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Comparative Similarities and Differences between Action Research, Participative Research, and Participatory Action Research

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Research paradigms or perspectives have developed their own cultures of inquiry that describe different research processes used to observe, describe, and understand phenomena. *Action, participative,* and *participatory action research* are relatively new types of social research methods which coincide with the move from the Newtonian world to an era when quantum theory has deeply challenged the Cartesian-based philosophy in science. The rise of a post mechanistic view within the scientific disciplines, one where the observer affects and is affected by the observed, has signified the transition from the industrial age to the age of cybernetic theory and systems thinking. These three types of research are a part of a continuum of action-oriented research processes that combine inquiry with creating direct social change and is not limited to just explanation of information or data (Boga, 2004). Each reflects a different level of commitment and influence of those being studied on and in the research process. Each also has a different purpose. The following briefly describes each research process and explores the similarities and difference between them based on the goals of the research model, the frameworks of the research including any assumptions that are made at the base level, and the level of commitment, involvement and influence of participants.

Action Research

Action research (AR) is a paradigm of inquiry where the researcher's primary purpose is to improve the capacity and subsequent practices of the researcher rather than to produce theoretical knowledge (Elliott, 1991). Improving practice means that the quality of the outcome of the process and products together are enhanced. A defining characteristic of AR is that the researcher initiates change based on a feeling that something needs to change to create a better human situation. The researcher provides direction toward realization and transformation of values through the process. Ends are not defined as specific goals or objectives before hand.

The researcher may act as an individual or with a team of colleagues as the facilitator of clients. The researcher improves skills and co-learns with the clients during the process. The researcher leads the process of identifying the problem, drawing facts and opinions from the clients, and leads the group to identify gaps in understanding. There is a unified conception, but there is not a rigid division of specialized tasks or roles. The researcher and the group identify actions to take and jointly analyze results, reflect on these actions and results, and propose new courses of action. The researcher and the clients act together to create or actualize satisfying results for change. The researcher leads the group through identifying the course of actions for diffusion, but does not necessarily engage in these actions. (Boga, 2004).

This continuing process of reflection on the part of the researcher and clients develops the *researcher's* capacity to discern the right course of action and to make ethical judgments in future situations involving complex, human relationships. This resulting practical wisdom is grounded in the researcher's experience in real cases. A wholistic appreciation of the situation to inform the narrative of the case at hand is greater than any analytical or theoretical contributions.

Several disparate processes are unified such as the development of the individual researcher, the design of the process, and the action-reflection cycle for both the researcher as an individual and with the clients. Although this method is primarily researcher led, collaborative reflection is imperative to encompass the experience and perceptions of the clients to make modifications to other change efforts based on shared feedback from collaborative members of the group (Elliott, 1991).

Participative Research

Participative research (PR) is a method where the primary goal is to create an environment and process where context-bound knowledge emerges to develop 'local theory' that is understandable and actionable. PR is initiated by the organization of interest. The researcher

and participants collaborate actively in a loosely defined group process to study and change their social reality. (Whyte, 1989)

All members of the organization can participate. Participants must have the will and resources to participate and take on active roles and directly influence defining the problem, choose the methods used to gather the data, analyze the data, prepare the findings, and create action. (Boga, 2004) (Elden, 1981, 258). The wholistic process is group led and self-organized, and adapts to changes as needed. Results are jointly prepared, and reported to those affected. The group decides when the group is finished.

Participants treat each other as colleagues. Through the give and take of a dialogic process, the researcher and participants learn together. The researcher's role as one of many 'co-learners' in not as an expert, but as a 'co-producer of learning.' The researcher is dependent on where and how the data comes, has less control over the research design process itself, and has to be flexible to the perspectives and definitions of the participants. The researcher is not merely a bystander but needs to contribute toward the creation and discovery of a process that can stand on its own. A participative researcher needs to develop a context-sensitive framework, be flexible to changes in the framework based on the local knowledge from participants in their own terms, and solve problems. The result of this type of collaboration is very context-oriented to create new shared understandings. (Reason & Rowan, 1981).

As Sohng (1995) comments, participatory research is a collaborative and empowering process because it (a) brings isolated people together around common needs and problems; (b) validates their experiences as the foundation for understanding and critical reflection; (c) presents the knowledge and experiences of the researchers as additional resources upon which to critically reflect; and (d) contextualises what might have previously felt like personal, individual problems or weaknesses. The primary strength of an action-oriented or participatory approach to

research is therefore not about description but about trying things out. It is a research approach that sees its function as one of giving us different ways of relating to natural and social environments. Researchers need to be aware of how members of a group perceive and speak about their lives. This means they must endeavour to find out everything that can be found out about the community being researched. Ideally, the researcher already lives in the community, partakes in its affairs and has an ongoing relationship with the community.

Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research (PAR) combines both the goals of improved capacity and practice of researchers, as in AR, and of achieving practical objectives and changing social reality, as in PR, through group participation. Those affected by a problem participate in planning, carrying out, analyzing and applying the results of the research. The growth and development of the participants are also an important part of the desired outcome. This method is initiated by the organization of interest and engages researchers that share control of the social process design with participants in the organization.

The research approach is jointly designed through discussions between professional researchers and active participation by some members of the organization. PAR acknowledges that people affected by a problem are in the best position to understand and suggest solutions. Local and experiential knowledge are valued. Participants carry out the data collection and analyze the results. The researcher cannot have tight control or an agenda in terms of research topic or design, but do need to be in a situation where the problem is relevant and important to participants, and uses credible methods.

Specifically when situations are complex with no clear line of inquiry to follow, PAR can contribute to advancing theory and knowledge along with achieving practical results. As a participant-centered approach, PAR is grounded in first-hand knowledge and participation by the

participants affected. This enables researchers to gain relevant knowledge during the process which encourages creative surprises. This leads to new understandings by integrating ideas across disciplines that are typically isolated from each other to solve problems. These advances can contribute to major organizational changes along with advancing theoretical understandings across multiple disciplines.

Similarities between Methods

The primary similarities in the three methods are active participation, open-ended objectives, and high levels of commitment from the researcher and the participants to the research problem and active learning.

The first similarity between these three methods of research is that individuals/employees and not only researchers/leadership from an organization collaboratively design and actively participate in the research process. In AR, although the researchers are studying themselves in the context of a working with an organization, it can also be a collaborative effort when the whole group or organization is being supported by an action research process. PR requires the input and involvement of employees, including leadership, in designing the process with researchers as a group through implementing the results. PAR involves those most affected by a problem and engages them in planning, carrying out, and applying the results of the research.

The second similarity in that each of these methods is that the end objectives are not directly specified in the beginning and the process results in solving real problems in organizations. AR is geared toward creating a more capable individual so that person is equipped to deal with the complexity of today's work issues. PR allows employees to influence and create solutions to a business problem. PAR creates new knowledge through the process of solving real business or organizational problems while also improving the capacity of individuals in the organization.

Third, these research models are similar in the high level of commitment and involvement required from the organization, the employees, and the researcher about the importance of the problem and to the learning that results. The organization is central to the success of the research because participants are empowered to change their reality in all three methods. The researcher guides the process to varying degrees in each method, but in all cases contributes to framing a process that is wholistic, flexible, and enhances shared learning. Isolated people, groups, disciplines and disparate processes are unified through dialogue. The result is context-oriented new understandings about individuals and the organization as a whole.

Differences between Methods

The differences between the three types of research lie in the methods used to reach the goal of problem solving but are also primarily in the specific goal of each type of research. As Elden points out:

> The cutting edge difference is the immediate goal of the research. Where the goal is to develop change capacity so that workers can solve their own problems and keep solving them (self-maintained learning.) the general knowledge research design seems to be of limited utility. (1981, 259)

Action research focuses on the idea that improving the process improves the organization. Elliot explains:

> The fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge. The production and utilization of knowledge is subordinate to, and conditioned by, this fundamental aim. (Elliott, 1991)

AR requires the most personal commitment and involvement of these three research methods. In effect, this method requires ongoing practice and growth and is therefore a long-term commitment.

Participative research utilizes the tacit knowledge and experience of employees and leadership in the process, requires group level commitment as well as researcher commitment for *the term of the project* while the team addresses and solves a relevant problem. In participative research, the long-term skills of the participants to "solve their own problems and keep solving them" (Elden, 1981, 259) is an outcome that extends beyond the research project itself. The focus in participative research is on the inclusion of the participants and their organizations within the process and the practical outcome, rather removing the process from its context. The researcher is not a facilitator of the process as in action research, but a 'co-producer of learning.' As Elden makes clear:

> Research is participatory when those directly affected by it influence each of these four [problem definition, methods choice, data analysis & use of findings] decisions and help carry them out. (1981, 258)

In contrast, PAR requires both researchers in their own group, organizational members in their own group and both groups collaboratively to commit to the research process for both a scientific goal of furthering the research method *and* a tangible problem solving goal such as whether or not to close a manufacturing plant. PAR has implications for the participants as participant within their larger environment. The participants and researchers are processing significant theoretical issues together.

> We can rekindle the intellectual excitement in our field if we are willing to leave the mainstream to involve ourselves with practitioners and struggle with them to solve important practical problems – which also have important theoretical implications (Whyte, 1989)

PAR relies on reflective practice of the researchers in action and unlike action research does not wait to apply new understandings to the next situation, but incorporates them into the ongoing

process. This reflective practice transforms views of structural problems and their values about the systems under study in the process and leads to more creative ‘surprises’ and solutions. The result of participatory action research is the opportunity for researchers and participants to link enhanced capacity and wisdom from action research with the ‘local theory’ from group participants in participative research to be agents of major social changes at the organizational level.

Conclusion

In comparing basic, applied and participative research, Elden makes the point that his examination is not to exclude any specific paradigm, but to highlight the relative utility of each for specific purposes. Elden states,

> No one of these types, of course, is intrinsically right or wrong. The question is useful for what? Regardless of what one is aiming at, researcher role must be consistent with the research goal. (1981, 261)

The three types of research discussed are a part of a continuum of naturalistic, post-positivist, systemic research methodology. All three have frameworks for the research method used but allow for modification as new observations and conclusions are made. Knowledge regarding a particular problem is best determined by groups of people affected. By arriving at a consensus and using qualitative methods of research rather than drawing conclusions purely through observation, measurement and quantitative analysis as is done in rationalistic research greater creativity and problem solving can emerge.

Appendix I – Types of Research

Action	**Participative**	**Participatory Action**
Post-Positivist	Post-positivist	Post-positivist
Researcher achieves learning, and larger group may also learn	Researcher and select participants learn about larger group	Participants (and researcher) achieve learning within larger group
The researcher facilitates the process, and collaborates with clients to create or actualize change. Researcher typically does not engage in change actions.	Participants make essential decisions in research project by which they are affected	Actions taken through process – action is incorporated into research itself
Researcher collaborates with "clients"	Researcher works with "participants"	Researcher works with "participants"
Researcher and clients engage in self-reflection	Researcher works with select participants / No Expert	Participant issues, actions and learning highlighted / No Expert
3rd party researcher engages in change as expert	Group works to change self with researcher not as expert	3rd party group works to change self and larger groups
Subjective	Subjective	Wholistic
Emergent property: improved capacity and wisdom	Emergent property: self-knowledge	Emergent property: creativity

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