

Is it possible to research without influencing?

In the classical view of research, the ideal researcher is purely objective and has no relation or interaction with the object. Classical scientific methods intend to isolate single questions, pare away contextual influences and minimize potential subjectivity of the researcher. It may be questioned, however, whether such a pure approach is possible in any situation where the ‘object’ is a person (morally a peer) or a number of people; at the very least the researcher needs to be sensitive to her/his potential influence.

Different departure points for Action Research

A German social psychologist, Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) is often credited with ‘inventing’ Action Research. He is quoted as saying that “In order to understand a social system one must change it,” and “No research without action, no action without research”.

Vikegård discerns two major types of Action Research, the ‘northern tradition’ and the ‘southern tradition’.

- The Northern Tradition is here seen as pragmatic and utilitarian, including
 - A consensus view of society
 - Development of working life, strategies for management, leadership and employee participation
 - The ”practitioner” is often seen in a professional role
- The Southern Tradition is seen as ideological and political
 - A conflict/protagonist view of society
 - Development of society and of change processes, including a feministic branch
 - The ”practitioner” can be anyone, from professionals to public, clients, patients, pupils

Hart and Bond (p. 37, 1995) take a different approach to defining Action Research. They describe seven necessary criteria and four types or applications.

	Experimental	Organizational	Professionalizing	Empowering
Is educative				
Deals with individuals as members of social groups				
Is problem focused, context-specific and futureorientated				Conflict
Involves a change intervention		Consensus		
Aims at improvement and involvement				
Involves a cyclic process in which research, action and evaluation are interlinked				
Is founded on a research relationship in which those involved are participants in the change process				

Dual perspective

A general characteristic of action research is the need for the researcher to hold a dual perspective. S/he is at one and the same time an active participant *and* an observer and analyst. This may or may not also be true of the practitioners/subjects, depending on the approach chosen, but is of necessity true of the researcher. There is an analogy to the kind of psychotherapy where the therapist consciously enters into an active peer relationship with the patient/client and simultaneously needs to hold responsibility for the process.

Thus, the practitioner/subject may in principle take full responsibility for *evaluating* the course of events, including formulating research questions and criteria for success; but the researcher always retains overall responsibility for the broader analysis.

Some open questions

It could be claimed that all research concerned with people and their behaviour (and indeed also some other kinds of research) are of necessity “action research” – and would potentially benefit from a recognition of this fact, enabling the impact of the researcher *and* the insights of the practitioner to be included as parameters without jeopardizing scientific quality.

This is however not to propose that such inclusion is easy. There are many open (research?) questions on the topic of ensuring the quality of action research, including questions concerned with

- Communication and dialogue
- Involvement and distance
- Connections and boundaries between ‘facts’, ‘opinions’ and ‘feelings’

Who is doing action research today?

One of the areas most often mentioned in connection with action research is education/schools. In this arena a change process may be initiated by practitioners, who engage researchers to support them.

There seems at times to be some fuzziness between action research and Action Learning. A useful distinction is that Action Learning is something you do for yourself: I learn through action/experience, and through seeing the results of my actions.

Action research, on the other hand, is concerned with learning for the benefit of others. The experience and results must be replicable and transferable (offered, taught) to others not part of the original practitioner population.