

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).

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

Figure 2.1 Characteristics of Qualitative and Quantitative Social Research

	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 study	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

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).

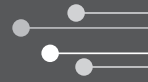
Ways of Knowing/Systems of Knowledge

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

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!

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 research does this not merely by generating knowledge enabling us to understand *about* an issue or problem but also knowledge about *how to* resolve it.

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).

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.

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.
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.

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.

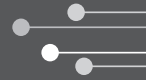
The Social Construction of Programs and Services

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

Huysen (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. Huysen'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, therefore, 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 *demand*s 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).

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).

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

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 Aragon & 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?

Continued

Lit Corner 2.2: The Imperative of Co-research With Indigenous People (Continued)

- 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?

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 **international 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 in **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**.