from these and other sources have, over time, changed the ways that both public and private programs and services operate. Huge corporations likewise have an impact on people's lives directly through the application of centralized managerial processes that become embedded in everyday operations of institutions and organizations, the production of texts and narratives of corporate operational practices, sometimes enhanced by huge programs of advertising, directly influencing the ideas and emotions of mass audiences in homes, workplaces, and the community.

Though historically recent developments associated with the increasing corporatization of the programs and services offered by agencies and institutions have had some positive effect in increasing efficiency and decreasing costs, it is clear they have failed to impact the key social agendas within modern democratic states. In these cases, it is likely that the very mechanisms and practices that have evolved are themselves inadequate and inappropriate for the task.

Extended investigations by Sarason (1990) and Cole (2010), for instance, revealed the general failure of reform efforts designed to “close the gap” between indicators of social well-being between mainstream populations and marginalized social groups. Both Sarason and Cole attributed failure of reform efforts to the inability of agencies and institutions to go outside the boundaries of existing organizational practices. They highlighted a general trend in the United States, over a 40-year period, for reforms to remain largely restricted to improvements within systems and structures as they have traditionally operated. In education and training particularly, enduring patterns of didactic classroom or workshop instruction failed to impact the desired reform outcomes. Similar situations exist across the world, including Australia, where increased funding in “close the gap” initiatives has shown little or no gains in any but a few social indicators of Indigenous well-being (Guenther, 2013).

The processes of action research presented below are specifically designed to work in these types of environments, providing practical activities that may challenge existing orthodoxies of organization and practice but are more likely to deliver effective, equitable, and sustainable social outcomes. This may require a personal and professional journey that may involve major paradigmatic shifts in the way people think of their work, as well as some intellectual and emotional risk-taking by all concerned. As Kelly and Westoby (2018) indicate

> Engaging in the task of development is a very human process, full of frailty and tension rather than ideological or practical purity. We therefore need to work from a principle of engaging with the reality and the humanity of the work. . . . We need to be able to sit with the tensions between the “ideal” and the “real.” (p. 5)

While there is considerable focus on the need to develop the capacities of professional practitioners, real change cannot be attained unless all stakeholders acquire the knowledge and skills to accomplish required changes to practice. This therefore entails processes of development and organizational change that include all levels of an organization—clients, workers, technicians, professionals, supervisors, managers, and executives. For more extended, complex projects, it may also require key community members, churches, and other social institutions, and local, state, and national political figures, sustainable and effective change not being possible without the participation of all who affect or are affected by the activities they engage in.

THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Development is a term often associated with international efforts to raise the standard of living in poorer nations and often refers to attempts to develop a more modern economy in nations where subsistence agriculture predominates. Attempts to institute economic developments based on the development of industrial capacities and a market economy often failed and sometimes had disastrous consequences. Those responsible failed to realize that centrally planned policies and programs failed to take into account the deeply embedded social, cultural, and political realities of any given context. Deep divisions resulting from inequitable distribution of wealth in these contexts often resulted in social disorder manifested in conflicts that spread from local to national and then regional wars.

General

Reflection 8.1:

Ernie—Collaborative Developmental Processes

The East Timor project described in *Reflection 8.4* *sought to develop the capacity of each community to rebuild the school system previously ravaged by a war of independence. It involved developmental work with a group of parents in each town or village but also included workshops with senior politicians, members of the Education Department, district superintendents, principals, teachers, local leaders, senior church figures, and representatives from a number of* *supporting agencies—the World Bank, UNICEF, and other aid agencies. A series of meetings with each of these stakeholding groups informed them of progress, while a national team provided capacity-building workshops for local teams responsible for implementation of the program. Independent evaluation of these efforts indicated that there had been sometimes dramatic developments that greatly assisted the nation to reconstruct its system of schooling*.

The same processes occur internally in developed nations, where rapid technological and economic changes have radically increased the divide between rich and poor, with segments of the population previously living settled and comfortable lives becoming impoverished. In both cases, economic developments imposed by centrally devised programs at international, national, and corporate levels have paid little attention to the need to provide people with the time and resources needed to make the social and cultural changes to their family and community lives (Stiglitz, 2013; Stiglitz, Fitoussi, & Durand, 2019; Stilwell, 2019). Economic development, therefore, requires the types of activity that are at the heart of action research. They require a set of skills and understandings not usually provided by research methods courses but, as we describe below, are central to those who are engaged in the very human, compassionate practices associated with developmental work.

Development Theory and Practice

Current approaches to development theory and practice emerge from past traditions of community development, community building, community organization, or a variety of other approaches to human development. Though applicable to a wide range of social and cultural contexts, they are particularly relevant to culturally diverse contexts and the situations of impoverished or otherwise marginalized peoples. Large-scale programs devised in the wake of the widespread changes resulting from the withdrawal of many former European colonies became so prevalent that development came to be seen as a fundamental human right.

In 1986 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Right to Development, defining it according to a set of foundational principles in the following ways:

> The right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized. (Article 1.1)
>
> The human right to development also implies the full realization of the right of peoples to self-determination, which includes, subject to the relevant provisions of both International Covenants on Human Rights, the exercise of their inalienable right to full sovereignty over all their natural wealth and resources. (Article 1.2)

These rights are enshrined in a comprehensive framework of ideas that guide approaches to developmental policies and programs. They are deemed to be relevant to all actors at all levels in all contexts—local, regional, national, and global. According to the UN charter, development includes processes that

- integrate aspects of both human rights and development theory and practice;
- encompass all human rights—civil, political, economic, social, and cultural;
- require active, free, and meaningful participation;
- demand comprehensive and human-centered development policy, participatory development processes, social justice, and equity;
- embody human rights principles of equality, nondiscrimination, participation, and transparency;
- emphasize the principles of self-determination and full sovereignty over resources.

Though these may appear idealistic and irrelevant to the realities of many social and political contexts, they provide a set of principles to guide those intent on actively engaging practices and processes that, ultimately, move people toward a truly democratic society able to achieve greater degrees of equity and social justice.

The approaches to action research embodied in this text are consciously oriented to these principles, though in the current ethos, they struggle against political and economic forces that appear to be antithetical to their intents. Centralized and often paternalistic dictates and mandates threaten to impose conditions that fail to accommodate the social and cultural realities and needs of many people and impose procedures and practices more attuned to authoritarian systems of organization and governance. Action research, as a means to engage in truly effective developmental work, provides a set of practices and processes that ultimately move people toward truly democratic society able to achieve greater degrees of equity and social justice.

LEVELS OF DEVELOPMENTAL PRACTICE[1]

1. Ernie: For much of the material on developmental work I am deeply indebted to my good friend, mentor, and colleague Anthony Kelly, whose wisdom and grace has inspired me, alongside many others, to seek the solace of a truly human approach to their professional and community lives.

The journey of developmental practice can involve major paradigmatic shifts. Commonly accepted ideas, processes, and practices may require changes that involve some intellectual and emotional risk-taking for all participants, making a focus on the fundamental principles of participatory process all the more important. Issues deeply embedded in the historical, social, and cultural circumstances of any social context require extended processes of action research that increase in extent and complexity as research participants extend their understanding of the issues involved. Kelly and Westoby (2018) provide a framework of concepts that assists in organizing developmental practices to be applied at a number of levels: implicate, micro, mezza, macro, and meta.

Implicate Method: Understanding the Personal

> Who we are, what we want, what we bring, and what we give is at the heart of the work. Implicate method is a methodical preparation of ourselves so that we can open, engage, and commit in hopeful, healthy, and helpful ways. Because we are all so different there are many different expressions of implicate method and the journey to find that expression necessarily a personal and individual story. Implicate method finds its ultimate expression a practice framework that represents our best effort to name the important connections between our inner world and the outer world in which we work. (Kelly & Westoby, 2018)

Those who work in development contexts often are required to enact practices somewhat different than those associated with work in mainstream social agencies and organizations, even to the extent that their activities challenge the orthodoxies of professional and organizational practices. In doing so they may put themselves or their families at some professional risk, in terms of their relationship with fellow workers or their supervisors or of the career advancement that will provide resources for home and family. Each worker needs to engage in consciously mindful exploration of where they sit in relation to their own self-view and worldview, to center themselves in who and what they are and how others see and experience them. They know and are able to explain how they will go about their work.

Micro Method: Building Purposeful Relationships

> *A description of the immensity of the sky by a frog peering at the stars from the bottom of a well is bound to be deficient*.

Micro method refers to the ways in which we develop the purposeful relationships that enable us to work alongside other stakeholders, providing the very basis upon which all other levels of work depend.

Kelly and Westoby (2018) suggest four principles that provide the foundation of this aspect of our endeavors:

Seeing what the people see

Recognizing that we understand so little of the lives of other people, micro method is based on the need to understand the perspective and experience of other people. Like the original purposes of ethnographic research, developmental action research is based on this assumption:

> "You will never understand, never join with us, unless you see the world through our eyes, and see what we see."
>
> It resonates with the words of others who suggest the need to "walk in my moccasins for a while," "listen, listen, then listen some more," "work with the people, not for them," and "carry your own agenda lightly."

At the heart of these messages is the warrant for academic and professional researchers to set aside their specialized professional knowledge, in the first instance, to concentrate on understanding the imperatives that drive the lives of the people with whom they work.

Engaging in dialogue

The core of this method is the development of the forms of communication providing the means to engage in authentic dialogue. This begins by making ourselves present' to another person—a friendly "hello," a smile, a "good morning," or a comment about the weather or any easy topic we share together. We then listen or otherwise respond to the presence of the other person, seeking to understand their response to us, welcoming and honoring whatever it is, by our continued engagement.

In continuing these interactions, research facilitators and participants listen to other people accurately so that they can see and understand the way research participants engage the world around them. They use clearly defined communication skills that help build constructive and honorable relationships.

Using keywords

> "There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world." (Freire, 2000 / 1972)

> "The important task . . . is to hear and respond to the key words that have developmental potential." (Kelly & Westoby, 2018)

Chapter 5 refers to the process of distilling the data—to extract units of meaning and significant themes from all the information emerging in the course of investigations and for these to be drawn from key stakeholders who are at the core of the project. Keywords are those that, from the perspective of primary stakeholders

- contain a positive resource
- indicate an intention to take action
- have a reflective quality that indicates the person has thought about the matter (Kelly & Westoby, 2018, p. 79).

Though terminology and concepts from agency and organizational policies, reports, and procedural practices may become a relevant part of the developmental process, the impetus in development practice is to center the work on terms and concepts deeply embedded in the lives of the people at the center of the issues investigated—clients, students, customers, community members, and so on.

Seeking permission to change the story

Often we find that descriptions emerging from investigations fail to provide the basis for action. Further they may describe a state of affairs that existed in the past that has no relevance to current circumstances, and these may be framed in very generalized terms that have little direct relevance to particular people of events:

It's pretty hopeless really . . .

We used to be able to .. . .

The government won't let us . . .

Parents in this town just don't care . . .

In these circumstances facilitators may wish to "change the story" by seeking terms that are more action-oriented, which refer to immediate circumstances rather than past or future, engaging descriptions that refer to particular people, events, or circumstances. In this we seek to privilege the subjective world over the objective and to engage the strength of the people by developing accounts that resonate more directly with their experience.

Mezzo Method: Working Together

People do not automatically know how to work collaboratively, their activities sometimes being deeply embedded in routines and practices they take to be "normal" or "necessary." On the other hand, people often feel they lack the capacity to make useful contributions to the activities associated with a developmental project. Mezzo method enables relatively small groups of people to work together on issues of common concern in ways that enable them to appreciate their points of connection and how they can take mutually beneficial action. Kelly and Westoby (2018) suggest that the power of developmental work is contained within the nature and quality of relationships between the people involved, describing the principles and processes through which small groups of people can develop harmonious and productive relationships. They suggest the following principles relevant to the development of collaborative work.

Small is beautiful

> Developmental work best emerges within the realities of particular circumstances, a small group of people developing initial understandings of the situation and taking small steps to articulate a preliminary definition of the problem or issue on which they feel the need to take action. Such a group needs to be open and transparent in the activities in which they engage and inclusive of the various groups associated with the issue they seek to resolve. In the process they develop a network of relationships that share information and actions across the group (see Figures 6.2 and 6.3 in Chapter 6).

Empowerment and capacity building

> The purpose of capacity building is to enable people to acquire the skills, knowledge, and resources to take control of important matters that affect their lives. In doing so they use the language of the people, the terms, concepts, and ideas that are inherent in the local context. The language of agencies and organizations or of the technical or professional world is not appropriate unless introduced only where necessary. Such terminology rarely provides the basis for action by the people primarily concerned with the issue. By building from what people know and can do, we can help them to develop the capacity to give shape and

direction to the actions required to deal with the issues affecting their lives. Capacity building requires development of the following:

Relationships

Information/knowledge and skills

Resources

Decision-making

Kelly and Westoby (2018) describe seven steps that enable people to acquire these capacities:

1. Establishing a participatory brief—what is the issue/problem?
2. Immersing oneself in the place and with the people
3. Gathering data—hearing and understanding the stories of people
4. Framing the work and organizing the resources
5. Using the framework and resources to take action
6. Identifying and taking key actions
7. Linking forward, back, and out

In all of these, development workers assist the people to make decisions and take action. All activities at the mezzo level require the ongoing application of micro level practices, including those of dialogue, connection, and bonding; rigorous and disciplined work; and a continuing focus on the implicate texts and stories of individual people. In the process the “I” and “you” become transformed into the “we” of the group.

General

Reflection 8.2:

Ernie—Productive Capacity Building Processes

I once worked with members of a neighborhood group who were concerned about the quality of education their Hispanic children were getting. They initially refused to allow the principal to engage the school district administration in research that might assist the teachers and the school administration to improve the situation. When I suggested that they, the neighborhood group, do the research, they replied emphatically, "We don't know how to do research!" When further discussion failed to produce acceptable solutions to their issue, they rather reluctantly agreed to my suggestion after hearing my description of a similar project elsewhere. Preparation sessions attended by neighborhood volunteers and members of the school administration not only provided the tools to engage in what became a highly successful project but also assisted in development of more friendly and productive relationships between parents and school administrators. The connection between capacity building and relationships was clearly evident (see Stringer, 2008).

Macro Method: Building Strong Organizations

Macro method builds organizations that provide the means for people to come together to achieve effective collective action on issues of common concern. Such organizations are based on principles of community or stakeholder group ownership and control and provide systematic ways of organizing actions to achieve mutually defined goals directed at the common good. The transition from informal participatory groups based on informal relationships of self or mutual interest to organizational roles and responsibilities requires the ongoing maintenance of the tapestry of partnerships that nurtured activity in the first levels of development work.

As Kelly and Westoby (2018) indicate,

> Organization is the form of social structure for the members of an organization to meet and have a common platform for them to take public action. . . . The public purpose of an organization and the authority to act to achieve that

> purpose flows from two sources. It flows first from the authority given to it by the properly constituted authority of the wider society, usually government, and second from the members of the organization itself. The nexus between the members of the wider social world is the arena of the work of macro method. (p. 121)

As a development project increases in size and scope, it is necessary for people to broaden their perspective from that or mutual self-interest to acknowledge and take responsibility for a broader community, social, or global good. Where previous levels of work entailed working “alongside” or “together,” macro level work is characterized as working in “partnership” with others. It requires a relational commitment to cooperation that provides the soul and spirit that holds people together, giving them an identity that maintains the essence of their partnership as they develop the procedures and rules that give structure and process to the purposes they wish to achieve.

The heart of macro method, Kelly and Westoby (2018) suggest, lies within four principles that guide the development of organization—subsidiarity, organizational culture, supportive relationships, and inclusive structure.

1. *Subsidiarity*: The major emphasis is the need for work and activity to be driven by the imperatives of those lower levels rather than by those in higher echelons of the organization. The purpose of those higher in the organizational structure is to find the ways and means to enact the purposes and plans of those at the lower level rather than replace them with their “more informed” actions.
2. *Building a supportive organizational structure*: The qualities of an effective development organization include the following:

    Inclusive eligibility for membership

    Control by members

    Connection to stakeholding communities

A focus on concerns of stakeholding communities

Equitable economic participation across member groups

Authority to make decisions

Building the capacity of members

Connection to relevant resources

Cooperation with others

Skills to engage in required work

Security associated with available funds and human resources.

In an effective organization, all these are maintained by the integration of principles and processes engaged at the micro and macro levels of development. Both the structure and operation, including policies, programs, and procedures, work to facilitate harmonious and respectful relationships between individuals and groups, avoiding those practices based on competition and self-interest that undermine the developmental intent of many organizations.

3. *Building supportive relationships*: As projects and programs increase in size and complexity, a developmental organization provides those within it with the resources and capacities to maintain order and coherence in their work. This requires processes and practices that help keep workers on track, defining task and developing plans dialogically, providing adequate training and personal support. (Many of these issues are described in greater detail in Chapter 6.)
4. *Building inclusive structures*: Inclusive structures are those that facilitate participatory work by authorizing the work appropriately, ensuring workers/members understand the responsibilities of their role and the stages of work they undertake from start to finish.

Work at the macro level is more complex and sometimes more demanding as participants wrestle with the complexities involved in activity that moves past the comfort of the personal relationships and partnerships of the micro and mezzo levels of activity. The heart of work at this level, however, is to maintain a focus on the general principles operating at those levels of work, ensuring that the human dimensions of our work are not lost in the often mechanistic and divisive operations of large-scale organizations.

Meta Method: Linking Personal, Local, Organizational, and Global

Today's world is characterized by a situation where the local and the global are becoming conflated. Technology has provided the means whereby people and ideas can be easily communicated across the planet; where people separated by thousands of miles can talk, plan, and organize activities, projects, and programs without recourse to face-to-face meetings; where powerful political figures can foment hatred and fear, and paradoxically, even those with the most humble resources can connect and work with people across the planet.

Meta method applies the theme of "connection" between local and global work. Principles include the application of social logics that enable people to embrace paradox and complexity. These provide the means to make constructive links with wider social and global institutions that enable more effective and sustainable work at local and organizational levels of operation. Perhaps more significantly, technology provides opportunities for people at local or organizational levels to link with networks and resources not previously available. The uses of IT and social media presented in Chapter 9 indicate ways that individuals, groups, and small organizations can develop useful and productive links with large-scale organizations, businesses, and corporations to tackle some of the significant issues threatening the international social order and the health of the planet itself.

As important is the potential for small organizations to tap into resources made available by larger organizations, or in some cases by the corporate world, to support or enhance their attempts to deal with local issues. In doing so they may participate in national and global processes directed at the development of an equitable, sustainable, and enjoyable life for people across the world. The old adage "Think globally, act locally" has become within reach of almost all people. What gives us pause, however, is the reality that powerful people have used these technologies to spread sensationalized narratives of hatred and fear that work in their own interests and in the process create deep divisions between peoples that often end in violence and even wars. We have yet to devise the means to counter this use of the technology, but the general processes presented in this text may indicate fruitful directions.

COMMUNITY WORK TRADITIONS AND DEVELOPMENTAL PRACTICE

> To be effective the processes of inquiry must always be participatory and seek to establish as sense of community among participants. Community based, in the sense of establishing a "common unity" of purpose and perspective, is inherent in all aspects of investigation. Through working together, establishing an understanding of each other's experience and perspective, we establish the basis for truly effective outcomes. . . . Community is not a place. It is a state of mind! (Stringer 2014, p. xxi)

Action research often takes place in community contexts, where a wide range of organizations, agencies, clubs, and other social groups experience issues requiring developmental action. Issues include organizations not able to work effectively, groups experiencing internal or external conflicts, operations or new developments suffering from lack of funds, threats to their ongoing operation, or bureaucratic demands of government or commercial agencies. In these cases, action research provides the means to systematically work through issues of concern to engage in actions that either resolve problems or gain required resources. People who work within the community, however, can operate according to differing traditions that are ideologically or philosophically different. The following section briefly describes these traditions, none of which are "correct" or "right" ways of working but may be suited to differing contexts or circumstances.

Service Delivery

Service delivery is one of the most common ways that modern societies provide for the needs of the people, offering a wide range of services in education, health, housing, welfare, employment, and so on. Government and nongovernment agencies employ experienced and trained professional staff to organize and deliver services in these and other areas, their expertise providing the means to ensure the ongoing well-being of the population. Typically, these services result from centralized funding and organization that is operationalized by centralized bureaucratic systems of control that provide for the needs of large sectors of the population. These systems of control are organized strategically by a managerial elite who are responsible for ensuring the systematic delivery of services to the people at local levels by trained professionals with specialized expertise in the particular area—health, education, housing, and so on.

Service delivery is one of the major accomplishments of modern societies, ensuring the harmonious and efficient provision of services that provide for the needs and well-being of the general community. A problem with this tradition, however, is that centralized processes sometimes fail to reach sectors of the population that are, for different reasons, unable to access the services. Further problems result from sociocultural dynamics that mean the particular approach to service delivery is unsuited to particular segments of the population. The "one-size-fits-all" operations emerging from centralized planning fail to accommodate the particular circumstances of all the diverse groups comprising a population. This sometimes results from situations in which the sociocultural orientations of service professionals fail to provide them with the capacities to provide services in appropriate or effective ways.

General

Reflection 8.3:

Ernie—"They Don't Understand!"

In a recent project involving Aboriginal people, participants spoke of the struggle in particularly difficult circumstances to maintain basic services—housing, employment, legal representation, and so on. Talking of their interaction with non-Aboriginal agency personnel, in which they tried to explain the situation and their circumstances, they consistently exclaimed in frustration, "Ernie, they just don't understand!*"*

Advocacy

Poor and socially marginalized social groups sometimes gain assistance from organizations or agencies that assist them to deal with problematic situations—people living in poverty, homeless people, or those who struggle to accommodate the needs of bureaucratic processes. Ordinary people sometimes find themselves faced with highly damaging circumstances arising accidentally or through the actions of powerful individuals, corporations, or government entities. In these circumstances, they are sometimes able to gain support from advocacy groups that provide assistance related to particular issues—housing, legal issues, and so on. Advocacy groups tend to act on behalf of individuals or groups, providing professional, legal, or other resources to help people deal with the issues that have threatened to overwhelm them.

Social Action

Social action involves a more determinably aggressive approach that may involve extended campaigns and a series of events that oppose policies, programs, or other authoritarian, bureaucratic, or corporate activities that threaten people's well-being. Sometimes militant actions—street marches, sit-ins, demonstrations, picketing, and so on—may also be accompanied by political action designed to create organizational or political change. Any or all of these activities may be appropriate to situations where decision makers or people in positions of power refuse to acknowledge the needs of the people or who work in their own interests or for particular powerful elites.

This type of activity has a long history over many centuries and has been particularly strong when social and technological changes have resulted in the disenfranchisement or impoverishment of large groups of people. In the past century, struggles for the rights of workers, women, and racial or cultural minorities has spawned movements that have taken sometimes militant approaches to social action. A landmark book by Saul Alinksky (1989) provided *Rules for Radicals* that mapped out a revolutionary plan for social change that was uncompromisingly militaristic in presenting systematic steps "to create mass organizations that seize power and give it to the people." These approaches to social action were common in the protest movements of the 1960s.

More peaceful, nonviolent approaches to social action are characteristic of the movements emerging in India around World War II under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and in the United States with Martin Luther King (2010), both advocating peaceful but insistent resolution to the issues of inequity and intolerance that were deeply embedded in their societies.

Developmental Action

Emerging from community development, community organization, and similar traditions, developmental action involves partnerships between professional and other supporters to assist community and social groups to develop the capacity to address common concerns. Details of developmental approaches to action at the community level are provided in the previous section of this chapter.

CAPACITY BUILDING: THE HEART OF DEVELOPMENTAL PRACTICE

Like other approaches to research, action research requires those with responsibilities for facilitating research to increase the breadth of their capacities to deal with the varied situations that arise. As the following sections indicate, initial experience in simple action research projects can be accomplished with the skills provided in educational programs. Ultimately, however, experience within the ongoing processes of research provide the means not only for facilitators to extend their research capacities but also to enable participants from community and agency settings to build their capacity to engage in systematic processes.

Professional development and training programs are often incorporated into the operation of agencies and institutions, providing people with an understanding of new features of their work or the skills required to implement the programs and services for which they are responsible. Professional development, training, and education processes are based on the fragmentation of the content to be learned into discrete “packages” that are largely focused on their application in the workplace. The theory appears to assume that generalized skills and packets of knowledge provide a “toolkit” from which people will draw in order to accomplish specific activities in specific settings and that these will automatically translate into more effective outcomes for the services and programs concerned. These approaches to professional development and training often tend to focus on “lessons,” which impart factual information and a limited set of skills that have little meaning or purpose in the everyday lifeworld of the target audience.

More generally, however, learning is limited to that which can be accomplished within the site of a classroom or training facility. A focus on acts, events, and activities presented by the instructor/teacher situated in an imagined setting attempts to situate learners in an approximation of a real-life setting. This approach to education and training, though limited in its ability to provide an integrated, meaningful, and purposeful learning experience, is useful in its economy and general application to large populations. For those whose lifeworlds differ considerably from the social life of curriculum designers and teachers, however, this approach to learning has severe limitations. This is particularly evident when Indigenous and other marginalized peoples are the target of education and training processes, the contextualizing frames of “lessons” often failing to provide the means by which learners are able to understand the meanings and purposes embedded in learning activities.

There are, however, strategies that encompass any set of curriculum content within contextualized learning procedures relevant to the lifeworld of a particular group of learners, incorporating sequences of learning that build on the body of skills and knowledge inherent in their lifeworld. Stringer (2008, 2015) describes programs in East Timor and Australia, where education, training, and development practices were constructed on this basis. These were highly successful, providing outcomes demonstrably successful in providing the means to institute meaningful changes and development projects that impacted positively on the lives of participants. Education and training that focuses on the development of people's individual capacities, therefore, can be framed and organized in ways that enable people to accomplish developmental goals in demanding settings, especially those marked by high degrees of social dislocation or alienation (see List Corner 8.1 for an example).

General

Lit Corner 8.1:

Participatory Action Research With Youth

In Action Learning: Social Justice Education and Participatory Action Research, *Dana Wright (2015) explores a case involving largely underperforming minority secondary school students who are disillusioned by the high-stakes testing environment and the resulting narrowing of the curriculum within their schools. With the guidance and support of two instructors, the students designed a youth-led participatory action research (PAR) project centered around the question "What do young people really need in our neighborhood?" Students and their instructors then collected and analyzed data to find answers to this question, which they later presented at a community forum attended by youth advocates and community organizations. Through their action research, the students discovered that there was a dire need for a youth center to house youth development programs, homework clubs, and a computer lab. To ensure follow-through on their recommendations, they created a Youth Task Force to ensure a youth center would be built in their community within 3 to 5 years*.

The PAR project used a combination of structured, experiential, and interactive pedagogical approaches that allowed for trust building and risk-taking, which ultimately nurtured youth engagement. Wright terms these collaborative and participative techniques a "pedagogy of praxis" that was

> *able to connect the critical reflection students and instructors had about their social conditions with action that could transform their community (p. 68).*

MANAGING PROCESSES OF SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

As indicated above, work within and between organizations requires systematic, carefully arranged contexts that ensure the efficient operation of the complex agendas and actions that emerge from a well-grounded action research process. Developmentally, the following strategies are designed to enable people to accomplish the purposes and intents of their endeavors, but their impact will depend to a great degree on the extent to which they are able to incorporate the principles and processes emerging from action at the personal, micro, and mezza levels of activity.

The intent of these processes is to ensure that changes evolving from action research are systematically integrated into the life of the agency, organization, department, or institution in which the research took place. Unless research participants take systematic steps to incorporate changed procedures into the ongoing life of the organization, changes are likely to be short-lived and have little impact. Systematic and principled action research has the potential to extend its influence to all sectors of activity that have an impact on the issue or problem originally investigated. It enables research participants to engage the significant changes that need to be incorporated into the organization and to do so in ways that ensure the continuing and improved effectiveness of its operation.

Processes of change always affect people's lives when they are required to modify their work practices or initiate new activities. Change processes are likely to disrupt long institutionalized practices that affect people's egos, dignity, power, status, and career opportunities. In many situations, some people will resist any changes unless the processes are carefully defined and their interests taken into account.

Significant change is also likely to involve many agencies and organizations so that participants may find themselves subject to pressures to develop controlling and bureaucratic styles of operation that make them lose their community focus and override the principles of action research. Facilitators must work with participants to ensure they are able to maintain the autonomy and integrity of their work but avoid the style, manner, and forms of operation that typify many bureaucratic settings. They need, above all, to maintain approaches to development that engage the participatory processes and foster a sense of community among all participants. This strategic approach to developmental work requires time and resources that must be factored into scheduling and budgeting plans.

To integrate their activities with existing organizations and agencies, participants should constantly refer to the working principles of action research. They need to inform themselves of approaches to management consonant with those principles so that they can enact their organizing activities in appropriate ways. A vast array of literature informs the fields of management, leadership, and organizational development but sources consonant with the approach to action research presented in this book include *The Empowered Manager: Positive Political Skills at Work* (Block, 2016); *A World Waiting to Be Born: Civility Rediscovered* (Peck, 1994); *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 2006); *The Dance of Change: The Challenges of Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations* (Senge & Roth, 1999); *Leading Organizations: Perspectives for a New Era* (Hickman, 2016); *Images of Organization* (Morgan, 2006); and *Organization Change: Theory and Practice* (Burke, 2017).

General

Reflection 8.4:

Ernie—A Strategic Developmental Process

In the time following the establishment of independence in East Timor, I acted as a UNICEF consultant for the Ministry of

Education, Culture, Youth, and Sports. My task was to find ways of involving parents and the community in the rebuilding and management of local schools devastated at the time of Indonesian withdrawal (Stringer, 2007). Initially, I facilitated participatory workshops with parents and teachers to engage them in action research processes that identified ways parents could contribute to the reconstruction and development of their local schools. At the same time, I engaged in interviews, focus groups, meetings, and workshops with directors and superintendents of education, school principals, and community leaders. Input from these sources provided information that was incorporated into a well-received policy paper that became the basis for developing Parent–Teacher Associations (PTAs) in East Timor (Stringer, 2002). In the following year I assisted a team of East Timorese educators in planning and facilitating a "preliminary pilot" parent workshop in one school and then left them to implement similar workshops in six pilot schools across the nation. Evaluation workshops held some months later indicated that they had been highly successful in initiating parent participation in a broad range of activities—rebuilding classrooms and furniture, making teaching materials, raising funds through gardens and fish farms, providing the school with a water supply, organizing security, and many other activities.

Workshops were then initiated across the nation by a team of trained facilitators who planned the implementation strategies they would employ in each district. Careful and systematic processes of preparation and planning enabled district teams to systematically integrate these developments over an extended period. Thus, the participatory processes of action research, initially focused on a relatively small number of people, grew into a national program that provided the basis for much-needed development of the East Timorese school system.

Much of the success of this project was due to the strategic planning and support processes that included stakeholders at all levels of the school system, from senior ministry officials to parents and community leaders in local schools. Not only were the participatory processes of investigation, planning, and implementation effective at a practical level, they were *also consonant with the national imperatives of this new nation. As one team member exclaimed with great jubilation, following a highly successful workshop, "This is so democratic!"*

Block (1990) suggests a way of conceptualizing the difference between what he typifies as *bureaucratic* and *entrepreneurial* organizations. Bureaucratic organizations, he suggests, are characterized by patriarchal systems that emphasize a top-down, high-control orientation to organizational activity. These types of organizations breed power-oriented people who use manipulative tactics to further their myopic self-interests, which focus on advancement, approval by organizational superiors, money, safety, and increased control rather than on service. Block further suggests that one outcome of this style of operation is the creation of cautious, dependent people who work in ways that maintain the status quo.

General

Reflection 8.5:

Ernie—Time is of the Essence

The unit for which I once worked was asked to produce a program to provide management training for people in community agencies. We estimated that development processes would take a minimum of 6 months and resisted efforts to get us to contract to do the job in 6 weeks, a period that would have allowed no time for consultation with client groups. The contract was given to another organization, which developed a set of training programs within the 6 weeks allotted. After 6 months of ineffectual activity, however, the training programs folded. We eventually acquired funding for a 12-month developmental process, which resulted in a program that is still operating successfully today across all regions of the state.

In another instance, we estimated that we would need 6 months to consult local groups and formulate a redevelopment strategy for a regional community organization. Although we were eventually funded for only 4 months, we found ways of completing the job satisfactorily in that time. Today, many years later, that regional organization continues to operate effectively.

Entrepreneurial organizations, conversely, are characterized, according to Block (1990), by people who act out of "enlightened self-interest." Enlightened self-interest focuses on activities that have meaning, depth, and substance; that genuinely serve the interests of clients or users; that have integrity; and that have positive impacts on people's lives. Entrepreneurial organizations are based on trust and a belief in the responsibility of people. The business of such organizations is managed directly and authentically so that people know where they stand, share information, share control, and are willing to take reasonable risks. Supervision, in these circumstances, becomes oriented toward support and consultation rather than control, and success is defined as a contribution to the well-being of service users, clients, or customers.

Although Block's conceptual frameworks have a business orientation, his entrepreneurial approach to management emphasizes a service-oriented definition of self-interest in harmony with the principles of action research. He proposes that management is not necessarily as highly controlling and exploitative as is sometimes perceived but can be enacted in consonance with more humanistic and democratic forms of organizational life.

A sign in bold capital letters on the wall of an alternative school program proclaimed, "If you keep doing what you always do, you'll keep getting what you always get."

As research projects increase in extent and complexity, the tools and resources of management become increasingly relevant. Research facilitators and other participants need organizational and management skills to supervise the wide range of activities, constraints, forces, and pressures that impinge on their activities.

They also need, however, to be consciously aware of the model of management they are enacting so that they are not drawn into procedures based on traditional, hierarchical models of authority and control that damage, rather than enhance, research processes.

STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

All action research requires some level of planning to clarify the steps required to implement actions and obtain satisfactory outcomes. Projects involving difficult problems, complex settings, diverse stakeholding groups, and multiple agencies, however, require long-term and large-scale strategic planning to achieve order and coherence to research activity. Strategic planning encompasses carefully defined and inclusive procedures that provide participants with a clear vision of their directions and intentions. It enables stakeholders to describe the following:

- A *vision* of their long-term aspirations
- An *operational plan* that defines the particular projects or activities that will accomplish this vision
- *Action* plans that lay out the tasks and steps required to enact each of these projects or activities

A Unifying Vision

As people work toward a collective vision that clarifies the nature of the problems that have brought them together, they gain a greater understanding of the complexities of the situation in which they are enmeshed. They also gain a more holistic understanding of the multitude of factors within which problems are embedded and realize the need to formulate increasingly sophisticated plans to resolve them.

The use of drugs by youth, for instance, may encompass a whole range of factors, including education, family, lifestyle, work, leisure activities, and the media. A community seriously intent on dealing with the issue of drug abuse will need to take all these factors into account in planning. Although community members need to focus on activities that will have immediate impact on some aspects of the problem, they also need to do “upstream” work that goes to the problem’s sources rather than dealing only superficially with its manifestations.

General

Reflection 8.6:

Ernie—Going to the Source of the Problem

A folk story is told of a man who found himself regularly rescuing people that were drowning in a river that flowed past his house. Eventually, tired of dragging one after the other from the river, he walked upstream where he observed an aggressive man pushing people into the water. He struggled with the man, who was eventually arrested and taken away. The problem of the drowning people was solved by his upstream work.

When we engage in action research, we are often placed in situations where we need to be pulling people from the water and working upstream at the same time. It is important, however, that we go to the source of the problem rather than do nothing but cope constantly with its outcomes.

As their analysis reveals the factors with which they must contend, stakeholders may be able to rationalize their activities. By planning carefully, they may find they are able to incorporate a diversity of activities into a few broad schemes or to connect a multitude of activities in ways that increase their effectiveness. A vision of the future that encompasses many facets of their common life may start to emerge.

A vision statement should clearly define the long-term aspirations of stakeholders. It should attempt to articulate the ultimate ends of an action research project by encompassing statements about particular goals within a broader framework of ideas. Such a statement may take the following form:

Students, administrators, and teachers at Downerton School will work with parents and other relevant community groups to provide a high-quality education for families in the district. They will develop a curriculum and a school organization that is relevant to the lives of students and enables them to do the following:

> *Achieve the highest levels of academic success of which they are capable*
>
> *Gain and maintain high levels of self-fulfillment*
>
> *Develop and enact moral and ethical standards appropriate to their family and community lives*
>
> *Live in harmony with fellow students, staff, and the community at large*
>
> *Gain the skills and knowledge that will enable them to be a viable part of the workforce*

The development of a vision is an attempt to integrate the many agendas that emerge from analyses in the Think phase of action research. The vision statement should provide the rubric under which the concerns of all participants are incorporated—academic standards, student behavior, boring teaching, irrelevant curriculum, teen pregnancy, and so on. Although participants—teachers, administrators, students, and parents—might have different agendas and priorities, they should all identify with and accept ownership of a vision statement within which they can recognize their own agendas and interests.

Vision statements should be publicly developed as part of the planning processes outlined in Chapter 6. The previous statement would result not solely from the activities of school administration, faculty, and the school board, for instance, but from an extended process including all stakeholders—students, parents, community groups, business interests, and so on. Vision statements are not the beginning point of an action research process. They arise only after considerable work has been undertaken to define specific problems and result from efforts to rationalize issues and concerns that have emanated from initial research processes. The “big plan” is an emergent reality rather than a predefined and predefining one.

Operational Statements: Enacting the Vision

An operational statement delineates the specific projects that enable participants to realize their vision. The previous vision statement, for instance, may be operationalized as follows:

The Downerton School will enact its vision through the following:

> *A school curriculum development process*
>
> *Site-based management processes*
>
> *Parent participation projects, including classroom volunteers, fundraising, after-school programs, and short-term specific-needs projects*
>
> *A student governance organization*
>
> *A peer counseling program*
>
> *Community outreach and education programs*
>
> *Staff development programs*

General

Reflection 8.7:

Ernie—Who Will Participate

I once observed a group of practitioners planning a program to decrease teenage alcohol consumption in one community. Their basic premise was "How can we stop them from drinking?" The only role they envisaged for teenagers involved using some "respectable" teens to act as models. There was no thought of involving teenagers who actually consumed alcohol. I do not know the actual outcome of the program, but I would be very surprised if the group's efforts resulted in a decrease in alcohol consumption.

The intended actions stated here are based on what the primary participants view as necessary to help them deal with their issues and concerns. Students cannot demand that their teachers engage in staff development programs; teachers should not initiate peer counseling programs for students on their own initiative. Actions must derive from the people who are the targets of any suggested action. The teachers themselves are likely to be unresponsive to staff development programs that have been mandated without consultation, and students are likely to see a peer counseling program as yet another imposition of the adult world unless it results from their own analysis of their needs.

There is sometimes a tendency to "gang up" on a problem by eliciting the support of many people and agencies. Plans to solve youth problems in a community sometimes start with meetings of concerned citizens or community leaders, who then seek the aid of social workers, teachers, other community leaders, service organizations, churches, government agencies, and politicians to develop appropriate plans. Although any or all of these may be appropriate at some stage, action research emphasizes the primacy of the principal stakeholders—those whose interests are centrally at stake. Action essentially must derive, in this case, from the youth themselves, who must ultimately formulate plans and decide what and who will be involved in the solutions they define.

Operational statements should be comprehensive and describe the activities required to enable the primary stakeholders to accomplish the aspects of the vision that are significant to them. Participants may not be able or willing to institute all the activities at once, but the operational statement should clearly articulate all the factors that need to be considered to resolve the problem effectively. Research facilitators should arrange meetings that enable participants to review their vision and operational statements from time to time so that they are aware of the extent to which they have made progress toward solution of their problems. An operational st0atement diminishes the possibility that people will look to one-shot jobs as instant solutions that focus on one related element.

Action Plans

A separate plan should be developed for each of the activities or projects delineated in the operational statement. As each plan becomes activated, participants should define the following:

- The *objectives* of the project
- The *tasks* to be done
- The *steps* to be taken for each task
- The *people* involved
- The *places* where activity will occur
- The *time lines* and durations of activities
- The *resources* required

Processes for developing action plans are described more fully in Chapter 6.

As different teams or committees formulate their action plans, they should come together to reveal their activities and directions to each other. This provides opportunities for the smaller groups to rationalize and coordinate activities so that plans do not work at cross-purposes or waste resources by inadvertently engaging in activities in the same areas.

As participants prepare to implement activities, they should appraise the strength of each plan according to the internal and external forces that impinge on it. A simple framework involving an analysis of the internal strengths and weaknesses of the plan, and external opportunities and threats, guides this process.

Strengths and Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

> *Strengths*: What are the strengths of the group (e.g., people and purposes)? What are the strengths of the plan (e.g., processes, resources, funds, materials, places)?
>
> *Weaknesses*: What are the weaknesses of the group? Of the plan? Who is not included? What resources are unavailable? What skills or knowledge do we need to obtain? Are there any gaps in our planning?
>
> *Opportunities*: What can we do that we have not yet planned to do? Have we taken full advantage of the people and resources we have? Who might potentially assist us? What resources are available that we are not yet using?
>
> *Threats*: Who might resist our efforts? What might they do? Are we invading other people's territory? Who might perceive us as a threat?

As answers to these and other relevant questions emerge, they should be restated in the form of objectives or tasks and assigned to individuals or groups as part of their responsibilities. For instance, a weakness identified as "inadequate funds" should be restated as an objective: "to investigate possible sources of funding" or "to commence the following fundraising activities." People can be assigned these tasks as part of the project.

Political Dimensions

In the 1960s, change processes were often driven by campaigns in which groups achieved their objectives by engaging in overtly power-oriented social and political action. The approach to action research presented here is not oriented toward this type of social action, being more aligned with change processes promoted historically by people like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Its purposes and objectives are to formulate links with and among parties who might be seen to be in conflict and to negotiate settlements of interest that allow all stakeholders to enhance their work, community, and personal life. To the extent that research facilitators are able to do this, they will increase the potential for the common unity at the heart of this approach to research. When researchers engage in political processes based on polarities of interest, they are likely to engage in conflictual interactions that generate antagonism. Although the potential for short-term gains is enticing, long-term enmities that sometimes result have a habit of coming back to bite you. The first impulse in action research must be to build links and formulate complementary coalitions rather than to divide the social setting into friends and enemies.

There may be times when obdurate, inflexible, ambitious, or fearful people will try to block the progress of a project. Research facilitators need to be aware of the political dimensions of the settings in which they work to deal with these situations. They can compile a list of those individuals and groups likely to assist them or be in favor of their activities, as well as those likely to resist because they believe the researchers' activities to be against their interests. All these people should be included as stakeholders from the beginning of the research process.

Only when researchers have failed, despite their best attempts, to engage people in their projects, and when people have purposively set themselves against the researchers' aims, should researchers fall back on the strategies envisaged in such books as Coover's (1985) *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution* or engage in the "campaigning" mode suggested by *Rules for Radicals* (Alinsky, 1989) and *With Head, Heart, and Hand* (Kelly & Sewell, 1994).

General

Reflection 8.8:

Ernie—Portraying Experience and Perspective

Through my work with Aboriginal people, I have become increasingly sensitive to the tendency of some individuals to constantly cast Aboriginals as oppressed people who are victims of colonization. To define Aboriginal life in such terms is to build a vision that has the potential to demean and diminish a group whose cultural strengths and spiritual wisdom have a significance that goes far beyond their small numbers. To portray them in such terms is, from my perspective, an act of envictimization.

This does not mean that I wish to deny the exceedingly violent history visited on Aboriginal people in Australia or to diminish the social, cultural, and political problems they face. There are times when we need to confront those issues directly and forcefully. When I consider the strength and integrity of my Aboriginal colleagues and friends and the vitality of their family lives, however, I see a broader reality that goes far beyond this vision of Aboriginal as victim. I don't want to diminish their human potential by constantly highlighting their oppression or portraying them as victims. The words that my Aboriginal colleagues use to speak of their experience provide a vision of familial, cultural, and spiritual strength that is a much more powerful basis for action. I would rather build from that strength than struggle through a perspective based on weakness.

Budgeting and Financial Planning

Funding can sometimes be a contentious and awkward aspect of a project, and research facilitators need to handle finances carefully and openly to maintain the integrity of the research process. Facilitators should assist participants in formulating a clearly defined budget that links financial requirements to each of the tasks and activities defined in the original planning process. The budget must be set out clearly so that all stakeholders can understand it. They should be presented with a copy of the budget, prior to meetings if possible, and have the opportunity to discuss it during meetings.

The budget should estimate the costs involved in establishing a project as well as continuing (recurrent) costs. These may be set out as shown in Table 8.1, which is based on a budget used in a youth leisure project. An extended project that involves complex processes may require the services of someone with budgeting expertise, but participants can learn to formulate budgets for less complex projects. It is important that all costs be itemized and that decisions be made about expenditures—whether, for instance, people are to be hired for some tasks, what equipment is required, and what travel is necessary.

Table 8.1 Sample Budget Table for Youth Leisure Project

	Task 1	**Task 2**	**Task 3**	**Task 4**	**Item Totals**
Salaries and consultants					
Materials and equipment					
Travel					
Telephone					
Total					Grand Total

Finances are often the most contentious part of a process because of most people's experiences with bureaucratic organizational settings, where power and authority are invested in those delegated to control the finances. When decisions must be made about funding priorities, they should be made at meetings of stakeholders. In working through these controversial issues and the negotiation of sometimes conflicting demands, a group can establish purpose and unity. When people in positions of power make forced decisions, divisions and antagonism often result.

> My high school history teacher constantly emphasized, “He who holds the purse strings holds the power!” Research participants should keep this in mind when pursuing empowering, community-based processes.

Decisions must also be made about where funds are to be held. Public finances are usually held within some incorporated body (e.g., the Gleneagle Youth Association) that has the facility to dispense and account for monies. The problem here is that the incorporated body itself has restrictions placed on the ways in which monies can be spent, with implications for the project. As a project increases in size, the group responsible for initiating activities may need to be formally incorporated to acquire and disburse funds. These are contingencies that project facilitators should consider as they lead people through a research process.

People sometimes are tempted to develop projects or programs because grant monies are available. They either launch into projects that are only peripherally relevant to their purposes or find themselves striving valiantly to fulfill the conflicting demands of the grant and the research project. In the process, the focus of their activities moves away from the issues and concerns that provide the energy for the formation of community, and participants risk burnout, disillusionment, or loss of direction.

Participants in action research projects should formulate specific plans to ensure that they have adequate funding for the period of the project. In many instances, people set up programs, services, or facilities with seed grants (grants given one time only, for specific purposes) only to find that they have no continuing funding. However, people should not restrict themselves to action for which funding is available. Research facilitators need to do a delicate dance to enable participants to actualize their dreams through their own efforts without leading them into situations of failure by focusing on priorities that come from funding agencies rather than their own analyses.

General

Reflection 8.9:

Ernie—The Perils of Funding Requirements

A good friend of mine used to view government funding with suspicion. "Stay away from government funding," he would say. "You'll kill yourself. Do what you can with your own resources." Certainly, the situation of the Aboriginal community school I described in *Chapter 1* *is testimony to this counsel. Most of the initial work for the school came from the community's own funds and only later did they acquire funds from other sources. The teacher who assisted the community in its formation admitted to me in conversation that she doubts whether the school would have been so successful if the people hadn't had to struggle, with meager resources, to get it going.*

EVALUATING

As stakeholders work through the recursive processes of observation, reflection, planning, and review, they are involved in a constant process of evaluation that enables them to monitor their activities and progress. There may be times, however, when a formal review of a project or program is either required by a funding agency or perceived as necessary to the project. When people take the time to stand back from their day-to-day activities to explore and reflect on the processes in which they have been engaged and to share perceptions and interpretations, they gain greater clarity about the direction of their work and efficacy of their activities.

Evaluation needs to be clearly focused to achieve its desired purposes. If evaluation includes a mass of detail that is only peripherally relevant and fails to capture the crucial elements at the core of the project, then it may be counterproductive, directing attention to the wrong areas of activity and distorting the research process.

Steps to Evaluation

Purpose: Assessing the Worth and Effectiveness of Activities

Evaluation should, ultimately, assess the worth and effectiveness of a set of activities or a project according to its impact on the primary stakeholders. Many evaluations focus on the activities in which project members engage but fail to provide any indication of the extent of their impact on the lives of the people for whom the project was formulated.

General

Reflection 8.10:

Ernie—Evaluating Outcomes

I once helped a group of community workers to review a program that engaged them in a diverse array of activities with many community groups. They enjoyed the work they were doing and their efforts appeared to be appreciated by the people with whom they worked, but such was the extent of their activities that some of them were feeling stressed and overworked.

When I asked the community workers to estimate the extent to which their activities contributed to the purposes of the program—an increase in work opportunities for unemployed youth—they were silent. Although they had engaged in many activities with youth in the community, none could make any connection between the activities in which they were engaged and the specific purposes of their program. Young people, it seemed, did not have increased work opportunities as a result of their enterprise. The activities were pleasurable *but unproductive in terms of the ostensive purposes of the program.*

Audience: Who Will Read the Evaluation Report?

Prior to commencing an evaluation, the research facilitator should define the groups to whom the results of the evaluation will be reported. The processes and products will differ depending on the audiences. Is the evaluation being conducted for those who provide funds, those who control the organization, those who are the recipients of services, those for whom the project was initiated, those who provide the services, or any other stakeholder group? Answers to these questions will help the facilitator formulate a suitable evaluation process and present the resulting report in an appropriate form.

Procedures: How Is the Evaluation Carried Out?

Evaluation is an intrinsic part of the action research cycle. The period of evaluation is a time when researchers formally examine or review the processes in which they have been engaged—another cycle in the Look–Think–Act process. In evaluation, the processes are as follows:

> Look: Describe all that the participants have been doing.
>
> Think: Reflect on what the participants have been doing. Note areas of success and any deficiencies, issues, or problems.
>
> Act: Judge the worth, effectiveness, appropriateness, and outcomes of those activities.

In keeping with the principles of action research, however, evaluation is not carried out by an outside evaluator to make judgments about the worth, effectiveness, success, or failure of a project. It is a process that enables those engaged in the research project to learn from their own experience. In Chapter 6, we provided some detail on the constructivist approach to evaluation advocated by Guba and Lincoln (1989), an orientation to evaluation in harmony with the philosophical principles of action research. Another example is provided by Wadsworth's (2011) *Everyday Evaluation on the Run*.

In some instances, funding agencies require a more direct form of evaluation to assess the extent to which project activities have attained their purposes or objectives. It requires participants to do the following:

- Define the purposes and audiences of the evaluation.
- Determine the goals of the project. What is the purpose? What is to be achieved? For whom? What are the intended outcomes and for whom (e.g., to increase the rate of employment of youth in Queenstown)?
- Set the objectives. What will be done to achieve the purposes (e.g., to initiate a youth employment program in Queenstown)?
- Describe activities related to the objectives (e.g., "The Youth Employment Program will increase employment opportunities for youth in Queenstown").
- Gather information indicating the activities in which participants have actually engaged.
- Gather information that enables people to judge the extent to which the activities were successful in achieving the purposes of the project or, when purposes have not been achieved or have been poorly achieved, what might account for that poor achievement.
- Engage in processes that enable participants to make judgments about the effectiveness and worth of their activities.

Careful initial planning facilitates the evaluation process because participants have clearly defined their activities and the relationship between these activities and the purposes of the project. Evaluation can sometimes highlight the lack of correspondence between purposes and activities. In the youth employment example given earlier, for instance, project workers had failed to articulate the relationship between their purposes and the activities in which they had engaged. They rationalized their activities as "providing good role models for unemployed youth," "improving the self-concepts of unemployed youth," and so on. Their activities may or may not have accomplished these objectives, but it is clear that they did little, if anything, to ensure that youth were actually employed. Sometimes theories—the explanations we give for events and phenomena—are inadequate because they do not fit the reality of people's lives. In this example, the participants may have improved their project by engaging unemployed youth in the process of defining the problem—that is, the reasons they were unemployed—and in finding ways they could gain employment. Careful processes of evaluation can sometimes reveal the inadequacies of a research project's initial framing activities.

DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION

There is a great deal of synchronicity between the approach to action research described in this book and developmental evaluation (DE). Patton (2010) suggests DE provides the means to institute changes and innovations in projects, programs, organizational changes, policy reforms, and systems interventions. It is particularly relevant to the emergent and dynamic realities of complex social environments, including those characterized by a large number of interacting and interdependent groups or agencies in which there is no central control, where there is no certainty about what to do to solve problems and key stakeholders are in conflict about how to proceed.

The Practitioners Guide to Developmental Evaluation (Dozois, Langlois, & Blanchet-Cohen, 2010) provides an approach particularly relevant to these complex contexts. It first presents clear guidelines that orient practitioners to the approach to evaluation and described required competencies. The following sections provide details of the practices involved:

Entry point: Orienting yourself, building relationships, and developing learning framework

Evaluation practices: Orienting the group, watching, sense-making, and intervening

Challenges: Objectivity, positioning, time allocation, and negative reactions

The authors note that although traditional forms of research work well in many situations, developmental evaluation is relevant to initiatives with multiple stakeholders, high levels of innovation, fast-paced decision-making, and areas of uncertainty. It differs from traditional forms of evaluation in several key ways:

The primary focus is on adaptive learning rather than accountability to an external authority.

The purpose is to provide real-time feedback and generate learnings to inform development.

The evaluator is embedded in the initiative as a member of the team.

The evaluator role extends well beyond data collection and analysis; the evaluator actively intervenes to shape the course of development, helping to inform decision-making and facilitate learning.

The evaluation is designed to capture system dynamics and surface innovative strategies and ideas.

The approach is exible, with new measures and monitoring mechanisms evolving as understanding of the situation deepens and the initiative’s goals emerge. (Adapted from Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2007)

REFLECTION AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

1. Think about the organization in which you now work or study.
    1. Who are the stakeholders?
    2. What is the organizational hierarchy involved? That is, who is on the lowest tier of the organization?
    3. Are there stakeholders who are not employees, students, or clients of the organization?
2. Think of a change you would like to happen in the part of the organization with which you are associated.
    1. Who would you talk about this to first?
    2. What would you say to them?
    3. Who else would need to be consulted if you wanted to make the change(s) you originally thought about?
3. If the changes were to be made, would they be likely to affect other parts or sections of the organization? How would the changes affect them? What would the change agents (those initiating the change) need to do? What actions should they take?
4. Would changes require professional development to prepare people for those changes? What professional development would be needed? For whom?

ACTIONS

1. Discuss these issues with your workgroup or a colleague.
2. Map out a developmental process for instituting the changes you identified.

CHAPTER REVIEW

Action research focuses on not only the **outcomes** of a project but also the extent to which it develops the **capacities of stakeholders** to take action themselves to deal with issues and problems in their lives.

Developmental action research requires layered levels of action that move from personal (**implicate**) and small-group (**micro**) activities to enact developmental processes within social networks (**mezza**), organizations, and institutions (**macro**).

Changes at these levels become integrated into **social and global networks and institutions** (**meta** action) and become incorporated into **policies, programs, and services** at all levels, from local to global.

Professional practitioners work within the community using different **traditions of practice:**

- **Service delivery,** in which the worker **provides a service** relevant to their expertise—health, education, justice, and so on
- **Advocacy**, where the professional takes action to advocate **on behalf of** the client
- **Social action**, in which an activist works with people to **organize** social or political action to improve their situation
- **Developmental action** (sometimes called community development), where the professional practitioners work **alongside the people** to assist them **to develop the capacity** to make required changes to their situation

Changes emerging from developmental processes are **integrated systematically** into the life of relevant agencies, organizations, or institutions.

Strategic planning for **organizational development** establishes a **unifying vision** and **action plans** that sustain desired changes.

Evaluation assesses both the **processes** and the **outcomes** of developmental changes.

Participatory processes of evaluation focus principally on the **impact** of change on **primary stakeholders**.

Evaluation reports are presented in ways that are **accessible and relevant** to all stakeholder **audiences**.

9 ACTION RESEARCH AND DIGITAL MEDIA

USING DIGITAL MEDIA IN ACTION RESEARCH

In the previous edition of this book, we noted that talking about the Internet as a separate part of research, or indeed everyday life, seemed almost redundant as it had become an increasingly integrated part of people's experience. Seven years later, this is even more the case and is reflected in the shift in language from "the Internet" to "digital media," "social media," "the cloud," and so on. What has notably changed over this time is the diversity of digital platforms with different uses and features that can be applied for research and collaboration. There is also an increased range of platforms available that are popular in different regions, language groups, and demographics. While the list presented below is not exhaustive, it does provide an overview of some of the current digital tools and platforms that can be utilized in an action research context. As was the case with the last edition, writing about digital media is like taking a photo of a stream: while it may be possible to capture the moment, it is subject to constant change.

Digital technologies in today's world have become integral to our lives, even as they change the nature of our daily interactions within our environments and communities. We use digital platforms to obtain information, share our stories, and communicate with each other on a daily basis. The prevalence of social media is an example of how rapidly the digital culture has evolved. In addition to their use by citizens, these platforms are rapidly becoming a part of academic and professional settings, where scholars and professional practitioners use digital tools for a variety of purposes, including collaboration, conducting research, generating knowledge, disseminating research, and accessing community contexts. They may use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to create research communities, to share and exchange information, and to communicate with and support each other in their scholarly and professional practices.

Digital tools now can be used in every aspect of the research process including planning, collaboration, data generation and analysis, and disseminating research findings outside of academia. In this chapter, our aim is to reveal the potential uses of digital technologies in research and professional settings. The chapter is loosely divided into five sections and these digital platforms into four overlapping groups: social media and networking sites; group messaging and videoconferencing; tools for research; and tools for collaboration. The chapter concludes by providing an updated list of resources available online that focus on action research.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Social media is a digital technology that enables user-generated content creation by sharing information, engaging in interests, and connecting ideas. Since the creation of social networking, researchers have studied user behavior to gain a deeper understanding of social interaction and how it plays an active role in research. Action research has widely adopted this method to study community-based participatory research initiatives. When planning methods for your research that utilize social media, it is important to be aware of privacy and confidentiality regulations by contacting your Institutional Review Board (IRB).

As reported by the Pew Research Center (2019), 72% of adults in the United States use at least one social media platform. Social media tools allow users to target audiences based on demographics such as age, race, gender, income, education, and community. Facebook continues to be the front-runner when it comes to popular mobile social networking apps with 169.76 million unique visitors from the United States in September 2019 (Statista, n.d.). Social media is significant because it brings together community actors on a local, national, and global scale. The interactions and ideas among online users can allow researchers to analyze and interpret data, and create strategies to take action in support of community initiatives. The following sections review some of the most popular social media and networking sites, suggesting ways in which they can be used to enhance action research projects.

Facebook

The U.S.-based platform Facebook is presently the most used social networking service globally and is the most popular app on iOS devices (Hutchinson, n.d.). The service is free, and users can create a profile for themselves and then add or follow the profiles of other users. Each profile can be personalized by posting a short introduction, posting status updates, posting and highlighting images and videos, joining groups and following pages, and posting links and other multimedia content for others to see. Users can also create or join groups or pages to interact with other users around a common topic.

General

Lit Corner 9.1:

Social Media and Political Activism

A research study by Selander and Jarvenpaa (2016) *focused on social media influences and political activism. The project explored new models to support digital activism for social movement organizations (SMOs). With the rise of social activism online, digital supporters can swiftly organize actions or any issue of interest. Yet, due to rapid developments, keeping digital users engaged for an extended time is necessary to support social change. The Swedish affiliate of Amnesty International, an SMO focused on human rights, participated with Selander and Jarvenpaa to investigate both professional groups (active members) and digital supporters (social media subscribers) of SMOs.*

They utilized a series of methods (interviews, observations, analyzing social media data, etc.) to better understand the behavior of supporters. Researchers also observed the Facebook community activity based on likes, dislikes, and conversations.

The research study offered both theoretical and practical implications. The theoretical implications suggest boundary-crossing dynamics may lead to challenges as there appeared to be different views between active professional groups (members) and digital contributors, signaling the need for researchers to be aware of group dynamics in a study. Practical implications suggest that the design of the research is critical to deterring a specific group of members from taking precedence over others, with a consequent risk of fragmentation of the project. Facilitators must be able to recognize these occurrences when engaging participants. Additional implications suggest a combination of digital and traditional research methods is needed to effectively collect data.

The Action Research for Teachers Facebook group (https://www.facebook.com/groups/actionresearchforteachers/), for example, hosts more than 20,000 members and the Action Research Advocacy for Learning (https://www.facebook.com/www.aral.com.ph/) has nearly 1,500 members. The Action Research Tutorials group (https://www.facebook.com/groups/actionresearchtutorials/) provides important action research resources to over 350 people.

Instagram

Instagram is a social media service designed for people to upload and share photos, images, or videos using a range of special filters and receive likes and comments on what they post. Users can also follow other people's profiles and be followed by others. Instagram Stories also allows users to post photos and videos that vanish after 24 hours and do not appear in the user's profile grid or in the main Instagram feed. The app also features direct messaging and video calling. Unlike Facebook, which relies on both text and pictures, or Twitter, which prioritizes text, Instagram's primary purpose is to enable users to share images or videos with their audience. Action research accounts on Instagram include the Action Research Collective (https://www.instagram.com/arc_clemson/), actionresearchplus (https://www.instagram.com/actionresearchplus/), and Marine Action Research (https://www.instagram.com/marineactionresearch/). Arihasta and Basthomi (2019) have integrated Instagram into an action research project.

General

Lit Corner 9.2:

Facebook and Being Marked "Safe"

Given its extensive uptake and scale, in 2017 Facebook launched its Crisis Response hub to allow users to indicate to family and friends worldwide of their well-being during calamities or major accidents (Statt, 2017). Features include being able to mark one's profile as "safe" with the Safety Check, soliciting and responding to calls for community help, and fundraising. During the Australian bushfire emergency in January 2020, Facebook created a disaster map for national and international relief operations to coordinate their efforts (Facebook, 2020), and users created over 19,000 fundraisers on Facebook across 75 countries to raise more than $50 million toward the Australia Wildlife Relief Efforts (Simo, 2020). Action research projects that have included Facebook include those by Winoto, Cancerine, and Anwar (2019) and Knox (2017).

Tumblr

Tumblr is a microblogging service that allows users to post their artwork, writing, photos, audio, and video, and follow and comment on other posts and reblog posts. Messaging and chat are also available and unless specified all posts are public. Tumblr provides a real-time list of all the new content on all the blogs users follow. A list of action research resources can be found on Tumblr at https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/action-research.

Twitter

Twitter is a social media service that lets users publicly share short posts, or tweets, that are limited to 280 characters of text. In addition to text users can include links, images, videos, location data, keywords, and polls in their tweets. Users label these by placing a hashtag before a keyword or phrase. Once posted, this keyword becomes a link that brings up other tweets posted by users containing that keyword. By default, tweets are publicly available (even without a Twitter account) and can be linked to, shared, and embedded in websites. Other Twitter users can tweet responses to another user's tweet, as well as liking it or retweeting it. Retweeting means it will be published in their feed, although still attributed to the original user. Twitter also has direct messaging, which allows users to have private conversations, and a live streaming app called Periscope. Discussions around action research on Twitter can be found at the #actionresearch hashtag. Action research studies that have used Twitter include Stephansen and Couldry (2014) and Kunnath and Jackson (2019).

DIGITAL TOOLS FOR COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION IN ACTION RESEARCH

As technology continues to transform the way we conduct research, it is essential to understand how the digital tools being used advance action research processes by gaining stakeholder buy-in and establishing trusting relationships between participants. Researchers may use social media and digital tools such as social media, digital storytelling, crowdsourcing, and PhotoVoice for a variety of purposes in their research projects. There is a growing appeal to use digital technologies in research studies across schools, businesses, community agencies, and health services to facilitate discussions with otherwise hard-to-reach populations. Advancements in digital technology will continue to emerge over the coming years, with digital platforms and tools creating environments where research processes can be more participatory and engaging (Kamrowska-Zaluska & Obracht-Prondzyńska, 2018).

Digital technologies can enhance research practices in multiple ways, including logistical support or project management. Researchers from different locations or time zones can connect and collaborate using digital tools to communicate with each other and their research teams. Because community participation is essential in action research, digital media can assist in creating an environment that increases participation by engaging colleagues, clients, students, and community members as co-researchers. When tools are used purposefully and ethically, meaningful engagements can enable participants to acquire deeper knowledge. As digital technology becomes more prevalent within action research, issues of power and ethics should therefore continually be considered as they directly affect a project's processes and possible outcomes (Gubrium, Harper, & Otañez, 2015). This section therefore explores a variety of digital tools that enable research participants to communicate, collaborate, collect, and analyze data, and report on research outcomes.

There is considerable overlap between the functions of the platforms described in this chapter, with many of the networking sites allowing for one-on-one and group discussions or acting as social media platforms in their own right. The following applications are particularly suited to communication, providing useful tools for exchanging messages or engaging in face-to-face conversations.

Slack

Slack is a commonly used cloud-based team collaboration app that archives messages and group conversations, hosts documents, and integrates with the Google Docs application. The app allows for real-time communication between collaborators without requiring e-mail addresses or phone numbers. Although this app is frequently used in business settings, it can be incorporated efficiently into academic research settings as well. Gofine and Clark (2017) share their experiences of introducing Slack into academic research practices in the medical field. In their study, a team of 51 researchers used Slack in their research process to archive research content and direct communications. Through the process, the users of Slack agreed that using the app improved communications within the research team and made it easy to integrate with their workflow.

Facebook Messenger

Facebook Messenger is a messaging app that is linked to Facebook that allows users to instant message; share photos, videos, and audio recordings; and create a group chat with Facebook friends or phone contacts. Users can also use Messenger to voice chat and video call. In 2019 there were more than 1.3 billion monthly users on the platform and it is the second most popular app on iOS devices (Hutchinson, n.d.). As such it is likely to be a platform that action researchers and research participants are familiar with, which may enable action research communications or aid in project management.

KakaoTalk

KakaoTalk (https://www.kakaocorp.com/service/KakaoTalk?lang=en) is a free messaging service for mobile phones that was launched in South Korea in 2010 by the tech developer company Kakao Corp. It can be downloaded onto Apple, Android, Blackberry, and Windows devices. Users can send instant text and voice messages, and share photographs, videos, locations, and links in dyad or group chats. A digital wallet feature known as KakaoPay allows users to transfer money without the use of cash and cards. At present, there is no limit to the number of users who can be added to group chat. A popular feature of KakaoTalk is the use of Stickers, where users can download (paid) packs of small graphics and animations to be used in messaging chats. New packs are available for download regularly, and KakaoTalk’s in-house character stickers have become popular cartoons internationally.

Line

Line was founded in 2011 by developers based in Japan and is similar to KakaoTalk. It can be used on smartphones, tablets, and computers and can be downloaded on Android, Chrome, Microsoft, and iOS systems. Users must register via a phone number, e-mail address, or user ID (Unuth, n.d.), and may start dyad or group chats to exchange text and voice messages, videos, and conduct voice and video calls. Its mobile payment feature is LINE Pay, and users can send money online and offline. Other features include the news stream LINE Today, video-on-demand service LINE TV, and digital comics through LINE Webtoon and LINE Manga.

WeChat

WeChat is a Chinese “super app” that combines messaging functions, social networking features, and payment services, and is the most essential app for communities and companies who wish to operate in China (Chao, 2017; Sehl, 2019). The app is available on mobile phone or Web browser. Users are able to send each other texts, voice snippets, or audio and video calls. Voice messaging is popular among elderly and less literate populations who may struggle with writing and is more convenient than voice call as it allows users to replay and save messages. The nonsynchronous aspect is convenient for users who are busy. Social networking features include the ability to post status updates known as “moments” that may include images with captions or text posts, and the ability to join groups and subscribe to pages for updates (Kharpal, 2019). Users can also activate additional features to play games, book appointments, call for vehicle services, and use payment services (Liao, 2018). A feature that was popularized by WeChat is the use of QR codes to add other users as contacts. This involves opening a mobile phone’s camera feature, scanning a unique barcode, and having the app automatically add the users to one’s collection of contacts. More traditional ways of adding contacts include using one’s phone number, one’s in-app ID, or turning on the geolocation feature to search for and add contacts who are in the vicinity. Recent studies utilizing WeChat in an action research context include Huang (2019) and Luo and Gui (2019).

WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a messaging, voice, and video calling app that, like Signal and Telegram, uses end-to-end encryption so that only the sender and the recipient can view messages. The app allows for both one-to-one and group communication. Users can download and install the app with no charge, set up their accounts, customize their profiles, determine their privacy levels, and add new contacts or form a group (Dove, 2019). There have been a number of studies utilizing WhatsApp in conjunction with action research, including Annamalai (2018) and Wessels and Wood (2019).

Microsoft 365

Microsoft (MS) Teams is an example of a cloud-based real-time collaboration and communication software developed by the Microsoft Corporation. MS Teams integration with Office 365 products and other third-party applications (e.g., social media, Google) enables instant file sharing, document editing, video meetings, and instant messaging, potentially making the research process more efficient. Rather than using multiple applications to organize the research, MS Teams, for example, provides an opportunity for a highly collaborative environment for direct communication and collaboration to keep the organizational aspect of the process in one place (Microsoft Teams, n.d.).

G Suite

G Suite is a collection of cloud-based productivity and collaborative tools developed by Google Cloud to streamline Web apps such as Gmail, Calendar, Docs, Forms (used frequently for short surveys), and Sheets, along with other applications used to manage information and data. The suite provides a range of support through various phases of the research process that includes planning, observations, and data collection. G Suite is appropriate to store public and internal data, yet some institutions may require sensitive information to reside on a restricted platform. In accordance with the G Suite Learning Center, the suite offers shareable file storage, task assignment, instant feedback, form creation, spreadsheet data analysis, and messaging capabilities (Google, n.d.).

Codigital

Codigital is a crowdsourcing app that allows a large group of people to solicit and share information on a digital platform collectively. They may generate, prioritize, and refine ideas in real time, gain increased levels of understanding, and support analytics for strategic planning, communication, and crowdsourcing. It is possible to engage a whole group or conference audience in research processes using an on-stage screen.

Videoconferencing: Zoom and Skype

While a number of the message apps allow for video messages and communication, there are also dedicated video communications and conference platforms that can be a valuable aid to research and collaboration. There are a number of videoconferencing platforms on the market. Two of the leaders in the field are Skype and Zoom. Skype allows for multiple people to join in the same video conference. Zoom is also a platform for hosting online meetings. It can accommodate up to 500 participants in a single shared meeting and allow participants to share the screen of the host of the meeting and as such is useful for remote group presentations. Both platforms are free to use, although with more options available in paid plans. Both are available online and through mobile phone apps.

YouTube

YouTube is a video sharing platform where people can watch and share video content online through the Web and through dedicated YouTube apps on mobile devices. Users can create their own channel and subscribe to the channels of other people or organizations. Users can rate, comment on, and share videos or add them to playlists. Many people use YouTube for video blogging, or vlogging. YouTube can also be used to livestream, which is video that is simultaneously broadcast and recorded in real time. YouTube is accessible to anyone to watch videos without an account, but for those who want to upload and share videos they will need to sign up for a Google account. Raj, Ann, Subramaniam, and Yunus (2019) worked with 60 11-year-old students in the Malaysian education system whose native languages included Mandarin, Malay, and Temiar. They used six YouTube videos to teach English listening, speaking, reading, and writing to explore the effectiveness of this platform for strengthening social expression. The study found that visualization through YouTube did improve learning and increase participants' interest in further learning the language.

TikTok

TikTok is short-video platform that builds upon the features of another short-video app, Musical.ly. TikTok allows users to create short videos that focus on background music and sound as a template for generating content. Some of the more popular genres include lip-sync videos, skits, and makeup videos that are usually between 3 and 15 seconds long. Users can also create short looping videos of up to 60 seconds. TikTok has been downloaded over 1.2 billion times and is touted as the fastest-growing social media app globally (Turner, 2019). It is most popular among young audiences, with the largest user group being 18- to 24-year-olds (TikTok, 2019). Users younger than 18 are asked to seek parental consent before use (Jessy, 2019), and this age-gating has been enforced through the mass deletion of accounts (Lee, 2019). Young people on TikTok have been using the platform to generate videos and solicit awareness and support for a variety of political issues, including climate change (Bogle, 2019), Uighur detention camps in Xinjiang (Harwell & Romm, 2019), and antiracism in Australia (Wilson, n.d.). However, the app had reportedly banned pro-LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) content (Hern, 2019) and raised concerns from users regarding platform censorship and freedom of speech.

DIGITAL RESEARCH TOOLS

Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling (DST) is a collaborative and participatory research tool being used to advance research processes. Digital storytelling enables participants to retell their stories and make visible the meanings they attribute to specific events in their lives. Digital stories often are presented in compelling and emotionally engaging formats that enable diverse peoples to share their life stories with others. They may use any combination of text, photographic images, video, audio, and social media elements like Twitter or interactive elements like maps to present their stories. Any of the media described above may be used for digital storytelling processes to gather and analyze data, formulate scripts, and disseminate reports or information. The nature of this process has the potential to be transformative, having a positive impact on the lives of people who tell their stories (Lenette et al., 2019).

General

Lit Corner 9.4:

Digital Storytelling to Promote Healthy Sexual Behavior Among LGBTQ Indigenous Youth

Video recordings and digital storytelling processes were used in a community-based participatory action research study conducted by scholars and activists focusing on HIV prevention and promoting healthy strategies among Indigenous youth (Flicker et al., 2017). In this study, 18 youth leaders with an active interest in HIV prevention, treatment, or community support were asked to interpret their experiences through video recordings. To prepare for their story, youth leaders attended an intensive retreat where facilitators walked them through the process of scriptwriting, recording, *designing, and video editing. Upon completion of the videos, youth leaders created digital stories and conducted screening in their local communities to showcase their stories. After the screening, participants and project staff facilitated Q&A sessions with community members. By using digital storytelling overlapping themes emerged, including connections between HIV and associated risk factors. This led to new ways of thinking about targeted strategies to promote healthy initiatives and HIV prevention among Indigenous youth*.

According to de Jager, Fogarty, Tewson, Lenette, and Boydell (2017, p. 2551), “storytelling is a universal and powerful way of making meaning.” DST is an appropriate research method to use with marginalized groups because it “lends itself in philosophy and execution to a participatory action research model, which favours a flat hierarchy between participants, researchers and other stakeholders” (Cunsolo Willox Harper et al., 2013, in de Jager et al., 2017, p.2551). The DST method is used frequently for the purposes of developing community as the process involves participants narrating their stories supported by visuals and music of their choice in the form of a digital story. Public exhibits and viewing of digital stories have been described as transformative for people engaged in the process (de Jager et al., 2017; Loe, 2013). Storytelling is now widely used in universities for educational purposes, as well as in public health, health care, social services, international development, and many other settings. When used with digital media participants may take advantage of applications such as iMovie, Windows Movie Maker, Final Cut Express, and WeVideo.

General

Lit Corner 9.3:

Using Codigital to Focus on a Patient-Centered Research Agenda for People Living With Cerebral Palsy

Gross et al. (2018) conducted a participatory action research (PAR) study to educate the community on cerebral palsy and develop a collaborative process among stakeholders to engage in active health care initiatives in support of people with cerebral palsy. The PAR methods combined a series of webinars, online community contributions, and in-person workshops. A 5-day webinar series explored various cerebral palsy topics by inviting persons with cerebral palsy, caregivers, researchers, clinicians, and advocates. Afterward, participants were asked to contribute ideas using the Codigital app. Daily emails prompted participants to record, edit, and vote on each other’s ideas. Within 20 days, over 392 ideas were generated and 26,798 votes were cast. To better understand the ideas, participants attended an in-person workshop geared to discuss in more detail the top ideas submitted. Researchers developed a strategic plan with targeted *objectives for cerebral palsy research to enhance patient care, community education, and resources.*

PHOTOVOICE

PhotoVoice is a visual-based approach used in many action research processes, including community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) studies (Ha & Whittaker, 2016, p. 1). This method aligns with the principles of action research and CBPAR as it emphasizes empowerment, collaboration, and co-learning between participants (co-researchers) and researchers, and capacity building in communities through action (Catalani & Minkler, 2010).

This process "(i) allows participants to record and reflect how they perceive and experience issues that matter the most for them through photographs, (ii) promotes critical dialogue and knowledge through collective discussion of photographs, and (iii) has the potential to reach and influence policy makers" (Wang & Burris, 1997).

General

Lit Corner 9.5:

Using Digital Storytelling With Marginalized Groups

Digital storytelling is well suited for working with marginalized groups, enabling them to develop significant insights into their experiences and the issues they face. Lenette et al. (2019) collaborated with refugee women in Australia who were able to document their experiences of resettlement through the Woman at Risk program. The researchers worked closely with four women throughout the four-phase research process: First, they conducted in-depth interviews with the women to explore ideas for the story creation process. The interviews also served as a space for establishing relationships and trust between the participants and the researchers. The second phase following the interviews was a workshop on digital storytelling. In this workshop, participants brought a personal object that had a special meaning for them to share their stories. The focus of the workshop was on participants' memories, the importance of storytelling, and how memories and personal objects are related. The next phase involved the researcher and the participants working together to develop a script and to select photos to be used in the digital stories and audio-recorded scripts. In the final step, each participant viewed their digital stories and the researcher conducted an interview with each participant following the viewing.

The process of creating digital stories provided an opportunity for the participants to share their stories with a focus of their choosing without *being given any prior guiding questions or concepts. The digital storytelling process is considered a transformative approach and in the study conducted by Lenette et al. (2019), this aspect of the process became visible. One of the participants was struggling with complex mental health issues and under medication prior to the project. She had very few expectations of benefiting from this study. However, after the completion of the project, she described her engagement in the process as "better than the pills." She was motivated to take control of her life. Through narrating her experiences, she was able to reflect on and make meaning out of her experiences and life, which resulted in her decision to be more active and purposeful in pursuing her new life.*

The main steps involved in a PhotoVoice project are as follows:

- Participant recruitment in a selected community
- Deciding on a topic/issue affecting their group or community
- Informing participants about the PhotoVoice process and providing them with cameras (if needed)
- Participants documenting their experiences using PhotoVoice
- Using focus group processes to share, review, discuss, and analyze photographs produced
- Developing a story related to the photographs
- Providing a presentation to audiences that may include community members, policy makers, service professionals, or other stakeholding groups

General

Lit Corner 9.6:

Using PhotoVoice to Explore the Communication Skills of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder in Vietnam

Ha and Whittaker (2016) conducted a research study involving children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Vietnam. Through the research study nine children with ASD from ages 10 to 17 years captured over 2,100 images from their daily life experiences. Due to communication challenges among nonverbal children with ASD, photos resulted in different analytic *weights and became the central source of data. Two approaches were used to find common themes. The first approach, content analysis, involved coding images based on focus, location, and distance. The second approach, participatory action research, allowed researchers to interpret the meaning of each photo by interviewing children, parents, and caregivers. PhotoVoice has been demonstrated to be a useful method when gathering data among nonverbal and verbal children. As a result, the study contributed new information on ASD to support public education and knowledge in the community.*

ONLINE GAMES

Digital games have become a new tool used in classroom settings, as they are shown to develop cognitive skills, problem-solving skills (Ruggiero & Green, 2018), and collaborative learning (Sung & Hwang, 2018). In the game-based learning approach, an online game becomes the teaching/learning platform for the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Many applications are available at sites that include ABCYa.com, FunBrain.com, PBSKids.org, Poptropica.com, Kids.NationalGeographic.com, GameClassroom.com, and Arcademics.com. For more information, type "online educational games" into your search engine.

General

Lit Corner 9.7:

Using a Game-Based Learning Approach to Educate Syrian Refugees in Turkey

Sirin and Rogers-Sirin (2015) used an online game-based learning approach to address the needs of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Through this intervention, called Project Hope, an online and game-based learning environment was created with a specific curriculum that included four online games addressing Turkish language skills, cognitive skills development, 21st-century skills (computational thinking and coding), and mental health (Sirin et al., 2018). The intervention included three sessions a day in 2-hour segments for 5 days a week over a 4-week period. The results of this study were promising as the children participants showed evidence of language learning, increased understanding of coding, and a decrease in hopelessness, indicating that using an online, game-based learning approach was effective. This study is an example of how digital technologies can be leveraged to address critical issues in an effective, cost-efficient way. In the case of refugee children who are in a different country where a different language is spoken, an online game platform provided a space for children to be able to connect with and engage in the *learning process in a universal language, that is, the game. The contents of the game were purposefully selected so that children could continue their education in a playful approach.*

Second Life is another online reality platform that uses a gaming feel. Second Life is a virtual three-dimensional world created by its users who make their own avatars or representations in the world and are able to interact with other avatars, places, and objects. Second Life users can create, buy, and sell virtual items and land. To use Second Life, users need to set up an account with a first and last name and a password. It can take a bit of practice to get used to navigating the new avatar in the Second Life world. Action research projects that have utilized Second Life include Chen (2019) and Pereira et al. (2019).

DATA ANALYSIS SOFTWARE

There are free and paid online programs and software for data analysis, such as NVivo, Dedoose, and MaxQDA. Some of these tools allow for collaboration between researchers in analyzing the data. In an action research process, participants also collaborate in data analysis. Using digital tools in collaborations helps with the logistics issues that may emerge. These tools allow participants to collaborate online from wherever they are.

NVivo is a software package that facilitates the analysis of qualitative data from research activities such as interviews, focus groups, and surveys with open questions. It can also be used in the analysis of social media and publications. As well as text, it can be used for analyzing images and audio and video files. It was first released in 1997, with the most recent version available from 2018.

SPSS originally stood for Statistical Package for the Social Sciences and as this suggests it is a tool for statistically analyzing data and statistics. While originally aimed at the social sciences, the tool has now been more widely adopted by researchers in a variety of different fields.

Google Vision API is a tool developed by Google for image analysis. It can automatically label images, find objects or faces in images, and read images of text and handwriting. It is particularly useful when having to analyze a large number of images.

WRITING, DOCUMENTING, AND DISSEMINATING

One of the greatest effects of the development of digital media is the extent to which it enables even projects with minimal resources to publicize widely or make contact with large audiences. The applications described above provide opportunities for participants to extend the network of people associated with their project or to publicize the outcomes they have achieved.

Traditional ways of disseminating research processes or findings include publications in academic journals and texts, which have a limited audience. There is a shift among researchers toward using innovative ways to share academic research with the broader public. Particularly in research settings where research participants are members of a local community, it is important to share the research process and the findings with the broader public as well as professional practitioners and policymakers. Action researchers can therefore make use of the various applications and techniques described above to reach wider public audiences. Latz (2017), for instance, describes a PhotoVoice process used by participants to hold a public exhibit of photographs produced during the last stages of their project. This created a space for exposure of community perspective on the issues being addressed to the larger public audiences, including research participants, community groups, community leaders, professional practitioners, and policymakers.

While a range of social media may be used for disseminating information, the initial writing process that captures the essence of a project may be facilitated by digital media. The writing process usually starts during the data collection stage, when the action researchers begin to document their observations, reflections, and field notes. Digital tools like WIX (blogging website), Google Docs, or Microsoft Word 365 can be used as online research journals where all the entries can be easily shared and accessible to all participants. Moreover, digital media such as Tableau Public or Adobe enable advanced ways for incorporating various artifacts such as graphics and video alongside text to enrich the presentation of written results and open the scope of participants (Bauer, Himpsl-Gutermann, Sankofi, Szucsich, & Petz, 2017). The expanding capacities of growing technologies and software allow for facilitation of the writing process from data storage, real-time writing collaboration, and editing to presenting the results, thus making them broadly available.

General

Lit Corner 9.8:

The “Education in Our Barrios” Project Integrates Digital Tools and Social Media Platforms Into Critical Participatory Action Research Projects

The focus of this digital and participatory action research project was to examine public education reform in New York City Latino neighborhoods. Researchers invited young people from an East Harlem neighborhood to the project as co-researchers and collectively worked with them to conduct and produce digital interviews, analyze the data, carry out archival research, participate in community education events, organize publicity events, and use social media to engage with people in their neighborhood. By using social media, they deepened their engagement with people in the *neighborhood and encouraged more public engagement among many people across New York City*.

The researchers created a website using it as an information clearinghouse and an interactive space for discussion. They placed, edited, and produced interview excerpts on the website so that viewers could make comments (http://barrioedproj.org). Additionally, they collected images of the neighborhood via Flickr and Instagram, created informational maps, and collected music produced by groups from the neighborhood to share on the website they launched. Multiple digital tools were used as research instruments in the process. One of these tools is VoJo.com, which is a multilingual voice journalism tool that allows participants to share stories via voice messages, texts (SMS), and images (MMS). The researchers used CowBird (http://cowbird.com) to edit and produce the VoJo entries.

Being part of the research process created a space for community members to be exposed to archival information in relation to their neighborhood. Through this exposure, members of the community were able to learn the rich history of their neighborhood. At the same time, it made it visible that some participants' histories were denied and it communicated how this denial impacted their educational career. Participants were able to recognize the effects of gentrification and education reform on their lives. As the pressing issues of the neighborhood became visible, the researchers made the decision to share their data through a newsletter that would be posted on their digital platforms and hold a public forum for sharing the newsletter. Additionally, they changed their focus from social media efforts to organizing and expanding their digital content and work toward relationship building with various community stakeholders.

(*Adapted from Mayorga, 2014)*

Evernote

Evernote is an application that helps store and organize digital data. It divides this into "notebooks" that consist of multiple notes related to a particular topic. These notes can consist of a variety of different digital files including text, images, audio and video files, as well as Web links. These can then be presented in a number of different ways to best suit the style and requirements of the user. In 2019, there were 225 million users on Evernote, 35 million of whom were in the Asia-Pacific region, making it the largest user group (Smith, 2019).

Blogger

Blogger is a webpage publishing platform that was first launched in 1999 and remains popular today. Users are able to sign up for an account free of charge and write online diary entries, which can be timestamped and are usually presented in reverse chronological order. Blogs can be hosted and used by single users or by multiple users wishing to establish a network of community. Alongside text, users are able to post still images, embed moving images, and audio clips. Blogger is a service, now owned by Google, that hosts these sites. Another popular platform for creating this type of website is WordPress. Blogger requires a Google account to log in and create a blog. Action research projects that have included Blogger and blogs more broadly include Saeed and Yang (2008) and Philip and Nicholls (2009).

STORING DATA

Using digital tools to collect data in participatory research processes reshapes the way the data are stored as well. Online data storage (cloud) and online video tools such as Vimeo and YouTube are the most used platforms for the purposes of storing data. From a researcher perspective, having access to the data through a cloud platform provides the opportunity for co-researchers to review the data on their own time and location. This accessibility allows researchers to focus on specific tasks including collaborative data analysis when they meet in person.

Another benefit of storing data online through YouTube or other sites is having the option to share the research with the public or the community of focus. This practice has the potential to engage with a broader community in the research process as the viewers of the content can make comments and potentially create a more diverse community participating in the process. The “Education in Our Barrios Project” (Mayorga, 2014) is an example of this approach, which is described in Lit Corner 9.8.

Dropbox is a file hosting service that allows the same files to be synchronized across a number of computers to help individuals keep track of their data across a number of different machines and also to share files between different people.

CHALLENGES: ETHICS AND ENGAGEMENT

The use of digital technologies in research settings has the potential to increase participation and engagement by co-researchers when processes are implemented purposefully. The examples presented above show how digital technologies can be effectively used for action research processes, but they are not without limitations. In this section, we briefly discuss the challenging elements associated with the processes presented and issues to consider when using digital media.

Privacy and Confidentiality

In terms of publicity, Mannay (2015) discussed the concerns that open access publication and data sharing bring out. The idea behind open access practices is to make all research processes and outcomes available to any interested reader so that the knowledge gained is transferred to a wide range of audiences. However, it creates challenges when working with visuals so that images or videos created by researchers and participants are stored and published online and might be reused or reproduced through digital tools by other researchers to tell a different story. In this case, the original artifacts are taken out of context and the owners or producers of these artifacts lose control over their data. Privacy and confidentiality are therefore primary concerns when using digital media, as illustrated in the following excerpt from a report on the “Education in Our Barrios” project described in Lit Corner 9.8:

> One strength that using VoJo brought to the process was that it allowed for more privacy for those who wanted to remain anonymous compared to video interviewees who openly shared their views. This is an important aspect to consider in the research process as it is an alternative way of engaging participants in the research while honoring their request for anonymity. If video is the only method used for interviews, individuals who would want to be anonymous may end up not participating. Digital technology, like VoJo, enables a wider population of participants because of the anonymous texts and images feature. (Mayorga, 2014)

Access

The other significant issue associated with the use of digital technologies is that of access. Using digital media requires access to computers or other devices required to make use of available resources. Depending on the nature of a project, participants may require equipment or research tools such as audio or video recorders, software, and so on. If a project is likely to be ongoing, tools acquired during the research process through the researchers should remain available for continued use after the initial phase of the research process ends.

Another issue to consider in using digital technologies is the demographics of the community members participating in the research as their use of digital technologies may vary. Their familiarity with and use of digital tools can affect their willingness to participate in the research, which is why researchers should consider providing training or information sessions to participants on how to use digital tools so that they can engage in the process actively.

Ownership

In participatory research settings, the production of digital artifacts by participants, researchers, or both and the dissemination of these artifacts with the larger community raise certain questions (Mitchell, de Lange, & Moletsane, 2017). One of these questions is related to the ownership of the artifacts produced. Do these artifacts belong to the participants or the researchers? Who gets to decide about the music or footage to be used in the video? These are the emerging questions that need to be considered in advance when using digital technologies in a research setting.

ACTION RESEARCH RESOURCES

As noted above, there are a number of platform-specific action research forums and repositories, particularly in different social media platforms. The following websites are a small sample of those that provide resources for people involved in action research activities and projects. Web resources continue to evolve and new valuable collections will appear, while others will disappear or be no longer maintained. While these may be a good starting point, we recommend you conduct your own searches and maintain your own list.

The Center for Collaborative Action Research—Action Research resources: http://cadres.pepperdine.edu/ccar/resources.html

Action Research Network of America: https://arnawebsite.org/

Action Research Resources: http://www.aral.com.au/resources/arphome.html

ActionResearch.net—among other resources this provides an interesting repository of PhD and master's dissertations in the field: https://www.actionresearch.net/

Collaborative Action Research Network: https://www.carn.org.uk/

Action Research Plus: https://actionresearchplus.com/

Action Research at Edith Cowen University: https://ecu.au.libguides.com/research-methodologies-creative-arts-humanities/action-research

Action Research at Iowa State University: https://instr.iastate.libguides.com/c.php?g=49332&p=318066

Action Research at the University of Gothenburg: https://cecar.gu.se/

See Table 9.1 for additional resources.

Table 9.1 Additional Examples and Tools

Source	Description	Site
Digital stories	Wapikoni offers video-on-demand service to directly stream independent films created in and by Indigenous communities. The map-centric workshop database allows visitors to view films.	http://www.wapikoni.ca/home

Source	Description	Site
North York Community House (NYCH)	Development project based out of Toronto, Ontario. The project integrates its members through digital storytelling processes. The platforms used in this project are their main website and YouTube channel. One unique aspect of NYCH is that it offers emotional support to participants following the upload of participant videos by discussing issues or emotions they may have experienced.	https://www.nych.ca/
Story Center	Story Center curates and facilitates digital storytelling workshops by working with organizations in various fields. They use their website and a YouTube channel as their online platforms.	https://www.storycenter.org/stories

Source	Description	Site
InsightShare Global Participatory Video Hub Network	A networking site that supports communities by helping them curate, create, and organize participatory videos as a tool for self-expression, advocacy, heritage documentation, and horizontal communication.	Insightshare.org/hubs Insightshare.org/resources/photostory/all.html
Vimeo	A video-sharing website.	https://vimeo.com/
Zoom	Videoconferencing software that allows cloud meetings.	https://zoom.us/
Tableau Public	Free data visualization tool that turns text data into visualization.	https://public.tableau.com/s/
MindMup	Free online mind mapping application for creating and sharing mind maps.	https://www.mindmup.com/
Zotero	Free reference management software allowing for collaboration and integration with other applications (e.g., Chrome, GoogleDrive).	https://www.zotero.org/
Mendeley	Free online reference manager and academic social network.	https://www.mendeley.com/?interaction_required=true

Source	Description	Site
ResearchGate	Social network for researchers to share, disseminate, and find research.	https://www.researchgate.net/
Draft	Draft is a tool for drafting and collaborative writing.	https://draftin.com/
CowBird	A public library of human experience where users upload the videos of the stories they want to share. The website shifted the focus of their services from gathering stories to storing the videos they already have as a historical archive.	http://cowbird.com/
RebelMouse	RebelMouse serves as a website and a publishing platform.	https://www.rebelmouse.com/#intro
Codigital	A cloud-based idea management solution that helps corporate and member organizations in brainstorming, collaboration, conferences, and gathering requirements.	https://www.codigital.com/
Storium	An online creative writing game that can be used in classrooms as a teaching and research tool.	https://storium.com/

Source	Description	Site
Signal	An open source encrypted messaging service.	https://signal.org/
Anvil	A video annotation tool that may be of use for particular action research projects where video analysis is required.	https://www.anvil-software.org/#
LaTeX	A typesetting system that can be useful for the final preparation of documents for publication.	https://www.latex-project.org/

REFLECTION AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

1. With a group of colleagues, discuss the ways in which you use the Internet and social media on a daily basis.
2. How and why are digital media particularly relevant to action research?
3. How might you incorporate these and other platforms from this chapter in your professional practices or research?
4. Discuss ways social media might be used to enhance action research processes. Focus on ways participants might use social media to communicate and collaborate.
5. What are some of the problems you might encounter when using social media platforms in action research? How might you overcome them?
6. In what circumstances would you use the research and collaboration tools suggested in this chapter? Do you have any other sets of tools that you find useful?

CHAPTER REVIEW

Digital tools now can be used in every aspect of the research process including **planning, collaboration, data generation and analysis, and disseminating research findings.**

Social media is a digital technology that enables user-generated content creation by **sharing information, engaging in interests, and connecting ideas.**

A variety of **digital tools** that enable research participants to **communicate, collaborate, collect and analyze data, and report on research outcomes.**

Many **apps** now provide the means for even large groups of people to actively participate in all facets of a research project, from establishing the research objectives and outcomes, through data gathering and analysis, to reporting and disseminating information about research outcomes.

Videoconferencing and livestreaming services enable researchers to **disseminate information, generate collective knowledge, and formulate collective action.**

Digital research tools enhance collaborative processes of data gathering, data analysis, writing, disseminating information, and storing data.

Other digital media that enhance action research include applications that facilitate **online games** and others that assist in **sharing information and gaining publicity.**

Privacy and confidentiality are challenges that need to be addressed when using digital media.

Another challenge to be addressed relates to the ability of stakeholders to participate.

Ownership of the processes and products of research is another issue to be addressed.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

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Crystal Abidin is senior research fellow in the School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry at Curtin University in Western Australia. She researches young people's relationships with internet celebrity, self-curation, and vulnerability. Her books include *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* (2018), *Microcelebrity Around the Globe: Approaches to Cultures of Internet Fame* (2018), co-edited with Megan Lindsay Brown, and *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (2019), with Tama Leaver and Tim Highfield. She is also affiliate researcher with the Media Management and Transformation Centre at Jonkoping University in Sweden.

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APPENDIX CASE EXAMPLES OF FORMAL REPORTS

TRANSITIONS: EXPERIENCES OF OLDER WOMEN FROM HOSPITAL TO HOME.[1]

1. Used with permission of Deborah Rae.

Deborah Rae

Introduction

This report[2] outlines an action research process conducted with women from the Older Women's Network in Mackay. Action research is a methodology that recognizes the researcher, as a fellow human being interacting with others within a social context, as necessarily an implicit part of the research. It is also a cyclical, reflexive process that advocates continued learning and development. I have prepared this report in the first person, which illustrates the transparency of my subjectivity in this process and the benefits of this subjectivity and also allows for my ongoing reflection on my actions throughout the action research process.

2. The reports in this appendix are different in style but follow the basic procedures for formulating a report outlined in Chapter 8. Note that the first report, "Transitions," contains a report within a report. Part of the formal report is a report presented by the author to the women with whom she had been working. They represent reports that emerged from action research projects.

1. Purpose of the Report and the Intended Audience(s)

This Report Has a Dual Purpose

One of the purposes of the report is as an assessment item for SWSP7348 Community Based Action Research as a course in my study of a Master of Social Administration at University of Queensland. It is intended to demonstrate my use of a participatory action research process in an activity within the particular community in the Mackay (north Queensland) district. As such, its intended audience is the lecturer for this course, Dr. Ernie Stringer.

Within this report is another report, which details the progress of this action research to date. As such, its intended audience is the primary stakeholders and their identified community for this research. At this stage, this includes older women who have had experiences in transitioning from a hospital stay to home (primary stakeholders) and the Older Women's Network, of which these women are all members (identified community).

2. Issue Investigated

After a preliminary inquiry of possible issues or problems was conducted in late August 2005, the following issue was raised, with the understanding that it could possibly change after further investigation and clarification with a broader range of stakeholders.

Issue:	Older women are experiencing problems when they return home

	following a stay in hospital, such as not having the capacity to cook meals, perform routine household tasks, or care for other family members (e.g., an older spouse).
Problem:	There are no transition services from hospital to home for older women.
Question:	How do older women experience the transition period from hospital to home?
Objective:	To understand what this experience of the transition from hospital to home means for older women.

While this report is based on the previously described issue and objective, following the focus group meeting on October 20, modifications were made to these items. These modifications are detailed in the section titled "Outcomes of the Study."

3. Context of the Study

Mackay is located on the Queensland coast, 1,000 km north of Brisbane, and covers an area of more than 90,000 km2, equivalent to about 5.2% of the total area of Queensland (Mackay City Council, 2005). In 2001 it had an estimated population of more than 143,578 permanent residents, of which approximately 69,800 are females. More than half of the total population (78,401) live within the jurisdiction of the Mackay City Council, while others live in outlying districts. Approximately 11,935 people in Mackay are over the age of 65, which means that Mackay's population is younger than that of the rest of Queensland. However, this does represent an increase of 12% in the Mackay elder population from 1996 to 2001 (MWREDC, 2003).

The region is serviced by the Mackay Base Hospital and Mater Misericordiae Hospital and to a lesser extent by the smaller Pioneer Valley Private Hospital. The Mackay Base Hospital, which is publicly funded, provides a range of medical facilities and services, with other services provided by visiting specialists from Townsville or Brisbane. This hospital has recently been the subject of media reports concerning a lack of human resources, especially a lack of appropriately trained medical specialists, a lack of community confidence in its services, declining workplace morale, and workplace bullying.

Other key community health services in the Mackay region include Blue Care (in-home nursing care), Meals on Wheels, Golden Doves (care for people with disabilities), Home Assist (general handyman services), and Home and Community Health Assistance, including a local bus service for older and/or disabled people.

Researcher/Historical Perspective

Because I have no previous professional experience in community development and have been a member of the Mackay community for only a short time, the context of my research included the following:

1. Making initial contact with an appropriate organization and key people within the organization
2. Negotiating entry into the organization
3. Identifying further opportunities for other individuals to enter the research group to participate in a possible research project
4. Making contact and negotiating with key stakeholders external to this organization to initiate a research project

Stakeholders, Sites of Action, and Time Frames

Primary Stakeholders

Originally, older women who have had experiences in the transition from a hospital stay to home were the primary stakeholders in this action research project. These stakeholders were initially drawn from the Older Women's Network (OWN), which is "an independent forum in which the special needs of older women could be specifically addressed" (OWN, 2004).

At the focus group meeting on October 20, these primary stakeholders decided to modify the context of this action research to include both women and men. They also decided that being identified as "older" is not a numerical representation but subject to self-identification by the person. For example, more explicit self-identification as an older person is represented by a decision to participate in social groups such as OWN, 50 and Better, Independent Retirees, the Senior Citizens Association, or National Seniors. They also decided that the context would include older people who have had an experience in any of the private or public hospitals in the region and that the project would not be limited to Mackay city limits but also its immediate regional districts. This involves western, northern, and southern districts within approximately 50 km from Mackay city limits.

Other Stakeholders

During interviews with individual primary stakeholders, when the project was focused on the experiences of older women, other possible stakeholders for this action research were identified. During the October 20 focus group meeting, however, these stakeholders were further clarified by the primary stakeholders and divided into separate groups:

1. Other primary stakeholders

    Men and women from organizations such as Independent Retirees, Older Women's Network, 50 and Better, the Senior Citizens Association, National Seniors, and Australian Pensioners League

    Friends and acquaintances of current primary stakeholders

2. Hospital representatives

    Representatives of Continuum of Hospital Extended Care (CHEC), which "provides care and support for discharge from hospital"

    Social workers

3. Community service providers

    Home and Community Care (HACC) transport services

    Blue Nurses in Mackay

    Meals on Wheels in Mackay

    Home Assist in Mackay

    Dial an Angel (based in Southeast Queensland)

    RSL Home Care in Mackay

4. Other community members

President of the Mackay Regional Council of Social Development (MRCSD), who is also a local member of Queensland Council of Social Services (QCOSS)

Member of the Mackay and District Health Council

President of National Seniors, who is also on the State Council for Seniors

Sites of Action

The project has essentially been situated in locations that were preferred by the primary stakeholders:

Meeting with OWN at their usual venue (Blue Nurses function room)

Meeting with primary stakeholders in their homes (except for one who chose to meet at a coffee shop)

Focus group meeting at a primary stakeholder's home, as decided by the stakeholders themselves

Because the primary stakeholders are expecting the size of the meeting group to expand, they have commenced inquiries into accessing an alternative meeting venue. Options they are currently considering include the MRCSD's meeting room, the Mackay Neighborhood Centre, or the Mackay City Council library.

4. Procedures Used to Carry Out the Study

(a) Data Gathering

Data gathering has been accomplished by the following:

Participation in OWN meetings to gain access to potential primary stakeholders

Identifying people I could approach to participate in the action research project, as this group comprises many primary stakeholders. This included identifying people with particularly tragic experiences (extreme case sampling), usually reported experiences (typical sampling), particular knowledge of this issue (concept sampling), and divergent experiences (maximal variation sampling; Stringer, 2004).

Comments by individuals at this meeting seemed to suggest that they are particularly interested in achieving a specific tangible outcome that they have already thought about. I attempted to be mindful of this when I met individuals and heard their stories, so that

they had an opportunity to fully explore their own experiences and possibly come to realize a range of issues and possible options,

they had an opportunity to benefit from the process, not just the outcome.

This required me to use grand and mini tour questions effectively, make full use of stakeholders' opportunity to review and clarify their words, and give stakeholders plenty of time to reflect on their actions and statements.

Data-gathering activities will ensure that primary participants remain included in, and the focus of, the process, as well as the determining elements of the "substance of our research." Participants' involvement in contacting other stakeholders and arranging and chairing future focus group meetings is an initial step toward guarding against the dangers of excessive networking, neglect of primary stakeholders, and the predominance of the "agendas and perspectives of organizational people."

Clarifying My Role

Even though I explained that it is not my role or intention to lead the project, or do all the work, it appeared that OWN members were still assuming that this was indeed the case. For example, an individual asked if I expected the outcome would be something that would be funded by government or privately. I therefore think that, although I may have initially explained my role in the process, it will require further clarification, probably on a few occasions. Also, I think my actions may not have been consistent with my words. For example, I was introduced by the president while standing in front of a seated group. I believe this created an impression that I had some sort of authority over the process. It would therefore have been better for me to initially meet the participants individually rather than in this group forum. This could have been achieved during informal chats during the morning tea break (which was my original intention).

Note-Taking

Note-taking initially proved to be difficult because of my focus on verbatim recording of each participant's words. This detracted from my ability to keep eye contact and maintain some degree of natural conversation with the participant. This proved to be less of a problem in later interviews, however, when I changed my physical position so it was easier to maintain eye contact, and my note-taking skills began to improve so that I could relax a little and give more attention to the participant. I also found that in the pauses while I was writing, the participant had an opportunity to contemplate what she had been saying, which was reflected in her subsequent comments.

Participant Reactions

Judging by the passion and intensity with which these stories were told, it would seem that participants generally appeared to appreciate the opportunity to be heard and to tell their story. I attempted to ascertain their perceptions of the process by inviting comments about the interview or directly asking them for their comments.

Focus Group

I conducted a focus group with the primary stakeholders. The preparation, structure, and format were as follows:

- The meeting time and date were scheduled by two of the participants, who then telephoned me and some of the other participants, while I contacted two others.
- The meeting was held in the home of one of the research participants.
- The meeting was attended by six primary stakeholders, three of whom had been interviewed once; the other three had been interviewed twice.
- All participants were provided with transcribed copies of their interview(s).
- The meeting duration was 2.5 hours. Participants requested that I chair the meeting, "since it's the first one."

Focus Group Outcomes

The meeting was, from my perspective, very successful. This was evident from the outset, when the passion and depth of these women's concerns became evident before the meeting started. This suggests that the timing of the group meeting was appropriate, as they are all currently keen to share their stories and make this issue public. The tone of the meeting was informal and friendly but also focused on a particular objective. It was lively, enjoyable, and very active but also primarily concerned with the issue at hand. The meeting provided an ideal forum for these women to express their passion about this issue and also actively work toward realistic options for resolution. Similarities can be seen with Stringer's description of a workshop, where "the level of animation in their discussions and the extensive lists of useful information emerging from their discussions were testament to their enthusiasm and the extent to which they appreciated opportunities to learn from each other" (2004, p. 123).

Artifacts

A range of brochures and pamphlets were reviewed by other participants and me throughout the interview and focus group process. These were predominantly documents related to hospital preadmission and discharge processes and services, medication sheets, and newspaper clippings about community services related to transition from hospital to home. The data within these documents were useful in developing the knowledge of participants regarding this issue, particularly in enlightening us about the range of services available. A critique of this data also revealed how its stated intentions did not match reality, which was emphasized by participants in their interviews.

(b) Data Analysis

Data analysis in this action research project has been conducted according to the interpretive interactionist methodology of identifying and analyzing epiphanies and illuminative experiences. As Denzin (2001, p. 158) defines it, an epiphany is a "moment of problematic experience that illuminates personal character and often signifies a turning point in a person's life." It is within the research participants' epiphanies that the researcher may "capture the concepts, meanings, emotions and agendas that can be applied to problems affecting their personal, institutional, and professional lives" (Stringer, 2004, p. 99). Data analysis processes therefore include the following:

- Identification of epiphanies in data collected in the first interview with individuals
- Deconstruction of these epiphanies to reveal their features and elements
- Preparation of accounts and narratives of these epiphanies for the individuals
- Preparation of a joint account, via the focus group meeting of primary stakeholders
- Interpreting the participant's world

I had significant concerns about using the data gathered from participants in any way, as I feared that I could distort their perspectives. I considered it more important to keep their words and concepts intact, without any interference on my part. However, after reading Denzin's (2001, p. 133) explanations of the "thick, contextual, interactional, multivoiced interpretation," it became evident that this actually provides the reader with an opportunity to extend his or her understanding of the issue being investigated.

(c) Report Construction

Following the focus group meeting, it was agreed that I would prepare a written account from the meeting minutes of the project to date, including the issues raised by participants. Participants also agreed that they would prepare a verbal account to present to OWN members. My written account, which served as a progress report for OWN members, is provided in the section titled “Outcomes of the Study.”

(d) Ethical Procedures

At the commencement of the project, ethical issues to be addressed included the following:

- Maintaining ethical principles of MRCSD
- Maintaining the confidentiality of interactions with participants, particularly with respect to any comments they provide about local services
- Ensuring appropriate storage of confidential information at MRCSD
- Obtaining permission from participants to share with others information they provide and how it will be shared (e.g., verbally in general references, in written brochures)

(e) Checks for Rigor

Checks for rigor within this action research project include the following:

- Prolonged engagement

Individual interviews with participants (either one or two) were each at least 2 hours in length, and this prolonged engagement enabled sufficient exploration of the issue at hand. This was coupled with the initial interaction with primary participants at the OWN meeting.

- Persistent observation

The initial meeting, first and second rounds of interviews, and the focus group meeting took place over a period of approximately 10 weeks. This element also included sending e-mails and making telephone calls throughout this period.

- Triangulation

I used a range of sources, including individual interviews, focus groups, participation in a group meeting, observation of interactions between participants, literature review, and a review of artifacts, including brochures and other documents.

- Transferability, dependability, and confirmability

The thickness of the detail of each individual interview is evident in the transcribed documents, and its applicability to this whole group was confirmed in the focus group meeting. That is, issues of each person are clearly identifiable in her accounts, due to the level of detail, passion, and intensity in participants' stories. The primary participants seem assured of the dependability of these data, which has been fully transparent and provided to them at every opportunity. This dependability will be assessed more rigorously with the production and distribution of the progress report to the OWN meeting. The confirmability of the data is clearly apparent even within this report, as all data, including electronic and paper meeting minutes, learnings reports, brochures, and other documents, have been filed and stored.

Philosophical rationale

Action research is a form of naturalistic inquiry with the purpose of studying people's subjective experience and "explor[ing] perspectives on an issue or problem" (Stringer, 2004, p. 16). Thus, it is a form of "transformational learning" (p. 3), which provides research participants with the opportunity to gain enhanced clarity and realizations of their own situations within a social context. Action research processes therefore include a progressive development of events, through continuous cycles of looking, thinking, and acting. Simply, it is research conducted by, with, and for people (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 2). Reason and Bradbury (2001, p. 1) emphasize the democratic nature of action research that is concerned with "developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes" with a view to "the flourishing of individual persons and their communities." This occurs within the realm of the interconnected complexity of people and their cultural worlds and the expectation of outcomes perceived as worthwhile by these people in their everyday lives. Action research is therefore concerned with "a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part" (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 2).

Outcomes of the Study

The outcomes of this study are represented in the following progress report that will be forwarded to OWN membership. While this report provides them with a written record, the research participants will also make a verbal presentation to the OWN meeting of research outcomes. This report has been prepared by me at the request of the research participants and is, in essence, the minutes of the focus group meeting of the primary stakeholders. Its framework has been constructed according to the key elements identified by the research participants' joint account of this issue.

TRANSITIONS: EXPERIENCES OF OLDER PEOPLE FROM HOSPITAL TO HOME—PROGRESS REPORT

Introduction

This is a report to the members of the Older Women's Network (OWN) about the progress of an action research project being conducted by some OWN members with Deborah Rae, a volunteer worker with the Mackay Regional Council for Social and Regional Development (MRCSD).

This progress report includes the following:

- A brief description of the background of the action research project
- The project's objective
- A summary of the key issues that OWN members identified

A conclusion

Background

The OWN members who have been a part of this research have

met with Deborah for an individual interview, where they talked about their experiences when they went from hospital to home;

met with Deborah again (some but not all participants) so that she could verify what they told her and they could explain their story further;

met together as a focus group to share their stories and decide what to do next.

Objective

The issue that OWN members have been talking to Deborah about is that older people, especially those who live alone, experience problems when they return home after a stay in a hospital, such as not being able to cook meals, do housework, or care for other family members (e.g., an older spouse). The problem is that there are no transition services for older people from hospital to home.

The OWN members' objective is to find ways to improve the experience of the transition from hospital to home for older people.

Summary of the Key Issues

It Could Be Anyone—It's a Community Issue

The participants feel that they shouldn't do this just for women. It should be "across the board, not just channelling down one lane to one sort of people." It's a community issue and "should be available for anyone that requires it." One woman explained, "The community as a whole needs to say, we gotta put something in place. Everyone needs to know they've got someone to fall back on, if they need it. It's about that support. It's not a luxury. It's a basic need for the community. It should be there for people of any status."

Infections

Participants talked about how you can become very sick from infections after you get out of the hospital. One woman explained, "If you're lucky, you don't get an infection. The infection actually caused more hassle. The infection part is one of the really major problems that the hospital has got. And the patient has got. The hospital just can't fight these germs anymore."

Another very independent woman had a major operation that was very successful. She didn't know that she had an infection until her daughter found her collapsed in her bedroom. She said that infections "take over you—you have no control. It just knocks you for six. If you don't have a positive attitude, the infection can just take control. You're not aware of it yourself. You don't realize you're getting sicker. Then you're unable to get up. You just collapse and stay there. Somebody on their own wouldn't have someone to push them."

Who's Responsible for Telling You This Information?

Many women talked about problems with the information they get from the hospital and from other places. They also talked about how "you've got to make people aware, educate them." They said that you "find things out when you don't need it anymore," or "they give you information but then you can't access it," and "you hear people talking about these things [services]. That doesn't mean that when you come to need it, you get it right." Even during the focus group meeting, some women found out about some services for the first time, exclaiming, "I didn't know you could do that!" "Yeah, I just found out too."

One woman talked about how she saw her friends struggling to cope with finding information. She said, "I've seen women who are so depressed. You say hello and they fall to pieces. They're lost as to who can help them and who can't. They suffer with depression. They don't know what to do in this situation. They can't help themselves. They don't know how to get *into* these services. I know that I've had to resource things myself to find out what is available."

One woman was given information in a brochure about a service that would come to her house to help her. But later she was told that they wouldn't do it. She says, "It's about having things at your fingertips when you need it. They should be saying, 'This is what we can offer you now.' It could have happened at preadmission. It's all about the timing. You need appropriate information that can be followed through. My life could've been made so much easier."

How Am I Going to Get There?

Some women talked about the problems with public transport in Mackay, which is a "problem when you come out of hospital, and have to go back a few days later." Many women don't drive: "Public transport is almost nonexistent, depending on the area" and "taxi transit is such a hassle. If you're sick you can't be bothered with all that."

One woman said that after a successful operation on her neck, her main distress was when she was told to go to her doctor to get the staples out. She explains, "I was feeling exceedingly unwell. I had to get the staples out. I had nine of them in my neck. It's hard to get to a doctor. I rang all day. I was exhausted. I just kept thinking, 'Where in hell am I going to get these staples out of my neck? How can I *get* there?'"

You Need Someone to Call on You

Several women said that they were most concerned about women who are living on their own. One woman, who lives alone herself, explained that "if you're living on your own, you need to know how to arrange tradesmen, pay rates. But if you lose your husband in your 60s, you're thrown in the deep end. You have to learn all these things, especially if they have no children who have time to help them out."

Another woman, who lives in a group of units, has seen many friends and neighbors struggling to manage alone. She says, "The Blue Nurses get sent out, just to redress the wound. They're not there all the time. Even Meals on Wheels don't have time to stop and chat. They rush in, drop the meal, and go. They have to struggle to get around at home, even to make a cuppa. For dinner they just have a packet of biscuits and a cup of tea. It's not enough. Some people wouldn't even bother with that. They just sit."

I'm Happy to Be Home, but Is It Practical?

One woman, who has lived at home alone for many years and enjoys her independence, explains, “There are a lot of hazards when living alone at home, and you do things you shouldn’t do. Old people and children don’t know their limitations. I think I can do that—then find you can’t.” The group talked about the dangers of having an accident and how it changes your life. As one woman who lives alone explains, “At our age, if you get a fractured hip, half your life is over. It takes a long while to heal, if it heals, and your whole life is altered. Its structure is altered. I’m scared as hell of slipping over.”

They also talked about the ability to plan ahead if you live at home. For example, as one woman says, “If you have an accident at home, then you’re in an ambulance, in old clothes, they’ve ripped the leg of your pants to look at your knee. . . . You haven’t had a chance to put anything in an overnight bag. . . . How do you handle that? You have to ring a friend and explain where everything is in your house. In the end of my wardrobe, I have an overnight bag with nightie, slippers. . . . You have to be prepared. You have to realize these things.”

Family and Friends

Many women talked about having family and friends who would “put themselves out for me” but were not keen on “family having to interrupt their lives.” One woman who developed an infection and suddenly became very ill explains, “When I came home I was sicker than when I was in hospital. My daughter had to leave her two children and come down from Townsville to look after me. It was very, very inconvenient. I was lucky that I had that option. Not everybody has that.”

They also talked about feeling pressured to get support from friends. One exasperated woman exclaimed, “Friends, friends, friends, friends! Well, if I kept asking friends, I won’t have any left. I didn’t feel comfortable asking for help. Yeah, I felt *really* uncomfortable with it. I had to do what was asked of me [in preadmission]. I was totally pressured. I absolutely had no choice—you were pushed onto your friends. I think there should be an alternative.”

All the women said they would help their friends and family, but some admitted that they preferred to manage alone when needing help themselves. One woman reveals, “I should’ve [called someone to help] but . . . a neighbor came over to see if there’s anything I needed, but I said, ‘Oh, I’m alright.’ Getting around I could manage it, it just took a long time. I didn’t want anyone to take me to the loo. I’m one of those silly ones—too independent. I’ve been living on my own a long time.”

Conclusion

The OWN members participating in this research have identified several key issues for older women in their transition from hospital to home. They have also started to find some ways to improve this transition and have an action plan in place to continue researching this issue and working toward possible improvements. They have decided to meet again in November and will keep OWN informed of their future actions.

Literature Review

Research participants have not expressed an interest in reviewing literature related to this project. They are aware that similar research has been conducted by OWN members in other states (although not based on action research methodology), but at this stage they have made the decision to continue gathering data from older women within their own organization as well as to broaden their data gathering to women and men from similar organizations in Mackay. Simultaneously, they have requested that I commence gathering data from other stakeholders, including community service providers and hospital personnel.

The data in this review is derived from three sources:

1. A health and aging submission to the federal budget, prepared by the Council of the Ageing (Australia)
2. A survey on experiences of care after hospital, conducted by the Older Women's Network (Action) group in Canberra
3. A research activity describing the "reported experiences of elderly patients regarding their transition from an acute hospital to independent community living," as reported in the *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*

A NEW MATHEMATICS CURRICULUM[3]

3. Used with permission of Karen Swift.

Karen Swift

The Issue to Be Researched

At Blacksmith Primary School, I am a member of the mathematics curriculum team and have a real interest in this subject area. Over the past 2 years, this team has been looking at the Curriculum Framework in the mathematics area. We have been investigating and identifying the key points and strategies of the learning area outcomes. We have inserviced our teachers and informed them of the information we have learned from our investigations. We have also discussed with teachers new strategies and techniques they should be using in their classrooms to achieve the outcomes stated in the Curriculum Framework document.

As it has been more than a year since the changes have been implemented, I was keen to see how teachers, parents, and students of the school were experiencing the new changes. I had intended to complete this research project on the whole school, but due to my inexperience as a researcher, the short allocation of time to conduct the research, and my determination to start small, I decided to complete my research project just on the five junior primary classes (Year 1 to Year 3) within the school.

Stating the Research Question

How are teachers, parents, and students in the junior primary classes (Year 1 to Year 3) experiencing the new mathematics curriculum?

Method

After deciding on the research problem, I discussed my research proposal with the school principal. She thought it sounded very interesting and was keen to see the results in the final report and presentation at the completion of the project.

I began this research project by purposively selecting a sample of participants from each of the groups significantly affected by the issue being studied—achieving mathematics outcomes—taking into account sex, age of participants, academic ability, and ethnic backgrounds. The participants who were included consisted of three teachers, three students, and three parents from all of the junior primary grades. Once the students had been selected, I wrote letters to the children's parents explaining the project and asking for their permission for their child to be included in the project. I also gained informed consent from the other participants involved.

All the participants were interviewed individually. The teachers and parents were interviewed over a 2-week period in my classroom before school or straight after school. The children were interviewed in their own classroom so they could give a grand tour and explain their own classroom procedures. I used ethnographic interview questions (Spradley, 1979), and I recorded the participants' responses using field notes. I then spent a week analyzing the data from each individual interview. I decided to use the categorizing and coding method of data analysis. I photocopied my field notes and then cut up all the words into little units of meaning. I then placed the units of meaning into categories, thus enabling the participants to interpret and have a better understanding of the data collected.

Once I completed all the initial interviews with participants, I decided to have a focus group meeting with the three different groups. These were short meetings during the last week of the school term. The aim of these meetings was for all the members involved to get to know each other, to be informed about the next procedure, and to decide on a convenient time to meet each week to work collaboratively to investigate how we could achieve mathematics outcomes in the school. The teachers decided to meet on Tuesday afternoons, the children at Wednesday lunch times, and the parents on Thursday afternoons.

When I completed my data analysis from the individual interviews, I returned the analyzed data to the participants for member checking. For the students, I individually read their report with them.

The participants then gathered together for another focus group meeting. During these focus group meetings, the participants created joint written accounts that gave a clear understanding of how all the participants in their group were experiencing and perceiving the issue.

After all the focus groups had created their group reports, a meeting was held where all the participants attended. At this meeting, each focus group presented its report. The teachers used a PowerPoint presentation, the parents wrote a letter addressed to the teachers, and the students created a poster that expressed their likes and dislikes for math. The teachers also presented the information they had discovered during their literature study. After the students presented their report, they left; the teachers and parents worked collaboratively to create a narrative report to present to the principal and teaching staff. To create this report, they broke up into pairs of a teacher and a parent working together to identify common themes from the three reports. Each of the pairs reported back their findings, and then a group report was constructed.

During the next meeting, the parent and teacher participants created a plan of action. The group identified the key issues to be addressed and suggested solutions to accomplish the desired outcome. An action agenda plan was then established using a planning chart. Next, the action agenda plan was added to the narrative report that was presented to the principal and teachers at a staff meeting.

The teacher and parent focus groups continued to gather once a week during the fourth term to continue to supervise and monitor the progress of the actions being implemented during that term.

My Philosophical Rationale

An experimental style of research is not appropriate for my research issue, as I am looking at the behaviors and attitudes of teachers, students, and parents in relation to the mathematics curriculum. According to Stringer (1999), “The social and behavioral worlds cannot be operationalized in scientific terms because the phenomena to be tested lack the stability required by traditional scientific method” (p. 192).

The naturalistic inquiry approach studies people’s subjective experiences and explores their perspective and views of a particular issue or problem. By using this approach, researchers “gain greater insight into the ways people interpret events from their own perspective, providing culturally and contextually appropriate information assisting them to more effectively manage problems they confront” (Stringer, 2004, p. 15). Once the researcher gathers the information from the people’s experiences, he or she uses interpretive methods to analyze the data before producing reports that give detailed descriptions of the people’s understandings of events and their behaviors. The researcher’s reports and presentations can vary depending on the purpose and audience involved in the research.

Action research is at the center of the naturalistic qualitative research approach, as there is a “need to understand how people experience and make meaning of events and phenomena” (Stringer, 2004, p. 26). Action research “is a cyclical, dynamic and collaborative process in which people address social issues affecting their lives” (p. 4).

Action research uses a number of cycles of the Look–Think–Act sequence. During the Look or Observation stage, the researcher gathers the information from a variety of sources and builds a picture to clarify the nature of the research problem or issue. The main information is gathered through interviews with stakeholders, where each stakeholder gives meaningful accounts of their personal experiences and perspectives of the research topic. Researchers also use participant observation, surveys, artifacts, and literature reviews to gain a clearer understanding of the problem or issue. Artifacts can include documents, records, student work samples, materials, equipment, and facilities.

The second part of the cycle, the Think or Reflection stage, is where the researcher analyzes large amounts of data to reduce the quantity of information and to gain a clearer understanding of what is happening and how it is happening for each stakeholder in relation to the problem or issue being investigated. According to Stringer (2004), there are two ways of analyzing the data: analyzing epiphanies and categorizing and coding.

Analyzing epiphanies involves the researcher identifying the epiphanies from each individual interview with the participants. An epiphany is an “illuminative or significant experience” (Stringer, 2004, p. 97) in a person’s life. Once the epiphanies are identified, the researcher distinguishes the detailed features and then the elements associated with each epiphany. Each participant’s experiences are then consolidated into a framework that shows his or her own personal perspectives and experiences in relation to the issue or problem. Once all of the individual reports have been completed, connections of similarities and differences are identified between the stakeholders (Stringer, 2004).

The categorizing and coding method is a traditional process where the large amount of data from each stakeholder’s interview is divided into units of meaning. These units of meaning are then placed into the appropriate categories, subcategories, and themes that have been established by the researcher or participants involved. Organizing the information into a system of categories allows the participants to understand and interpret all the information and explains the significant features of the experiences appearing from the investigation (Stringer, 2004).

Analyzing the noninterview data is also an important part of the Think stage. Even though action research is mainly based on the participants’ personal perspectives and experiences, noninterview data can present an extra resource to assist the participants in clarifying, supporting, and understanding the problem or issue being investigated (Stringer, 2004). Analyzing all the data then provides the background information necessary for effective action to be taken.

The final part of the cycle, the Act or Action stage, is divided into two processes. The first process is to inform all participants and stakeholders of the data analyzed and the outcomes established. This information can be presented in written reports, presentations, or performances. The research participants need to think carefully about how they present their information so that it is communicated effectively to the appropriate audiences and represents understanding of their personal experiences and perspectives. Before any report, presentation, or performance is presented to an audience or focus group, member checking needs to be completed to ensure that the participants’ experiences and perspectives are being presented accurately (Stringer, 2004).

The second part of this stage involves creating solutions to solve the problem or issue being investigated. All research participants need to be involved in the solution-solving process. The participants need to review all the information that has been presented to them in the reports, presentations, and performances, and they need to select the most important issues they would like to solve. The participants create a schedule outlining the action and order of events to be taken for each of the issues identified. This information is best recorded in a chart or table so it can be clearly read and reviewed by all participants. Once the action plan has been established and the tasks and steps are being implemented, each action needs to be assigned a supervisor. The role of this supervisor is to assist and support the people involved and monitor and communicate the progress to other participants. Regular meetings with the research participants should still occur at this stage so that the participants can report on their tasks and make any necessary changes and review the overall plan (Stringer, 2004).

Action research is powerful because of “its ability to allow researchers to tentatively state the problem, then refine and reframe the study by continuing iterations of the Look–Think–Act research cycle” (Stringer, 2004, p. 46). This means that the research can change as needed to meet the needs of the individual participants involved. It also allows the researcher to continue using these cycles until the problem or issue is completely solved. According to Johnson and Christensen (2000), “Action Research is a cyclical process because problems are rarely solved through one research study” (p. 7).

Outcomes of the Study

Context of the Study

Blacksmith Primary is a double-stream school located in Hurstenville, Western Australia. It employs teachers with varying degrees of experience and understanding of the Curriculum Framework document. A new principal was appointed in Term 2 this year, so many changes are beginning to occur throughout the school.

This school has a strong community base with good relationships among the teachers, parents, and students of the school. The parents openly volunteer their assistance in all aspects of the school and often help out in many classrooms on a regular basis, and parents are always welcomed into the school environment.

Over the past 2 years at Blacksmith Primary, there have been many changes implemented into the teaching of the new mathematics curriculum. During this time, the mathematics curriculum team has been investigating and identifying the key points and strategies needed to implement the new curriculum into the classrooms. This information has been taught to the classroom teachers through regular inservicing and collaborative learning sessions held during school staff meetings.

After a year of teachers’ inservicing on the new curriculum, the mathematics team became interested in seeing how the classroom teachers, students, and parents were experiencing the new curriculum and how they felt it was working in each individual classroom. This came about after listening to many teachers talking to colleagues in the staff room. One teacher made the comment that “there is not enough time to fit the entire new mathematics curriculum into the school year.” Another teacher said, “It is great how you can now integrate your math lessons into the themes that you are teaching.” The mathematics team decided to start their investigation with the junior primary section of the school.

Student Experiences

Most of the students in the junior primary grades expressed a positive attitude to math in their classroom. Only one little boy had some concerns: “I don’t always like math as sometimes it is too hard.” All the students responded with answers that stated they loved their teachers and were always able to gain assistance and help from their teachers when they required it.

During the individual interviews, each student gave a grand tour of his or her classroom, which they seemed to enjoy. They showed their workbooks, textbooks, the whiteboard ("this is where the teacher writes lots of sums," one student said), mathematics resources, and work hanging up around the room.

Most of the students did not make any comments about the textbook, but one girl said, "We don't use this book very much, I don't know why we even have it." When the students were showing the activities completed in their workbooks—most work was on worksheets that had been stuck into their book—one student said in a moaning voice, "We do lots of these worksheets, and they are so boring and easy. I complete them really quickly."

When the students came to the point in their tour that demonstrated the mathematics resources in their classrooms, most of the students started to play with the equipment. They displayed some of the things they liked to do with it. All the students' responses were positive, and they expressed enjoyment with using the equipment, but they said they wished they could use it more, as "it is great fun playing with it, with my friends."

During the first focus group meeting, the students drew pictures of their favorite math lesson or activity that they really liked. All the pictures drawn by the students involved using concrete material and working collaboratively with their friends. One girl drew herself and her friend playing on the computer, another drew herself playing with a group of children with the MAB blocks, and a boy drew himself and his friend measuring objects in the classroom.

At the second focus group meeting, the children created a poster with pictures of their likes and dislikes of mathematics. On the likes side, the children drew pictures of themselves playing games, using the mathematics equipment, using a calculator, working with their friends, and working on the computer. On the dislikes side, the children drew pictures of themselves sitting at their desks, the whiteboard, the mathematics textbook, and a math worksheet. When students were asked why they disliked these things, they said, "They're boring and no fun because we can't play or talk to our friends."

Overall most students had a positive attitude to math but would like to see some changes so they can enjoy math more by regularly using concrete materials and learning collaboratively with their friends rather than working individually at their desks to complete worksheets or sums from the whiteboard.

Teacher Experiences

The teachers' responses all showed enthusiasm and enjoyment regarding teaching mathematics. All the teachers had made some changes to the strategies and techniques they were using, but they still felt like they "have a lot more to learn." The teachers made many comments about their strong feelings about the use of textbooks, the mathematics resources, the children's attitudes, the need for continual inservicing, and time to share great ideas with their colleagues.

The teachers had both negative and positive responses to the use of the textbook. Some teachers liked "the textbook, as it makes for easy programming, and there is not much preparation for math lessons." However, the opinion of most teachers was that the textbooks were "repetitive and boring, and they don't allow for real-life problem solving." One teacher even stated, "The textbook is stopping me from completing creative and integrated lessons, and I hope we don't have to use them next year."

According to all the junior primary teachers, there is a real concern with the mathematics resources in the school. All the teachers stressed the importance of using math equipment, "as it enhances the children's learning during a math lesson." However, all the teachers' responses stated that integrating math equipment into their lessons was difficult, as "the school is really lacking in resources" and "the resources are stored all over the school and you spend half your day trying to find them, and teachers don't have time for that." All the teachers would like to see more resources purchased. Some teachers felt that "more teacher reference books which show how to teach real-life problem-solving skills to the students need to be purchased." Other teachers believed that "having a collection of websites that both the teachers and students could use would be very beneficial."

All the teachers enjoyed seeing students' enthusiasm for math lessons. Every teacher gave an example of a successful math lesson that he or she felt students enjoyed and with which he or she believed they had real success. One teacher explained, "The children cheer every time I ask them to collect a calculator from the shelf." Another teacher explained how her class loved playing the Buzz game and asked if they could play it every day. All the teachers agreed that most math lessons could be "fun and enjoyable if they offered variety, interaction, and the use of resources and equipment."

All the teachers felt that they still required further inservicing with the mathematics curriculum. Many teachers felt that problem-solving skills and the Working Mathematically outcomes were two strong areas of concern. One teacher said, "I find it very difficult to assess the children in the Working Mathematically area as the pointers are not clear to me." Some teachers also stated that it would "be nice to take the time out to meet informally with other teachers and discuss different matters that arise in our classrooms or share successful math lessons with others."

Parent Experiences

All the parents expressed very strong and positive feelings toward the teachers at this school, and they congratulated them on the wonderful job they do. The parents believed that the teachers were "dedicated and enthusiastic teachers who showed love and kindness to all children in their classes." The parents felt the teachers explained new topics to the children clearly and concisely, and this was reflected in the children being "able to complete their math homework independently, which is great for us."

The parents were very appreciative of the teachers for keeping them informed about their children's progress. One parent said, "It is great the way we receive feedback every term as you can always see how your children are doing." Another said, "I would like to see the school have parent–teacher interviews at the end of Term 1 so we can see early on if our children are having any problems." The parents also found teachers very approachable, and they liked how teachers gave up their time whenever a parent requested it to discuss any concerns or questions they had regarding their children. One parent explained, "I have never had a teacher tell me they were too busy to see me; they always saw me that afternoon or the very next day."

All the parents' school experiences were very different from what their children are experiencing today. One parent stated, "It is very different from when I went to school; we didn't play games or use equipment. The teacher just wrote on the blackboard and we copied it down." Another parent said, "All I remember is the constant math tests every Friday." The parents expressed concerns about their understanding of the teaching and assessing techniques being used in the classroom today. One parent said, "When the children bring home their portfolios there are all these tables on their work with ticks all over it. I don't read any of the writing, because I don't understand it. I just look at the marks to make sure that they are satisfactory or above." One parent suggested "holding information sessions to inform parents about the new teaching and assessing techniques."

Parent involvement and inclusion during math lessons in the classrooms was a strong point made by many of the parents. One parent believed "the children would learn better if there were more adults in the room," and another said, "More group work could be completed and the children could be grouped in ability like with reading." One parent expressed strongly that "having parents in the room is a great idea, but there has to be some time for the teacher to teach these children independently. Children also need breaks from their parents and time to spend with just their peers."

Students' Results From Standardized Tests

During one of the teacher focus group meetings, the teachers decided to review how students were performing in the mathematics area. The teachers felt that this would give an extra perspective to the investigation. The students completed the standardized tests during Term 4 every year. The results from these tests show each child's strengths and weaknesses in the different mathematical strands. They also give individual class profiles that show the class's strengths and areas of concern. From the results, the teachers discovered that, since the last year, the students had really improved in the number and space strands. The Working Mathematically strand had not changed in most of the classes over the past 2 years, and in one class the results were very low.

Literature Study on Working Mathematically

Because there was a strong focus coming through from the participants' responses about needing to implement and come to a better understanding of problem-solving skills and the Working Mathematically outcomes, the teacher focus group decided to investigate what the literature had to say about these ideas. All the literature researched discusses the idea that the "process of Working Mathematically is learning to work like a mathematician." This involves providing the children with problems to which they don't know the answers, and they have to play around and use a variety of strategies to solve them.

The teacher focus group also discovered a variety of schools around Australia that have changed their teaching styles and approaches to teaching mathematics to incorporate this new concept of working mathematically. The teacher focus group contacted these schools for advice and information to assist them in implementing new ideas into the Blacksmith Primary School community as part of the Action Agenda for 2005.

Action Agenda

After the three focus groups presented their group reports to each other, parents and teachers gathered together to form a new focus group. This larger group reviewed all the data collected in the group reports, the results from the standardized testing, and the information from the literature study. They used this information to identify the issues of concern and suggested solutions to accomplish the group's desired outcomes.

The group prioritized the issues and the areas of concern into the following categories: the school mathematical resources, the use of mathematics textbooks, parent involvement in the classrooms, teacher collaborative learning meetings, and inservicing teachers on using real-life problem-solving techniques in their classrooms and gaining a better understanding of the Working Mathematically outcomes. The group decided that with Term 4 being such a short one, only some of the issues would be able to be addressed in this term and some would have to wait until Term 1, 2005.

Term 4, 2004

The teachers and parents felt that the school mathematical resources and the use of mathematics textbooks in the school required priority in Term 4. Throughout the reports, there was a strong emphasis on the importance of using resources and equipment in the teaching of the new mathematics curriculum. The school mathematical resources needed attention both with the reviewing of equipment in the school and with the purchasing of new equipment and teacher reference books. The teachers and students would also like to see the Internet being used more as a tool for teachers to gain ideas about teaching mathematics and for students to improve their mathematical skills.

To achieve these results the teacher and parent groups suggested the following action plan:

- Complete a stocktaking of all the mathematics equipment in the school.
- Discuss with the principal and the P&F Committee about including funds in next year's budget to purchase new mathematical resources and equipment next year.
- Contact mathematical sales consultants for advice and samples of new resources and materials available to be purchased.
- Create a property box on the school webpage for great mathematical webpages to be included for easy access for all members of the school community.

Regarding the use of mathematics textbooks for next year, a meeting has been scheduled for November 15, 2004. At this meeting, the principal and the junior primary teachers will discuss the positives and the negatives of using the textbooks and will then come to a decision about the approach for next year.

Term 1, 2005

In Term 1, 2005, teachers will provide parents with information and exploration sessions. These sessions will help parents come to a clearer understanding of the teaching and assessing of mathematics today. At these sessions, parents will be given the opportunity to experience some hands-on problem-solving math lessons as well as gain greater understanding of the use of outcomes to teach and assess students.

As all the participants expressed the belief that math lessons should be fun, a small committee of teachers, parents, and students will be established to create fun math sessions in which all junior primary students can participate. The aim of these sessions is to expose children to activities where they can work collaboratively to solve real-life problems and to include parents in the classroom activities as requested.

Many teachers believed that they could learn a great deal from each other by just sitting and communicating together. This belief encouraged teachers to look into having regular collaborative learning meetings for the junior primary teachers. At these meetings teachers would gather together to gain advice and ideas from their colleagues as well as share successful math lessons.

As most of the teachers still feel they lack expertise in the teaching of the new mathematics curriculum, a proposal will be put forward to the administration team of the school for a math consultant to come and inservice the teachers as part of the professional development plan for 2005. The information gathered from the literature study by the teacher focus group will assist in this area. The math consultant will inform teachers of new strategies and techniques they will be able to use for teaching real-life problem-solving skills and the Working Mathematically outcomes to the students. The mathematics curriculum team would also investigate the purchasing of new teacher reference books with problem-solving and Working Mathematically teaching ideas.

Conclusion

I received the approval for the research project from the principal on August 24, 2004, and I presented the results to the principal and the teaching staff on Monday, November 22, 2004. The report was presented in the form of a big book that told the story of how the project was completed, the participants' experiences, and the actions that needed to be implemented. Even though the project was completed, there were still some areas of the action plan that will continue to be implemented this term and during Term 1, 2005. Now that I have completed a successful project, I feel more confident about completing action research projects in the future.

MARGINALIZED PEOPLE PRIVILEGING VOICE THROUGH THEIR OWN NARRATIVES

Rosalind Beadle

Introduction: The Power and Authority of Insider Accounts

This narrative focuses on the activities I facilitated with a group of Aboriginal women in a remote community in the western desert regions of Western Australia from 2009 to 2014. An impoverished community, largely neglected by government programs and services, became the site of a wide-ranging program of activities, driven by a group of local Aboriginal women, that demonstrated the unique potential lying largely dormant in the people who lived there.

The key issue evolving from this project focused on the nature of the *work* in which the women became engaged, since common perceptions in government agencies and the Australian community-at-large were that Aboriginal people in remote communities were lazy and uncaring welfare recipients, incapable or unwilling to engage in regular employment of any kind. More discerning views by experienced field workers and researchers indicated that many Aboriginal people would welcome regular work, but that family responsibilities and community cultural obligations prevented arrangements normally incorporated into mainstream employment.

A School Breakfast program that emerged from concerns felt by a group of Aboriginal people for the education of their children heralded the development of a wide range of activities that not only benefited the community in many ways but provided the context for extended work opportunities for the women involved. A key feature of these activities was the desire of the women to produce stories of their activities that not only provided community and external audiences with a true picture of the employment potential for Aboriginal people but also extended the capacities and self-confidence of the women.

The Warburton Breakfast Program: An Empowering Context

The Warburton Breakfast Program has been running for many years, providing a healthy breakfast for children prior to the start of the school day. It commenced as a community initiative to improve school attendance and engaged the services of many local women. Starting with four grandmothers, their skills have trickled down through the generations so that women from the ages of 18 to 55 work in the program. Although the women are still fondly known around town as the "Breakfast Minyma (women)," the much broader agenda of their activities now fit under the self-named title *Milyirrtjarra Kuurl Mirrka Palyalpayi Program* (Making Good Food at Warburton School).

From a relatively simple breakfast program, the women rapidly expanded their activities to include a catering service to the school and many of the agencies operating in the community. These commenced with a request from the school principal for them to cater for an interschool sports carnival at Warburton in 2009, which required cooking breakfast, lunch, and dinner for 280 people over 3 days. This was achieved successfully and took great pressure off the teachers, all of whom were non-Indigenous visitors to the community, who had previously carried this responsibility. Other jobs started rolling in, including breakfast for a large cultural camp for a week, catering services for various organizational meetings and training workshops, and for special school events.

Many of the cooking activities were undertaken, with permission from the principal, in the school home economics room, which led to important and positive educational outcomes. A now well-documented solution to ongoing problems in this type of school was to involve family members in school activities. This allowed teachers to gain an insight into their students' lives, leading to changes in the curriculum to make it more relevant, and to provide children with a better understanding of the link between community life and education.

Over time, the Breakfast Minyma became a reference group for teachers and the principal, assisting them to deal with many school and community issues. The Minyma became actively involved in the daily attendance run, and since they were present on the school grounds for most of the day, they could assist with disciplinary issues. One of the Breakfast Minyma commenced work as an Aboriginal Educational Officer in the high school classroom, which resulted in improved attendance of high school girls.

In mid-2010, the Home and Community Care (HACC) coordinator working for Ngaanyatjarra Health Service spoke with the Breakfast Minyma about the possibility of providing meals to elderly people in the community. The meals were being provided by the local store and the recipients had reported that they were insubstantial and, according to the coordinator, quite expensive. The Minyma commenced by providing a weekly healthy meal that included stews, curries, pastas, and bakes, complemented with desserts of rice cream, custard, and fruit.

Each week the HACC coordinator would pick up the meals and undertake the daily deliveries. During her annual leave, however, this job was left to the Minyma who would prepare and deliver the daily meals with one of the support staff acting as the driver. Some of the Minyma were able to fulfill driving license requirements so it then became possible for them to deliver meals, independent of any support staff. Further activities emerged from the desire of the Breakfast Minyma to extend their responsibilities so that, from their perspective, they were able to contribute significantly to the well-being of their families and the community.

Giving Voice: Representing Their Own Stories

As the Minyma's activities became increasingly established, so too did their desire to tell stories about what they were doing. In addition to their regular conversations and reflections, formal opportunities to disseminate stories about their activities began to emerge following presentations they gave in a national video conference and at a child health research center in the city. Hand-drawn charts depicting their activities enabled the Minyma, in a simple way, to depict their activities to the children and other visitors who started to appear on a regular basis as their reputation spread.

The project for the initiation, compilation, and production of a storybook about School Breakfast emerged from a discussion between the Minyma after they had finished cleaning up for the morning. Over a cup of tea, the Minyma chatted about the morning events and their subsequent plans for the day. I listened carefully. The chatter fluctuated between Ngaanyatjarra and English, no doubt for my benefit as I was listening carefully to their conversation. Susan, one of the four "original" grandmothers, looked in my direction and stated, as if providing me with a summarized conclusion of their lengthy conversation, Tjarwina,4 we should make a little storybook that the *tjitji* (kids) can look at and learn (teach) them about our work, that they can read about school breakfast.

4. The Ngaanyatjarra name I was given early in my time in Warburton due to the similarity of my name with someone who had recently passed away.

This conversation initiated an expansion of Minyma's role into developing and publishing local resources for the learning of the school children.

The production of the book emerged as a collaborative project between the older and younger women. With my assistance and support, they developed and implemented a process for compiling a book. They first took a series of photos of different aspects of school breakfast and then identified the photos they wanted to use to tell the story. Using the iBook computer program, they chose a book template, allocated the photos and captions to each page, and applied colorful fonts and background colors to stimulate and interest the children. The school principal suggested the Minyma include some of the first words children need when learning to read English and provided the Minyma with a word list from the curriculum. The Minyma perceived the books would not only be an engaging educational resource by including names and pictures of the children and their family members but also portray their ongoing work.

The production of the *Breakfast Story Book* enhanced the Minyma's composition, writing, computer, and text production skills and drew on each other's strengths. For example, those with photography and computer skills guided those aspects of the project, and those with confidence writing English supported others less skilled. Gradually, I observed the Minyma worker role expand to encompass the production of educational resources for their children. Further, this functioned as an effective method of explaining their valued, productive worker role to children.

The *Breakfast Story Book* proved highly popular, with a wide readership in the community and in schools across the region, eventually being published in a form that was sold through a national childcare agency. The book was part of simpler developments that enabled the Minyma to use existing skills to write cue cards that assisted their presentations, to construct charts that complemented those presentations, and eventually to provide the basis for multimedia formats that took the form of storybooks, posters, DVDs, and PowerPoint presentations. Over time, these were delivered to a range of audiences in school and classroom presentations and other remote Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences in both the city and regional centers at conferences, institutions, and government agencies. Their stories revealed their vibrant engagement characterized by strong participation and motivation and passionate identity as workers contributing to their community. The women's presentations incorporated two significant themes: first, the positive impact of their activities on the well-being of their families and community; and second, the benefits they experienced in their role as workers: the importance they attributed to *doing* work and *being* workers.

Extending the Reach of Their Stories

Drawing on their new skills, previous experience, and motivation to showcase their worker role, the Minyma initiated other means to promote and encourage their work. To do this, they designed materials that promoted themselves as productive workers, again further extending their skills and the scope of their role. They hoped to encourage others to follow in their footsteps. An example was a series of short documentary-style DVDs about various elements of their work that the Minyma saw as having potential to reach further afield:

Yuwa (yes), we want to make a little movie about the work you ladies do, not just breakfast but all the things like HACC, Kungka Nights, Work camp, you know. You know, we want stories on NITV [National Indigenous Television]

> from Ranges, not just all them other places. We want to tell the story of the Breakfast Minyma so other people can learn about the program, other people all over the communities. It can teach them about what we all do in Ranges. It can show this Family Place and everything. (Breakfast Minyma, 2012)

In addition, the Minyma designed, produced, and displayed both amateur and professional posters made of collages of photos from their activities at the school, Family Place, and on notice boards throughout the community. The development and production of these promotional materials prompted self-reflection and contributed significantly to building their self-esteem and confidence. To a certain extent, it also appeared that the collaborative reflection, positive collective representation, and joint celebration of their activities went some way toward enabling them to overcome some of the challenges that they faced in their work. As the Minyma were choosing the photos for their posters, the room was always full of boisterous laughter and storytelling. The photos sparked memories of amusing moments that were retold in detail. Reflection on the still images also led to suggestions that the women modify certain activities. These collaborative reflections stimulated thinking about how the program should evolve, how they were a source of inspiration and encouragement, and a reminder of all the things they had achieved together.

The Minyma recognized that these representations were a way of reminding the kids of the positive experiences their work provided:

> It's good that we have all them photos up in the Family Place so we can have a look at how it was when it started. . . . The pictures [on the posters] is showing them ladies, you know they were working. It's to show everybody you know round the community or must be city, town, show them what we've been doing.
>
> It's also good to have those posters for the parents [Breakfast Minyma} and kids to look at. They can have like little memories you know, think back. They can have a look and say, "oh yes, I was doing that, putting *nyapa* (them), fruits in the bowl with weetbix, putting honey on the weetbix, sitting down at the table good way and behave having breakfast." (Breakfast Minyma, 2012)

Empowering People Through Multimedia Narrative Accounts

The power and efficacy of people's own stories has been recognized for some years with many textual accounts now found in books, journals, and other print media. As important as they are, textual accounts are somewhat limited in the extent to which they provide readers with a truly empathetic understanding of the events described. This paper provides evidence of the possibility of extending the breadth and extent of accounts of peoples lived experience, even in the situation of very limited resources. Visual materials, especially when produced in video form, extend the possibilities of empowering people by given them greater access to audiences outside of their own domain and, in the process, providing a rich body of knowledge for those responsible for formulating and delivering services to cultural groups outside of their own experience.

[Description](#)

Descriptions of Images and Figures

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On the top left of the image is a potato-like shape with six legs that look like a mushroom. On the potato-like shape is a pattern that looks like a turtle's shell. Next to it is the following text:

"Milyirrtjarra Kuurl Mirrka Palyalpayi

Making Good Food at Warburton School"

On the bottom right of the title is a photo labeled "Warburton Ranges Community, Ngaanyatjarra Lands." It shows a vast piece of land with numerous camps. In the inset is a map showing a western part of Australia. On the left of this photograph is the following text:

"Milyirrtjarra Kuurl Mirrka Palyalpayi program grew out of discussions between Warburton School principal and members of the Ngaanyatjarra (regional) and Warburton (local) Councils at the end of 2008. Seeking to support the school to improve the education of children, council members nominated a group of four grandmothers to provide breakfast that would give the kids a healthy start to their day and encourage them to come to school.

Since it started over 30 women from different generations have been involved and it's no longer just about making breakfast. The "Breakfast Women" now cater a range of events in the community, are producing literature resources for the kids and up skilling other women in the Ngaanyatjarra lands."

On the bottom right left of the above text is a photo showing differently aged, happy Ngaanyatjarra children eating at a table and posing for the photo.

Below that photo are the following three photographs:

> The photo on the left is labeled "Catering for School Theme Day." It shows women posing for the camera with food in a kitchen.
>
> The photo in the center is labeled "Cooking for the kids at Desert Dust-Up Sports Carnival." It shows a group of men and women in a uniform posing for the camera.
>
> The photo on the right is labeled "Serving food at School Open Day." It shows a group of men and women in a uniform serving food to children.

Below the above photos are the following pieces of information:

> On the left is a piece of information titled "HACC meals." It has a photo of a woman packing food boxes on its right. The surrounding text reads:
> "In mid-2010 the women took on the task of doing Home and Community Care (HACC) meals for elderly people in Warburton. Everyday they prepare and deliver a healthy meal to their elderly family members, a job that used to be shared between the store and health staff. They are learning to cook many new things and taking the recipe home to their families."
> Below this information is a testimonial authored by Lama Porter, Breakfast Program 2010, which reads:
> "I like the breakfast program because it keeps me from staying at home and keep me busy. It makes life easier for me and my children. My children are happy, they see me go to work. Kids see us, what we do and they learn to do the right thing"
> On the right of the testimonial are two photos that show two children holding sticks of food and a child sitting at a table with food in a hand and food on the table. Next to those two photos is a Ngaanyatjarra painting on whose right is a photo that shows women and children posing with the food in their hands. Above this photo is a testimonial authored by Cherelle Robertson, Breakfast program 2010 that reads:
> "Breakfast is good because it helps the kids to school and they go straight to class. They like the weetbix, toast and milo. Some kids, they don't have breakfast in their homes so they come to school for breakfast"
>
> In the center is a piece of information titled "Our Book." It has a photo of an open book on its right. The surrounding text reads:
> "We have recently launched the first of a series of children's storybooks about our activities. *The Breakfast Story Book* is about what happens at the Warburton Ranges School every morning when the kids come in for breakfast. We will read it to kids in their classes and at home." Below this text is a photo of women standing with trays full of toasts in their hands and toasters on a table
>
> On the right is a piece of information titled "The Family Place." It has Ngaanyatjarra painting on its right. The surrounding text reads:
> "The Breakfast Women undertake their activities in the school home economics room. However, soon they will be moving into their own building, the Family Place, which has recently been established on the school grounds. They are looking forward to expanding their activities in their new center; developing a website, undertaking accredited training, growing a garden and working with the teachers to undertake cultural activities with the kids.

School Community Partnerships
The women have established themselves as a strong part of the school environment and support the principal and teachers on continuing to develop good relationships between the school and the community."
Below this text is a photo of women preparing food.

On the bottom left of the image is the following text:

"Thank you to everyone who has supported our program including:

WA Health Promoting Schools Associaton, Ngaanyatjarra Council, Department of Education, FoodBank WA, Warburton Community Office, Department of Child Protection, FaHCSIA, the Community Development Foundation, Lotterywest, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, Curtin University, Learning Centre Link, Skillhire and Max Employment."

On the bottom right of the image is the following text:

"For more information please contact us:

warburtonbreakfast@hotmail.com

PMB 71

Warburton Community

Kalgoorlie, 6431 WA

Ph: 0409 535 880"

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