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Action Research: Assumptions and Practice

by

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Social science research has developed into a large scale enterprise in the twentieth century. A number of social phenomena and social systems have been researched through a variety of research approaches. This paper attempts to enumerate some of the basic assumptions of the classical enquiry approach in social science research. It further examines the validity of those assumptions and presents the ideological, epistemological and methodological aspects of action-research.

ASSUMPTIONS OF CLASSICAL RESEARCH

Research in social sciences has focused on a number of themes and issues through a number of disciplines. Psychology and sociology have dominated the field of social sciences research during the first half of the twentieth century. New disciplines like social psychology have joined the ranks of these two only in the last 2 to 3 decades. These disciplines have combined to develop the dominant approach of enquiry in social sciences which has influenced the range of research stories undertaken in the past. A number of assumptions have guided the development of their classical approach. The three basic assumptions underlying this approach to social science research are the following:

- (1) The first assumption relates to the purpose of enquiry in social sciences. The generation of knowledge has been regarded as the sole purpose of social science research. This knowledge-generation is focused on the determination of truth about the social order and the social phenomena. The pursuit of truth has been the “calling” of social scientists. This process of social science enquiry is borrowed from the natural sciences where science is the epitome of knowledge-generation. Utilisation of this knowledge is considered outside the legitimate role of social scientists. Knowledge-utilisation is, therefore, left to the administrators, policy-makers and other.

This pursuit of truth in social science research is further influenced by the underlying assumptions about the notion of absolute truth. The pursuit of truth for the natural scientists has been aimed at ascertaining the truth of natural phenomena. Likewise, social science research has assumed that there is one truth about social phenomena and most enquiry is aimed at ascertaining the truth (Douglas, 1976). This absolutist approach to social science enquiry has led to the development of only internal criteria of equality for evaluating social science research. It is proclaimed that the scientists and his peer alone can judge the relevance and value of his research.

- (2) Another significant assumption of social science research is borrowed from the natural sciences and is related to the first. In order to decipher the truth about social phenomena, enquiry must be objective. It is believed that the social phenomena must be studied objectively so that the “real” nature of such phenomena could be understood. This implies a non-normative approach to the study of social phenomena and social systems. Therefore, the choice of methodology in social science enquiry must be such that the elements of subjectivity can be controlled. This leads to a preponderance of laboratory experiments over field research. Moreover, rigorous research designs are developed to eliminate the sources of subjectivity. This assumption is so strongly shared among the majority of social scientists that non - experimental research designs and field studies are labelled as “unscientific” (Bakan, 1964).

In an effort to control the elements of subjectivity so that social science research can become objective, the research approaches are premised on a narrow definition of knowing. The personal experience of the researcher as a basis for enquiry is denied. In fact, effort is made to eliminate or control the influence of subjective experience on the process of enquiry. This has led to an overwhelming emphasis on abstract conceptualisation and theory - building. Mitroff and Pandey (1974) analyse the existing approaches to social science research to articulate this issue. In the Leibnizian form of research, abstract theory-building is emphasized and data-collection is used to strengthen or justify the theory. In the Lockean form of enquiry, the empiricist tradition gets preponderance. *Data - collection here proceeds theory - building.* Yet, the ultimate goal is to develop abstract concepts and models that can be generalised to other settings. This focus on generalisable models leads to strict conditions to enhance the objectivity of enquiry.

- (3) The final assumption in social science research is derived from the previous one. Just as the researcher is external to phenomena under study in natural sciences, the social science research emphasises separation of the researcher from the social phenomena. The researcher is assured to be external to the phenomena under study. This is seen to reinforce the objectivity of the research. This assumption is the genesis of research - subject differentiation. While describing the nature of contemporary psychology, (Bakan 1964: 18) posts that “scientist subject distinction is a

reflection of the mystery - mastery complex". The researcher keeps the focus of research a mystery from the subjects while he/she is trying to master the individuals, phenomena or systems under study. The objectivity in research in psychology is maintained by the researcher's unilateral control over the content and process of research. The researcher maintains a rigid separation from the "subject" under study. This separation is further enhanced by the use of sophisticated research methodology. The purpose of enquiry, the methods of data - collection and outcome of enquiry are closely guarded from the "subject".

The above mentioned assumptions guide the classical research in social science. Action - research as an approach to social science enquiry is premised on an alternative sometimes opposite, set of assumptions. Action - research was originally developed by Kurt Lewin and his colleagues. In its original conception, it was a methodology of understanding the social systems by trying to change it. In order to understand the particular phenomena or the social system, the researcher attempts to change it (Sanford, 1970). Based on a limited understanding of the subject matter, interventions are designed to effect a change. The data generated from this effort at change further enhance understanding about the subject-matter (Pareek, 1978). Action - research is, therefore, a cyclical process of understanding and change.

Action - research is an attempt to integrate these two sets of objectives: understanding and change. The social scientists have primarily focused on understanding. They have relied on classical methodology of research which has been guided by the assumptions mentioned above. This methodology has proved to be inadequate to explain the "real life" phenomena in their entire complexity. The activities or practitioners, on the other hand, have primarily pursued change. They have ignored systematic enquiry in their change efforts and knowledge generated through social science research has remained largely unutilised. Action - research, by combining these two objectives of understanding and change, provides an alternative approach for social research and social action. It can potentially integrate the efforts of the social scientist and the activist/practitioner.

ASPECTS OF ACTION RESEARCH

A. Ideological

The ideological aspect of action-research is based on the assumption that all enquiry is normative. A particular approach to enquiry contains a certain manner of viewing or representing reality. To that extent, each approach to enquiry has certain clear value commitments. Mitroff and Pandy (1974: 472) argue that “scientific description is not value - free because one always has had to pre - suppose some normative model of the world in the first place in order that one can collect observations in the second place.” The very act of enquiry is based on the belief that social phenomena are orderly enough to be understood. Even enquiry in natural sciences is not value - free. The enquirer accepts certain set of assumption about the subject - matter based upon his normative orientation. Value –free enquiry is a myth, at best.

Action - research assumes this normative aspect of social science research. The recognition of normative nature of enquiry provides the ideological basis to action - research. The ideological position of action - research broadens the purpose of social science enquiry from mere understanding to understanding and change. Knowledge – generation is not the ultimate act of the social scientists. Knowledge – utilisation is equally important and cannot be left for others. This position argues for judging the relevance of social science research in the context of its ultimate utilisation. Knowledge for knowledge sake-is not acceptable to action - researchers. They want social science researchers to accept the responsibility for the utiliation of knowledge.

It can be even argued that the major reason for the non - utilisation of this knowledge generated by social science research is the artificial separation of knowledge - generation from knowledge - utilisation. Who can best utilise the knowledge generated by the research? Those engaged in the generation of knowledge are appropriately suited to assist in its utilisation. This is the basic logic for combining the roles of knowledge - generation and knowledge - utilisation in the form of action - research. The action - research approach does not leave knowledge - utilisation to chance. Action - researchers accept the responsibility for and verbalise their attempts at knowledge - utilisation. To the extent that social science enquiry is normative, action - research recognises this and taken an ideological stand vis – à -

vis the context and content of enquiry. This stand makes them to explicitly state their value-premises at the outset.

B. Epistemological

The epistemological aspects of action - research are related to the assumption about the process of knowing. Any approach to enquiry is determined by certain assumptions about the process of knowing. The classical model of social science research makes only partial and limited assumptions about the process of knowing. The Leibnizian model of enquiry assumes that learning and knowing occur through a process of abstract manipulation of symbols and concepts. The Lockean model of enquiry, on the other hand, emphasises direct observation as a process of knowing (Mitroff & Pandy, 1974). The process of knowing assumed by the action research approach to enquiry is embedded in the theory of adult learning. Adult learning is posited to be an interactive, cyclical process of different activities. Concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation are suggested as four types of learning process (Kolb, et.al., 1975). This theory recommends that adult learning occurs through all these four approaches. To that extent, the process of knowing can take place through experience, observation, conceptualisation and action. Knowledge - generation can, therefore, occur through any of these four or their combinations.

The cyclical and interactive nature of action - research is derived from this theory of adult learning. Action - research emphasises reflection and conceptualisation on the one hand, and experience and experimentation on the other. Classical research in social science has emphasised observation and conceptualisation only. Experience and experimentation have been largely ignored. The epistemological base of action - research suggests a continuous movement from understanding and conceptualisation to action and experience. Action as a legitimate process of knowing has only been recently recognized. Certain aspects of the social system can only be understood by intervening in and changing them. Various studies have shown the usefulness of this "Knowledge - from - action". Alderfer and Brown (1975:214) argue that "some important aspects of human experience in organisations will remain unknowable to all but those who participate in them". This epistemological aspect of action - research is neglected in the classical social science research.

The concrete experience as an approach to learning and, therefore, as an approach to knowing is also a necessary ingredient of action - research. Whatever the subject

- matter of enquiry in social sciences, the researcher develops a tacit understanding of it (Polanyi, 1959). This tacit knowledge is as much cognitive as sensory. To that extent, the subjective experience of the researcher cannot be (and according to Polanyi, should not be) eliminated. The tacit knowledge of the researcher forms the basis for explicit knowledge. A major effort in knowledge - generation is spent making explicit what is tacitly experienced by the researcher. The subjective experiences of the researcher has impact on the conduct of enquiry even in the natural sciences. The sensory experience of the scientists engaged in Apollo - Moon project have been shown to have significant impact on the research process (Mitroff, 1976). The classical social science research has emphasised only the cognitive understanding and neglected the emotional and subjective understanding.

C. Methodological

The methodological aspects of action - research are based on the assumption that enquiry into social systems and social phenomena has influenced on the systems and phenomena under study. It has been shown that attempts to develop an understanding of the social system can lead to changes in it (Brown, 1972; Brown & Tandon, 1978). To the extent that enquiry tends to act as an intervention into social systems, the assumptions of classical research methodology seem to be invalid. The sheer fact of observation of a social system or a phenomena tends to change the subject - matter under study. The social - psychological research has shown that the sheer presence of others tend to influence human beings (Zajono, 1965). To the extent that human beings are part of social science research, the very process of data - collection tends to influence the nature of data collected. However, well we design a particular social science research, this impact of enquiry cannot be completely eliminated. Given this dilemma, how can one study social systems? The major interest in any research is to understand a particular phenomena or social systems. The researcher is, therefore, primarily interested in collecting valid information about the phenomena or social system. Only on the basis of valid information, he can develop a holistic understanding of the reality. The classical research recommends objectivity and separation of researcher from the phenomena as a method of collecting valid data. Some researchers have shown dysfunctional consequence of the rigorous approach adopted by classical social science research (Argyris, 1970). It is now well documented that the researcher and his behaviours have substantial impact over the quality of data collected (Rosenthal, 1966; Friedlander, 1968). In the case of laboratory experiment, the setting of the research

as created by the researcher has impact on the nature of data collected (Orne, 1962). In the case of field research, the validity of data obtained is determined by the quality of relationships developed by the researcher (Hyman, 1950; Friedlander, 1970). The very setting of laboratory experiment changes the phenomena under study. The more nature of relationship developed between the researcher and the social system under study influences the social system. It has been shown that the researcher is able to obtain improved quality of data if he develops a rapport with the "subjects" (Alderfer, 1968; Alderfer and Brown, 1972, Brown and Tandon, 1978). The traditional and mutual relationship between the researcher and the social system under study is emphasised in the methodology of data - collection in action - research. This transactional and participative aspect of action - research methodology needs to be understood.

If the data-collection methods of action - research are transactional and participative, the criteria of reliability and validity also need to be altered. The existing criteria of reliability of instruments have been shown to be rather unreliable in assessing the quality of data generated (Alderfer and Brown, 1972). The present notions of validity are also of limited relevance. Internal and external validity of social science research design has been currently evaluated on a set of rigorous criteria (Campbell and Stanley, 1966). Classical research has emphasised these because of their rigour. In the methodology of action - research, the issue of consensual validity becomes critical. The holistic representation of a social reality is not independent of that reality itself. Criteria of consensual validation are needed to ascertain the quality of the research in representing the reality.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion of action - research has been intended to identify its ideological, epistemological and methodological aspects. The underlying assumptions of action - research tend to go contrary to the assumptions of classical research. In certain situations, it may be still possible to use classical research approaches. The argument presented in this paper has been that the choice of an enquiry approach is as much as Indian experience today, it is not possible to provide all the answers. However, it is possible to raise some key questions which have been largely neglected in social science research:

- (i) Given the magnitude of social-economic problems and the paucity of resources in countries like India, can Social Sciences afford to ignore the

issue of knowledge - utilisation? To what extent it is acceptable to engage in esoteric conceptualisation and sophisticated experimentation in social sciences oblivious of the relevance of our efforts?

- (ii) Can the social sciences claim to be value - free? Given the social - psychological aspects of social science research, can we engage in studying “others” without offering them something on return besides “knowledge”? Is it an ethical consideration in social science inquiry to feed the data back to the people it has been collected from?
- (iii) To what extent can the rigours of natural sciences be transferred to social science research? In our quest for rigour and control of spurious interference, are we measuring the inconsequential precisely?
- (iv) To what extent is the present social science research dogmatic pursuit (Andreski, 1972). Have we become prisoners of our own methodology? Has the method become the end, as opposed to a means for inquiry? Have we become so method - bound so as to not permit any deviations from the established course?

(v) Can action - research be called “scientific” research? Should we instead look for ways of making such research more rigorous? Do we consider the options of quasi - experimental designs (Campbell and Stanley, 1966) and multi - trait, multi - method approaches (Campbell and Fiske, 1959) to increase the validity of data - collection? Have we explored the methodologies of grounded inquiry (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) or unobtrusive, non-reactive research methods (Webb, et. al., 1966).

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