

KEYNOTE LECTURE

Evaluating action research

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What is it?

Action research is not easily defined, as it is an approach to research, rather than a specific method. The term is used widely and loosely throughout the scientific and professional literature. However, the following definition broadly captures its meaning.

“Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of those practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out” [1].

Action research can be seen as a rejection of more traditional positivist and interpretative views of science (or a third way) in dealing with theory development within a practice discipline [2]. It is concerned with doing research with and for people, rather than doing research on them [3]. It focuses on working with people to identify problems in practice, implement solutions and to monitor the process and outcomes of change. Most definitions incorporate three important elements: its participatory character; its democratic impulse; and its simultaneous contribution to social science and social change [4].

Participatory character

Participation is fundamental to action research. It is an approach which demands that participants perceive the need to change and are willing to play an active part in the research and the change process. All research requires willing subjects, but the level of commitment required in any action research study goes beyond simply agreeing to answer questions or be observed. It is important that volunteers participating in an action research should feel able to negotiate continually their involvement in a study, and that the researcher agrees with participants an ethical code of practice within which to conduct the research [2].

Democratic impulse

Action research requires participants to be seen as equals, not only with the researcher, but also with each other. The action researcher formatively feeds back findings to parti-

cipants throughout the study for validation and to inform decisions about the next stage of the study. In healthcare settings, this often involves a careful process of negotiation across traditional boundaries (for example, between health and social care professionals or between hospital and community care settings). This requires both excellent interpersonal skills as well as research ability.

Simultaneous contribution to social science and social change

If the purpose of research is to better understand and ultimately improve practice, then action research does this at the same time as generating findings for wider dissemination. With a focus on reflexive methods, the approach not only allows participants to learn for themselves but also empowers them to improve the social contexts in which they work. It is argued that action research findings are more meaningful to practitioners because they more closely reflect reality by responding to events as they naturally occur in the field. Action research is often written up as a case study and it is important to note that generalisation is therefore different to more traditional forms of research [5]. Case studies are a means by which theoretical explanations of phenomena can be generated using analytic induction. Often action research accounts are written up in their rich contextual detail and readers are invited to judge the relevance of the findings to their own practice situation. The truths contained in a successful report are thus assumed by shock of recognition.

Relevance to health service research

Action research has been in existence for over 55 years and has long been used in a variety of disciplines [2]. It is designed specifically to bridge the gap between theory, practice and research. At a time when there is increasing concern that research evidence is not sufficiently influencing practice development [6], action research is gaining credibility in healthcare settings [7]. Action research acknowledges the value of professional judgement in applying scientific evidence in practice. Working closely with practitioners and using reflexive data collection methods, action researchers are better placed to explain the nature of professional

judgement and to elucidate why scientific evidence is not always successfully implemented in practice.

Evaluating action research

The Health Technology Assessment programme has commissioned a systematic review of the literature on action research. The purpose of the review is to examine the role of action research in UK health care settings and to provide guidance for funding agencies, policy makers, ethics committees and researchers for assessing action research proposals and reports. The report has not yet been published but the findings are likely to be contentious. Whilst guidance is clearly needed, the fact that action research arises from a different epistemological background means that it cannot be judged using the same criteria as other research approaches. The problem stems from the fact that 'systematic reviews' often place studies in a hierarchy of evidence in relation to the 'gold standard' randomised controlled trial (RCT) [8] and this is clearly inappropriate for action research, which tends to use more qualitative methods [4]. The quantitative approaches used in the systematic review of experimental research allow for easier and clearer judgements to be made about its generalisation. The generalisation of action research is not empirically based but theoretically constructed and appeals to the reader's tacit knowledge for understanding and acceptance.

Generalisation

Action research is supposed to offer a surrogate experience and invites the reader to underwrite the account by appealing to their tacit knowledge of human situations [1]. The experience of innovation should be accessible to both public and professional judgement. In order that the reader can judge the relevance of action research findings to their own social situation, the study needs to be reported in rich contextual detail and written in an accessible language. This form of generalisation would depend on contextual similarity and is usually referred to as transferability [9] or fittingness [10]. Another form of generalisation, known as analytic induction [11] is based on deviant case analysis and the constant comparative method. The purpose of analytic generalisation is to use single cases to construct and test theories. Rolfe [12] suggests that the concept of analytic generalisation allows action researchers not only to apply findings from one case to other cases in similar contexts, but also to generalise to other contexts and patient groups. He argues that such forms of generalisation can only be undertaken by experienced practitioners who have the professional judgement necessary for theory generation.

Trustworthiness of data

Simons cautions the need for reports to be authentic, detailed and rigorously accurate and impartial [13], in order that the experience of innovation is accessible to both

public and professional judgement. Action research acknowledges subjectivity, and rather than seeking objectivity, instead demonstrates freedom from bias. Thus, confidence in trustworthiness of data can be achieved through triangulation, reflexivity and member checks [14].

Ethical code of practice

There are particular issues and problems in action research which require an ethical code of practice to be negotiated between the action researcher and participants [2]. For instance, there is a limit to informed consent in action research, when the nature of the proposed change is unknown and determined by an emerging reality. Furthermore, change can be threatening and participants, who begin by collaborating, may later change their desire to do so. The action researcher needs to be aware of participants' values, beliefs and power relations and sensitively work between differing agendas. Another ethical dilemma associated with action research is the difficulty of assuring participants of anonymity and confidentiality, when findings are fed back to participants in the field. In such a vulnerable situation, participants need to feel that they have ownership of the data and feel able to control how the findings are more widely disseminated.

Judging success

Finally, the success of action research is not whether change can be positively demonstrated, but more what was learnt from the experience of trying to change practice. Findings should be meaningful and persuasive and set within the wider literature. Often it helps participants of action research to feel more comfortable sharing their experience with others, when they feel the findings have a wider significance.

Conclusion

Action research has much to contribute to health services research. By working with participants both in determining the nature of change and the design of the study, it is argued that the findings are more meaningful to practice. Indeed, the value of small-scale studies, and action research in particular, has been highlighted as a key approach to exploring consumer issues within the NHS, especially in relation to those who are normally disempowered, for example, older people [15].

References

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