

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ACTION RESEARCH

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Abstract: *This article presents a brief history of the action research, starting with Kurt Lewin's contribution (1946). Right from the start, the action research was conceived as a methodological alternative to the mainstream science, but it is still little used, including in Romania.*

Keywords: *action research, methodology, positivism.*

1. KURT LEWIN'S CONTRIBUTION

The action research began to assert a distinct type of research in the social and human sciences after 1946, following Kurt Lewin's publication of his article: *Action research and minority problems*. The American (of German origin) psycho-sociologist Kurt Lewin is considered the „father” of the action research (especially since he is considered to have created the term, although John Collier used it in the same way a year before Lewin) and the delimitation of the specificity of this type of research is one of his major contributions to the development of psycho-sociology. Also, Jacob Levi Moreno's contribution to structure this type of research is noticed in most works devoted to the history of the action research.

A number of authors (Kock et.al., 1997; Baskerville, 1999 etc.) show that in parallel with Kurt Lewin's work at the University of Michigan, Research Center for Group Dynamics, similar research was developed (independently) at the *Tavistock Institute of Human Relations* in London on disorders being suffering from by the soldiers who fought in the Second World War. Also, James McKernan (1991, 8-9) identifies a number of similar research (Collier, 1945, Lippitt and Radke, 1946) immediately after the period when research was carried out by Lewin or by the Group from Tavistock and links the

emergence of the new type of research to the „Science in education” movement, active in the United States during the period between the XIX and XX centuries, as well as to a series of re-conceptualization of education within the same cultural space, especially those of John Dewey (e.g. description of problem solving). Kurt Lewin's contribution is regarded as fundamental as he is the first author who conducted a systematic methodological reflection on the specificity and way of realization of the action research.

The idea of action research was based in the 40's by Kurt Lewin, in an attempt to connect social theory and practice. Lewin considered at the time that there was neither a relationship between social theory and social action, nor collaboration between scientists and practitioners, who should use the scientific results in their work. While scientists developed the theory without taking into consideration its applicability, practitioners in the social field engaged mostly in actions without being informed, so no one could talk about consistent results in any of the two „worlds”: the abstract, the scientists' one, and the real one, of those who build the intervention strategies and work towards the social change. Bringing together these two worlds and the combination of the research with the action would result, in Lewin's conception, in the production of information and solutions that would result in informed

actions, improved behaviors, and strategies of encouraging social change.

Lewin (1951) brought the cycle of action research approach, designed as a series of activities: identification of an initial „idea”, fact-finding, planning, action, evaluation, developing a better plan and implementing it, then followed by the resumption of these activities to further understanding of the situation and formulating a theory as close as possible to the actual situation [13].

Besides the article from 1946, Kurt Lewin developed the concept of „action research” in two other articles, which appeared in 1947. Although he developed the first theoretical approach and described for the first time the cycle of action research, Kurt Lewin has failed (due to his premature death, he was only 57 years old) to further articulate his ideas on this type of empirical research.

At sixty years after the publication of the article *Action research and minority problems*, David Bargal [3] has assumed the task of formulating the principles of the action research, by extracting them from Kurt Lewin’s three articles:

1) Action research combines the systematic study - often experimental – of some social problems with the solving efforts. In contrast to the traditional scientific model, where the researcher’s main task was that of understanding the problem, in the action research one studies the problem and offers opportunities to intervene to solve it. The implementation of this principle requires a very good knowledge of the theories on the studied social problem, starting from the dictum „There isn’t a more practical thing than a good theory” (Lewin, 1943/1951, 169).

2) The action research includes a data collection spiral setting the purpose for action to achieve results and assessment of intervention. Lewin designs the action research as a process of problem solving that takes place in a constantly changing environment. Therefore, in principle, there isn’t an end of the intervention as problems to be solved arise permanently. For each process of solving a problem, the following stages are taken: data collection to determine the purpose of the

intervention; the achievement of the goals (through the intervention of the individual groups, organizations or communities) and the evaluation of the completed intervention.

3) The action research requires feedback from all parties involved in achieving it. The feedback can show deviations from the aim of the intervention (alterations in the original plan) and may exhibit discontinuities in the process of the intervention that are thus corrected in real time. This principle emphasizes the active role of all parties involved in the research project, including the customers (who are usually excluded, not having access to the information available to those carrying out the research).

4) The action research implies continuous cooperation between researchers and practitioners. If within the framework of the conventional scientific research model the investigator has exclusive control (being the only one familiar with the research hypothesis, the selection of participants, etc.), within the action-research framework the scientist and the other people who carry out the research are equal partners in making decisions. This cooperation is based on the recognition that the participants should be responsible for making decisions affecting their existence and they need to understand the reasons for the intervention. Because they are the researcher’s equal partners in the project of intervention and know the reasons and decisions that were taken up, the participants can maintain their motivation at a high level.

5) The small group plays a central role in making decisions and changing individuals. For Kurt Lewin the small group is the most important vehicle for making decisions democratically, and the change of individuals through it goes through three phases: a) defrosting (reduction of forces that are keeping pressure on the current situation, by presenting a problem or a challenging event, with the aim to determine the organization’s members to recognize the need for change and seek new solutions), b) the change itself (changing group members’ behavior by developing new behaviors, values and attitudes), c) freezing (through the establishment of new procedures

and systems to support and maintain the change made).

6) The action research takes into account the values, goals and aspirations for the power of the parties involved. Since each person involved in the action research has its own set of priorities and values, the only way to ensure the success of the research is to approach the occurring conflicts in an open way. Again, one can notice the contrast with the classical manner of approaching the research, where only the person carrying out the research has the power to make decisions and resolve conflicts unilaterally.

7) The action research serves to create knowledge, to formulate the principles of intervention and evaluation. Regarding knowledge, it generates both data collected and processed in the same way as other types of research and „actionable knowledge” (important both for the intervention and for improving, in time, the group’s, organization’s or community’s functioning). Also, the group can use the measuring instruments/tools used in the action research long after the intervention, as assessment tools.

8) In the action-research one focuses on recruitment, training, development and support of the change agents – the trainers. Since action research aims to social change, these investments in trainers (the change agents) may be considered essential, since they are the principal means of achieving the wanted social change: “In Lewin's definition, the action research is portrayed as a triangle: the training is the first leg and the other two are research and intervention. In contrast to the usual research, the trainer’s role is beyond data collection and management of the evaluation process. The action research trainer needs a thorough understanding of the participants who take part in the intervention and should have the appropriate means to achieve the goals of the research. For this reason, the appropriate trainers’ selection is essential, as well as providing them guidance and support during the intervention” [3].

Another way of interpretation of Kurt Lewin's contribution to the substantiation of the action research is the identification of the

essential aspects of the paradigm of this type of research. For W.J. Allen [1] Lewin’s fundamental presumption is that effective social change depends on the engagement and understanding of those involved in the process of change. Richard Baskerville [4] identified two such assumptions: a) that reductionism is not effective in addressing complex social systems, b) that action brings their understanding. For Bob Dick [7] the essence of the action research is given by the simultaneous presence of the following characteristics: it serves both research and action, knowledge is produced in a cyclical manner, and the presence of a critical reflexivity component within each cycle of research.

2. CURRENT TRENDS IN ACTION RESEARCH

In relation to the effervescence recorded in the mid-twentieth century, during which several authors can be credited with remarkable contributions to defining the action research, further development of this distinct type of research has been slow [4]. Bob Dick [8] characterizes this trend as being caused by a „strange neglect” of this type of research, especially when this approach succeeds in drawing near the results of the research to the action desired by the practitioners from different social fields. As for us, we systematized the factors that have slowed down the affirmation of the new paradigm (described disparately in the literature) in the form of the following categories:

a) The existence of the ongoing controversy on the interpretation of Kurt Lewin's contribution to the delineation of the action research as a distinct type of research. As the „father” of this paradigm did not finish his work, the detailed interpretations of his contribution (the extraction of principles and basic assumptions) are relatively diverse and numerous. As a result, even the theoretical basis of the new methodological approach seems a shaky one, despite the fact that the American psycho-sociologist was its firm supporter: “His energy devoted to the action

research during the last years of his life and his efforts in establishing the Center for Group Dynamics shows a real passion for the new paradigm. In his memoirs about his father Miriam Lewin (1992) writes: „I think action research was a part of his response to the tragedy caused by the death of his mother (Lewin's mother and his aunt were killed by the Nazis - David Barge). The memory of violent anti-Semitism and discrimination in Germany, delicately expressed in his letter to Köhler (1933/1987), was clearly the impetus for his efforts to ease tension and discrimination to which minorities were subject to in the United States” [3].

b) „Opposition” with positivism. Nereu F. Kock, Robert J. McQueen and John L. Scott (1997) note that, since its beginnings the action research was „evangelized” by its practitioners and intensely criticized by those who defended the positivist approach. Because the practitioners of the new type of research presented it as a methodological alternative designed to overcome the limitations of the positivism, the impression that action research and positivism are guidelines for research that were exclusive was created. The created opposition is unrealistic at present, since positivism is an epistemology that guides the dominant power in science (the mainstream science) and the action research, in relation to positivism, can not be more than one particular way of addressing the research (emerging as the need for intervention to solve a social problem, which is accompanied by a careful theoretical study and the analysis of results).

Starting from this observation, there are attempts to „reconcile”, based on the description of the classic studies of action-research (including Kurt Lewin's) in positivist terms as a particular form of the field experiment, conducted with little control of the variables [11]. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the „father” of the action research remained in history as one of the psycho-sociologist with the most remarkable experimental results and did not make a demarcation between it and positivism.

Several authors suggest that the declared opposition could become a genuine one, by

developing an epistemology based on the paradigm of the action research, which show some real differences from the mainstream science.

c) The way of financing the social and human sciences during the postwar period, based mainly on public funds, encouraging mainly quantitative research, to the detriment of the quality. Action research, as a type of predominantly qualitative research, was one of the „victims” of this funding mechanism [4]. Perhaps this is the reason why a series of statements minimize the action research, classified as „fans' science” or „the poor's science” [10].

d) Social Activism (sometimes of a radical type) adopted by some followers of the action research was appreciated neither by the positivists, nor by the governments (the principal donors of the research programs). Among the best-known examples in this respect there are the approaches made by Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda in South America. Due to the social activism, the action research was seen as a less desirable type of research and was not financed very well.

e) Attempts to „corrupt” the action research (reinterpreting wrongly Kurt Lewin's essential concepts) derived both from those who practice it (giving up generating theories and testing them, trying only to ensure successful interventions) and from those who try to increase the rigor by experimental designs, bringing a deployment of theory to reality, producing research results largely irrelevant [2]. Because of these attempts, a „distortion” of the action research over the way it was originally conceived took place [10].

f) Strong assertion in a limited number of fields of study (such as school development or health care) and its discreet presence in the most areas. The possible causes of this trend are the affirmation of the experiment as the main method in psycho-sociology and the fact that higher education has a certain tendency to conservatism in terms of teaching and learning the research methodology [4].

The action research is less important among the academic concerns, but, in recent

years, it has become more substantial precisely because of the need to create bridges between theory and practice, because of the need to apply research results in social intervention strategies, being adopted by international organizations as part of the social development programs.

Although in many studies one can identify elements of the action research, they do not always bear that name. Sometimes, the emphasis is placed on the idea of participation, sometimes on action, but the final concern is always the resolution of the social problems. Most applications of this approach are found in areas such as the organizational change, the social policies, the social assistance and the information systems [13].

Due to these restraining factors, the action research has not had a spectacular evolution, except in some clearly defined sectors and scientific communities dedicated to practicing this type of research. Despite the fact that it has more than six decades of existence, the action research can still be considered a paradigm emerging globally [5].

In an article which suggested reviewing the literature on the action research, Bob Dick [9] listed a number of areas of psychosocial intervention for which there are the most publications: community development, health, education and applications in different types of organizations.

The author identified a number of trends in the current literature: an increase in the volume of articles that use the action-research methodology, researchers' increased concern for the community and increased attention to practical details that can obtain the participants' participation and involvement.

3. ACTION RESEARCH IN ROMANIA

As regards Romania, the action research was used very rarely, and in a review of the works appeared in 2004 (Lambriu and Mărginean) such an approach was noted as „among the first examples of the application of the action research in our country”. However, the action research is not a novelty in the Romanian literature: Pantelimon Golu presented Kurt Lewin's contribution, and

Henri H. Stahl described the „centering on *action* as a common platform for all the particular social disciplines”.

This timid practice cannot be explained by the absence of the latest local sources of information, because there are many authors who presented the action research in their work on the methodology of research, community development, or psychosocial intervention. In this regard, we will give three definitions of the action research extracted from volumes published in the last decade:

1) „An attempt to associate the social and human sciences to the action which a power can develop in different sectors of public life (political, educational, administrative, economic). It is a new kind of applied research, a new general methodology of the action issues, a praxeology of administration, difficult to dissociated from a pedagogical intervention” [12].

2) „A process of diagnosing problems, planning and implementing actions to reduce or eliminate the disruption, while monitoring the induced social changes” [6].

3) “It is an iterative process, involving a series of activities, including the diagnosis of social problems, social intervention, the analysis of the results of the intervention, the adjustment of the strategy of the social intervention” [13].

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