

***Action Research***  
*Greg Saville,*  
*Florida State University, January 2000*

**Research** (1) – *n.* careful search or inquiry; endeavor to discover facts by study or investigation; course of critical investigation; (Oxford Dictionary)

**Research** (2) – All honest attempts to study a problem systematically or to add to humanity’s knowledge of a problem may be regarded as research (Modern Dictionary of Sociology)

**Ontology** – metaphysical theory of reality. What is real? What is the essential character of existence? Is there an objective reality “out there” that we can understand? (Funk & Wagnalls Dictionary)

**Epistemology** – the branch of philosophy that investigates the nature, limits, criteria, or validity of human knowledge; a theory of cognition; How do we know what we know? (Funk & Wagnalls Dictionary)

**What is action research?**

Action research is social research carried out by a team that includes an action researcher(s) and members of an organization or community seeking to improve their situation. AR promotes broad participation in the research process and supports action leading directly to a more just or satisfying situation for the stakeholders.

- 1) Social research carried out by a team
- 2) Includes action researcher and members of organization or community
- 3) Seeking to directly improve their situation
- 4) Promotes broad participation in research process

**How is action research done?**

Together the action researcher(s) and the stakeholders participating in the research team define the problems to be examined, co-generate relevant knowledge and hypotheses about them, learn and execute social research techniques, take actions, and interpret the results of actions based on what they have learned.

Action research is based on the belief that all people, professionals and otherwise, accumulate, organize, and use complex knowledge constantly in everyday life. It just often doesn’t get called research. By pooling their knowledge, action research democratizes the relationship between the researcher and local people being “researched”.

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- 2) Co-generate hypotheses and relevant knowledge about problem(s)
- 3) Learn and execute social research techniques
- 4) Take actions
- 5) Interpret results of actions taken based on what they have learned

**What characterizes “good” action research?**

Good action research is characterized by at least seven key elements: responsiveness; participative; triangulation; iterative; double-loop learning; requisite variety; domain formation and problem definition. Each of these elements has a long history in the evolution of the action research approach. They draw from research in general systems theory (GST), cybernetic theory, organizational ecology, the social psychology of Wilfred Bion, research of Kurt Lewin at the National Training Labs, and organizational change research at the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations in London.

### ***1. Responsiveness***

Ever since Schon's book, *The Reflective Practitioner*, the lesson of responsiveness has been a central feature of good action research. This is why it is cyclical in nature. To achieve both action, and research, the activity must be responsive to both the stakeholders in the study, those being studied, and the problem at hand. The intent of action research is the empowerment of those engaged in the social problem being studied, so that they themselves can affect positive change on the situation. This demands that action research be responsive.

### ***2. Participative***

Good action research is democratic, in the sense that researchers and researched participate in the research activity. It requires research questions that are summoned from those who are directly affected by the problem at hand. Because action is a part of the process, participation means that those involved are committed to the activity, and also to the outcomes of the activity. By definition, this means that action research involves extensive group work, and action researcher are often active as group facilitators.

### ***3. Triangulated***

Good action research is empirical, and it is responsive to the evidence collected during the phases of research. This means that multiple sources and means of collecting information should be used, a process generally referred to as triangulation. Different data sources, literature reviews, and other methods can be combined to permit a rigorous investigation.

### ***4. Iterative***

Good action research reflects back on findings as the research proceeds. Action research is cyclical and can be adjusted to the demands of the situation. This often violates the assumptions of applied or basic research, which often demand data be collected to disprove the null hypotheses established in early phases of research design. Action research uses a very different epistemology and does not follow this same pattern. Critique of research results by all those involved in the research, at numerous stages, aims to balance critical reflection of the results on one hand, and flexibility in the direction of the research on the other.

### ***5. Double-loop (deutero) learning***

Emerging from GST and cybernetic theory in the 1950. Later adapted by organizational development theorists and socio-psychologists to explain a means by which people learn-how-to-learn. Rather than simply learning from the results of research, those being researched have themselves learned how to learn for themselves as a product of the research process. For the purposes of action research, this means that the researcher has a commitment beyond gathering data and writing the results of the research for review by peers. It means a commitment to learning, as well as research, as neither of these concepts are considered separate in the ontology of action research.

### ***6. Requisite variety***

From the work of W. Ashby (*Introduction to Cybernetics*), Gregory Bateson (*The Ecology of Mind*) and the work of Argyris and Schon (*Organizational Learning*). It means that in order for any system, organization, neighborhood, or group to learn from experience, or resolve difficult social problems, it is necessary that the system contain the minimum critical specifications of the wider environment (thus to avoid the error of groupthink). This is the concept of the holographic system, where each individual part contains part of the whole. For the purpose of action research it is important that a) research teams are both representative of the larger social system they are researching. It is also important that b) the research is representative of the concerns of all relevant stakeholders. When both these minimum critical specifications are met, the research is said to possess the requisite variety in any social system.

### ***7. Domain formation and problem definition***

Action research must spend time clearly defining the boundaries of the problem being studied. This problem will normally have both specific local concern, as well as a wider, global implication. These provide the social, economic, political, and environmental context of a problem – the domain. The phrase “think globally, act locally” defines this process. Identifying the local and global linkages while co-defining the nature of the problem is called domain definition, and this is typically the earliest phase of the action research process. Search conferences are frequently used for this process.

### ***Requisite variety***

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Groupthink is a problem that arises within groups that become too inward looking and neglect the concerns of the outside world. Closed think-tanks can develop this phenomenon, which becomes a problem when results from discussions get applied to the wider environment, as happened to President Kennedy with the Cuban “Bay of Pigs” military disaster. Not enough outside information was obtained, and the think tank was unable to learn enough information from the rapidly changing situation in order to make decisions to avoid disaster. In a research setting, requisite variety is similar to the randomness and representativeness in survey methods. However, in this case group members, and community concerns, are what is represented in the research team.

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Q: What is the requisite variety that might be necessary to assemble a team to study an emerging problem of neighborhood prostitution?

Q: Who are the stakeholders that are directly affected by such a problem (insiders)

Q: Who are the stakeholders that are indirectly affected by such a problem (outsiders)

Q: Who are the formal organizations or institutions who might be involved in the problem?

Q: Who are the informal organizations or institutions who might be involved in the problem?

## ***Double-loop (deutero) learning***

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As action research is focused on contributing directly to meaningful change, it inherently involves learning by all those involved in the research. It is necessary to distinguish between types of learning; single loop learning and double-loop learning. Single loop learning is when a problem is detected, and it is corrected as it is identified based on experience or training. No inherent change to the person(s) results from the process, except that the person may avoid the problem in future. As long as the environment stays relatively stable, single loop learning will suffice.

When environments become unstable or turbulent, single loop learning will not suffice. Another way of changing is required. This is called double-loop learning. Double loop learning is when a problem is detected, and the person(s) identifies a challenge to the norms, or procedures that underlie ones very mode of operation. This challenges the very “theories in use” by people, and can represent a fundamental epistemological shift - a difficult challenge. This has been termed a “paradigm shift” by Kuhn. It represents the process of “learning how to learn”. The person(s) are encouraged to engage in self-criticism, self-review, and then apply these lessons to change the norms or procedures in how they operate. This was first applied to the Japanese “ringi” – a system of collective decision making where proposals are circulated among a wide group in order to be modified and changed as appropriate until a satisfactory decision emerges. It has evolved into the Quality Circle approach, which has been successful in revolutionizing the quality of modern production systems.

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Q: Do contemporary criminal justice organizations, such as a police department or correctional facility, typically utilize single, or double-loop, learning systems?

Q: Can applied, or evaluation, research encourage a criminal justice organization to employ double-loop learning, which will fundamentally change the way that organization operates? Why, or why not?

## *Domain formation and problem definition*

Due to the principles of requisite variety and double-loop learning, action research must spend time clearly defining the boundaries of the problem being studied. All research must do this, however in action research boundary definition takes on new meaning. A good deal of time is spent in early phases of research on this process, far more than is typical in applied, basic, or evaluation research.

Domain formation refers to two ideas. First, the concept of experts and non-experts in research. In traditional social research, the researcher is generally considered to be expert in the methods of research and the area of study, if not the specific topic being researched. The participants in the research, the “respondents” to surveys for example, are not considered to be the research experts. They are “inside” the problem situation and the researcher is “outside” the problem situation. The participants have the information the researcher is trying to obtain, the knowledge that is to be obtained. In the action research situation, the researcher is not the expert. The researcher shares his/her knowledge in research with the participants, and they share their local knowledge with the researcher. This exchange is a process of learning for both involved, as on going learning is an important part of the research process in action research. In this way both become *co-researchers* of the project.

The second concept in domain formation is the idea of problem definition. Once the “power” that the expert researchers once had in defining the problem hypothesis has been shared with those being researched, the extent and nature of the problem expands quite rapidly. The *co-researchers* of the action research project must define the problem that has arisen. This problem will normally have both specific local concern, as well as a wider, global implication. These provide the social, economic, political, and environmental context of a problem – the *domain*. The environmentalism phrase “think globally, act locally” defines this process. Identifying the local and global linkages while co-defining the nature of the problem is called domain definition, and this is typically the earliest phase of the action research process. The action research methodology called the “search conference” is frequently used for this process.

For example, say the problem being studied involves increasing prostitution in a city neighborhood. This may have a number of specific local issues, such as rising numbers of police complaints, as well as violence against prostitutes. It might have wider implications such as safety of neighborhood children walking to school, and activities often associated with prostitution such as theft and drug problems. Larger issues may include the role of various social agencies in responding to the problems, the lifestyle and victimization of the prostitutes, health issues, and the legalities of prostitution in the community. Defining a problem, neighborhood prostitution, obviously has much wider implications involving many other potential stakeholders. This will affect the research being conducted and the

Q: In the prostitution example above, roughly define a domain for the purposes of an action research project (keeping in mind that normally many more stakeholders would be involved in this process).

Q: How can the problem definition and domain formation steps enhance the ability of action research to act upon real problems in a constructive way?

Q: What ethical purpose does the process of domain formation serve, and what role do you think the action researcher has in the process?