



ORIGINAL PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH

Action research: genesis, evolution and orientations

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Submitted for publication: 13th February 2015
Accepted for publication: 13th April 2015

Abstract

Background: Action research is used to bring about systematic change at the same time as developing fresh understanding about the change strategy and its impact. It has been around since the 1940s in a variety of forms and for different purposes. It is increasingly used as a practice development research strategy in healthcare professions.

Aim and objectives: The aim is to provide an overview of action research to enable understanding of the flow and the cumulative, interactive nature of action research and its evolution. The objectives of the paper are practical, historical and paradigmatic in nature.

Methods: Drawing on personal and others' development and on experience of action research, the paper is a blend of scholarly writing, practical examples and the metaphor of a tidal river estuary. The metaphor uses continuous reshaping of sandbanks to symbolise the coming together and moving apart of different streams of action research.

Exposition: The origins and evolution of action research, with its different purposes, orientations and emphases, are shown through an analysis and critique of different definitions of action research over time. With differences identified, common characteristics of action research and the creation of action hypotheses are set out, followed by the history and evolution of action research, separated into four major modes. Paradigmatic origins and assumptions of these modes are critiqued.

Conclusion and implications for practice development research: In common with all researchers, practice development researchers need to consider carefully which paradigmatic assumptions are most relevant to their questions and purposes because those assumptions will help them to locate their work in an appropriate specific or blended research paradigm. The choice of paradigm will affect everything they do and are, so the choice needs to be made from an informed and embodied position.

Keywords: Action research, evolution, definitions, modes, research paradigms, purposes, practice development research

Introduction

Action research goes back some 70 years or more in the history of research, but its use by healthcare professionals is relatively recent. Nurses appear to be the first healthcare professionals to do action research, with early studies published in the 1970s and 1980s (for example, Tierney, 1973; Lathlean and Farnish, 1984) and a steady increase ever since. In other healthcare professions, such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy and pharmacy, action research emerged predominantly in the 2000s, although there is earlier work in occupational therapy (for example, Mattingley and Gillette, 1991; Swain and French, 2004; Sørensen and Haugbølle, 2008).



This photo of a Welsh tidal river estuary symbolises the differentiated nature of action research. Fundamentally, action research is a broad landscape of distinctive, and primarily qualitative research strategies for bringing about 'social change through action, developing and improving practice and, at the same time, generating and testing theory' (Titchen and Binnie, 1994, p 2). This paper introduces this landscape for people new to action research. The work arises

from a seminar I gave, through the lens of my own experience of action research, at the University of Ulster, Northern Ireland, and which I have further developed at the Person-centred Practice Research International Community of Practice's annual event for research students. Although the paper assumes a rudimentary understanding of different worldviews in research, it could also be useful as an introduction to those without any such understanding. For this reason, I have deliberately used a light touch to show the broad ideas and images of a shifting, evolving landscape with key references and influences only. There are articles and handbooks on action research referenced throughout the paper for follow-up if further detail is required.

I open with a summary of the purposes of action research and then, using imagery and a series of definitions, I introduce the distinctive orientations and emphases of action research. Rather than overload readers at this point by presenting the historical and paradigmatic perspectives, I have left this until the end of the paper, so as to get to the practicalities more quickly. This I do by pointing out the common characteristics of action research – such as, collaboration, rigour, participation and being values driven. Examples of UK nursing action research from my own and others' experiences are given, with a particular focus on creating and testing action hypotheses. This is then followed by a broad-brush tracing of the historical and paradigmatic origins and evolution of action research in the US, Australia, the UK, Scandinavia and the Netherlands. This tracing reveals that different kinds of action research are based on very different theoretical and philosophical assumptions (worldviews) and research paradigms. I conclude that action researchers should consider carefully which assumptions (and therefore research paradigm) are most appropriate for their research because these assumptions will influence their decisions about their research questions, methodologies, roles and relationships.

Purposes, orientations and emphases

Action research has a variety of purposes depending on the research questions being pursued and the philosophical and theoretical leanings of the action researcher. The common purposes (Brown and McIntyre, 1981; Carr and Kemmis, 1986; McNiff, 1988) are:

- Improving and developing better understanding of practice
- Introducing innovation and facilitating cultural, social, practice and political change
- Simultaneously generating and testing theory

Other purposes might include:

- Realising values in practice (Elliott, 1991), such as person-centred values
- Facilitating professional learning and reflective practice (Grundy, 1982; Winter, 1989)
- Helping people to empower themselves (Carr and Kemmis, 1986)
- Enabling practitioners to research their own practice (Stenhouse, 1975; Carr and Kemmis, 1986)
- Democratising/reforming/politicising practice (Freire, 1972; Carr and Kemmis, 1986)

Action research also has different orientations – that is, insider, outsider and insider-outsider orientations.

An insider orientation means the action researcher is an insider in the context where the action research is taking place. Here the role of ‘actor’ – for example, a clinical leader with authority for initiating and managing change – is combined with the role of action researcher. A disadvantage of this orientation is that the insider often finds it difficult to have enough time for the research processes due to responsibilities in the setting. An outsider orientation is where action researchers come from elsewhere (often a university or professional organisation) or may be practitioners with recognised expertise in the area being explored. The outsider is an ‘actor’, often in the role of action research/professional development facilitator, but if outsiders try to bring about change themselves, there is a real danger that the innovation or change will not be owned by those within the setting and practice is likely to revert to old ways when the outsider leaves the setting. An insider-outsider can be one person or a team that work(s) in the organisation, but not in the particular research setting within the organisation. The pros and cons of each orientation and a successful ‘double act’ orientation are discussed more fully elsewhere (Titchen and Binnie, 1993). These orientations run through different emphases of action research (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The emphases of action research

Emphases

- **Reflective/reflexive practitioner**
- **Personal and interpersonal** (New Paradigm research)
- **Methodological**
- **Emancipatory** Political ideology – democracy, moral intention of social justice
- **Transformational** Moral intention of human flourishing (McCormack and Titchen, 2014) for all involved – this emphasis is more recently emerging within practice development and research conducted in the critical creativity paradigm (McCormack and Titchen, 2006)

These purposes, orientations and emphases unfold in the definitions.

The definitions

One of the earliest definitions of action research was created in the US by Kurt Lewin. He coined the term ‘action research’ and saw it as a form of rational social management.

Definition 1

The research needed for social practice can best be characterised as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action (Lewin, 1946, p 35).

This definition implies an outsider model of action research where social scientists from the university are the initiators of the research. They invite people in the research setting to carry out the action for the social scientists to study. The roles of researcher and actor are completely separate. In a pure form – for example, if a university researcher wants to try out an innovation or get research evidence into health or social care practice – they will recruit those in the workplace to participate in the action, but not in decisions about the research. It would be the academic who decides on the research questions, gathers and analyses the data and feeds them back to the participants and the organisation to inform the action. The definition is also methodological in emphasis, given the implicit assumption of showing cause-effect relationships between the conditions, various forms of social action and their effects. Such assumptions are usually located in experimental research; indeed, Lewin was concerned with social experiments.

The outsider model of action research was used in successive waves of action research in the US, the UK and Europe, but the nature of the relationship between the outsider and insider changed due to, among other inter-related influences, evolving philosophical and theoretical assumptions underpinning the research (of which more later). For example, Kalleberg, a Norwegian sociologist, assumes the outsider model, but his emphasis is more on collaboration between the researcher and practitioner as they learn together to solve practical problems, change practice and generate local theory for public critique.

Definition 2

...a chance to try out new models that have often not been worked out in detail beforehand, but are generally specified in broad outlines and made more concrete and precise in a kind of collective learning process where social scientists and people in the client system co-operate (Kalleberg, 1992, cited in Wagner, 2006, p 16).

This definition assumes democratic processes and systems-oriented approaches that enable change to be anchored in practice.

The definition offered by Rönnerman et al. (2008) of educational action research in the Swedish context shifts to a more critical, challenging approach to learning through reflection and reflexivity (self-knowledge and awareness of self in interaction with others).

Definition 3

A reciprocal challenging of professional knowledge and experiences, rooted in everyday practices within schools, in collaboration arenas populated by researchers and practitioners, and in the interchange of knowledge of different kinds (Rönnerman et al., 2008, p 277).



It is interesting to look at Definition 3 in the light of action research rooted in the Nordic tradition of folk enlightenment, which emerged in 1900 and promoted study circles and later research circles (Ponte and Rönnerman, 2009). The ideological purpose of these circles was collaborative learning through democratic principles that would not only give workers a chance to learn about and discuss things they had not learned at school, but also enable more effective, democratic workplaces and practices. This

tradition was combined in the 1990s with Anglo-American ideas about educational action research (rather like the confluence of separate streams of water in the river estuary in this photo, forming a bigger body of water). So the outsider researcher is a democratic facilitator of knowledge creation through reflection. The intention is that this knowledge will empower practitioners to develop their own practice. However, as we know only too well, possessing knowledge does not necessarily lead to action!

In UK universities in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, academic researchers promoted a merging of the roles of actor and researcher. This confluence stemmed from the teacher-as-researcher or practitioner-researcher movement (Stenhouse, 1975) where the two roles were held by one person. Another form of this merging of roles arose in participative action research (Reason and Rowan, 1981) where academic outsiders researched 'with', rather than 'on' insider actors. Thus, the actor and researcher roles became shared. The contemporary Definition 4 from nursing shows the influence of those shifts.

Definition 4

Practitioner research is a formal and systematic attempt made by practitioners, either alone or in collaboration with others, to understand their work, with the intended purpose of making public new knowledge about the transformation of self, colleagues and work contexts (McCormack, 2009, p 33).

What this definition does not make completely clear is that 'others', not only alludes to other practitioner-researchers, but also researchers from universities and professional organisations. The latter are often facilitators of insiders' learning to become practitioner-researchers, at the same time as investigating the effectiveness of their own facilitation and its outcomes on the insiders. Thus the relationship between insider and outsider gets more complex. I have been involved as such an outsider in such a relationship in three UK studies, helping nurses to merge their actor role – that is, their clinical or education role with a researcher role. For example, in the national Expertise in Practice project conducted by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) (Manley et al., 2005; Hardy et al., 2009), we, the outsider research team, helped nurses with expertise in 15 clinical fields to become practitioner-researchers (insiders) investigating the nature of their own expertise and its links with the outcomes of their care of patients and work with colleagues. The purpose of the study was to:

- Recognise and value expertise in nursing practice
- Develop a recognition process for expertise in practice
- Develop further understanding of the concept of expertise in UK nursing
- Explore links between expertise and outcomes for service users and healthcare providers

Each expert nurse chose a local critical companion (Titchen, 2004) to help them in their own setting, while we, the outsider research team, helped the critical companions to develop their helping skills. We also challenged and supported the expert nurses and their companions as they learned how to carry out empirical research and generate new knowledge about expertise through critical analysis and debate in action learning sets. I show some of the outcomes of our help later in this paper. So, although as the research team we were outsiders to the nurses' clinical settings, we were insiders from the perspective of investigating our effectiveness as facilitators in achieving the goal of nurses researching their own expertise. Thus, the following definition, although it is methodological in emphasis, can also be useful in making this new dimension explicit. The idea here is that the researcher must be an actor of some kind in the situation or it is not action research.

Definition 5

By 'action research' we mean research where the emphasis is on the researcher's role as an actor in a situation which he [sic] is endeavoring to improve... where hypotheses are being tested about how to improve practice and those hypotheses are based on theory... and where the extent to which the problems and hypotheses are generalisable to other situations is explored (Brown and McIntyre, 1981, p 244).

In relation to hypothesis testing, Brown and McIntyre's definition links with Lewin's (1946) notion of seeking causal relationships in the practice setting, but it has moved on. No longer is it the outsider researcher developing the hypotheses and managing, or even manipulating, the situation and the actors within it. Action hypotheses are created by participants through informed imagination to show causal relationships between context, actions and outcomes. They focus, shape and hold together a practice development or action research plan. Moreover, they help practice developers and action researchers to demonstrate that the outcomes are linked to what they have done, rather than being a result of chance or of anything else going on at the time (Titchen, 2011; Manley et al., 2013). I explain how action hypotheses are formulated later in the paper.

The next definition shows another major shift to an emancipatory emphasis. It brings in an ideological and moral commitment to improving the justice of our own practices.

Definition 6

Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as the understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p 5).

This form of action research has been influenced by critical theory and its notions of democracy, enlightenment, empowerment and emancipation – the three Es (Fay, 1987). The notion of the three Es, was developed in the Expertise in Practice project. We used an emancipatory action research approach, but we were not concerned with reform of practice as Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) imply in this definition. From our own experiences and research, we knew it was likely that nurses would need help to overcome inner, as well as outer, obstacles to becoming practitioner-researchers of their own expertise in their own settings. For instance, they came to see that they needed to emancipate (free) themselves from the idea that when they exposed their practice to public scrutiny they would be shown up as ‘not really experts’. By the end of the study, the nurses were not only able to say ‘I have expertise in ...’, they could also articulate it confidently and publicly and provide evidence for it. The notion of democracy was more fully developed in another RCN emancipatory action research study, this time with consultant nurses (Manley and Titchen, 2012). Joint decisions about the study were made by the consultant nurses and research team – for example, about how action learning sets would be organised, what research questions would be posed, what action hypotheses would be created, what data would be collected, what methods would be used and how the data would be analysed and reported and by whom.

For some years now, Peter Reason and his colleagues have linked action research with the notion of transformation. For example, Reason and Torbert (2001) promote action research as a turn towards a transformational social science that will integrate (1) transformation of the person who is inquiring into some aspect of his/her own life, with (2) transformation of people who are engaging in face to face collaborative inquiries and with (3) inquiring communities that engage with whole organisations, communities and countries to bring about transformation at organisational, community and national levels. Other examples of the call for transformational intent and action within action research can be found, for example, in Reason and Bradbury’s (2001) excellent *Handbook of Action Research*. However, the final definition of transformational action research is not located in transformational social science but rather in the new research paradigm of critical creativity, which brings a number of streams together at a new confluence in the river estuary.

In this definition, the merged or shared role and emancipatory emphasis is elaborated by a self-conscious, moral emphasis on human flourishing – incidentally also promoted by Heron and Reason (1997) as vital in participative inquiry.

Definition 7

Transformational action research is in its infancy. It promotes transformation as both end and means of research. In addition to knowledge creation, there is a concern with transformation of self and, if they so wish, with facilitated transformation of co-researchers, participants, other stakeholders and communities of practice... It can lead to human flourishing, in creative, ecological, spiritual and ethical senses, of both recipients of the research and those undertaking it (adapted from Titchen and Armstrong, 2007).

Transformational action research, as well as transformational practice development, can be carried out in a new paradigmatic synthesis called critical creativity (McCormack and Titchen, 2006; Titchen and McCormack, 2008, 2010; McIntosh, 2010). With the ultimate purpose of enabling everyone involved in the research to flourish as human beings, a holistic, person-centred approach is taken that blends critical, creative, spiritual and ancient traditions. For example, in a co-operative inquiry arising from work conducted within the International Practice Development Collaborative, I worked with colleagues Brendan McCormack, Annette Solman and Val Wilson to develop and test out a methodological

framework for human flourishing as the end and means of transformational action research. We gathered, synthesised and interpreted data in nature, using creative methods such as painting, poetry, sculpture, body movement, artistic and cognitive critique (Titchen et al., 2011). Transformational action researchers use creative methods as well as the more usual methods of interviews, observing and analysing data, for example. They pay attention to creating the conditions for human flourishing (for example, stillness, nurturing, flowing, connecting) and communicative spaces or conversations for change that include accessing embodied knowing and wisdom of the body. In these spaces they engage in the cognitive and artistic critique of data through promoting each others' critical reflection and reflexivity (critical consciousness) and drawing on ancient wisdom and creative imagination and expression (see Titchen and McCormack, 2010).

These seven definitions, despite their differences, share a common core: they are concerned with bringing about change and simultaneously generating theory grounded in practice. Moreover, there are many similarities in their ways of working. They are:

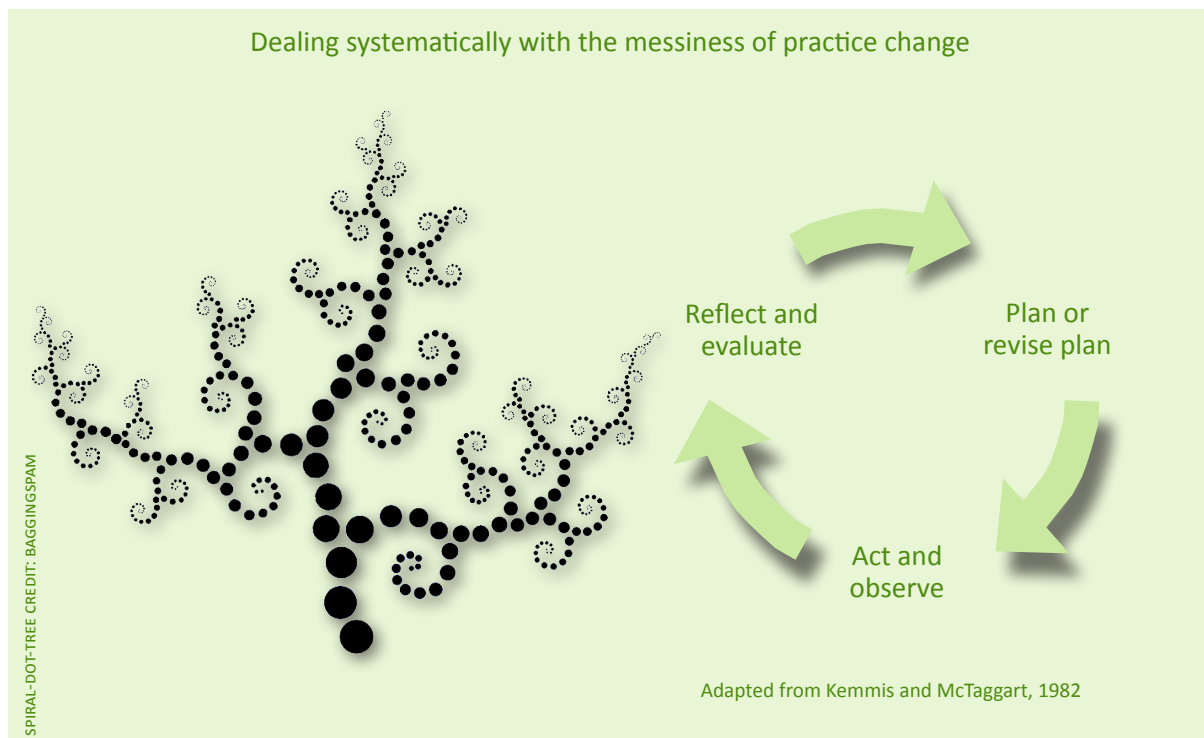
- Collaborative
- Systematic
- Rigorous
- Future oriented
- Reflective/reflexive
- Evaluative
- Participative
- Situational
- Value committed

However, there are major differences in terms of roles and emphases that are rooted in different philosophical assumptions and therefore research paradigms. But before exploring these assumptions and paradigms, I want to offer more of a practical feel for action research by considering the commonalities.

Common characteristics

Action research is systematic through the organisation of its processes. The most commonly used approach to this organisation is a spiral of steps, with each step comprising a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the impact of the action (Lewin, 1946). Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) interpreted these steps as plan, act and observe, reflect and revise plan. But a single spiral comprising a series of circles does not adequately describe the reality (cf. Goodnough, 2008; Cardiff, 2014). In Figure 2, I show a tree of spirals where smaller spirals spiral off the larger ones. In my experience, this or some such representation, like Snoeren and Frost's (2011) overlapping spirals, more accurately reflects the experience of being systematic in the complexity and messiness of organisational, cultural and practice change.

Figure 2: Action research tree of spirals



Ensuring rigour in action research follows the same principles as any other kind of qualitative research – such as, using triangulation of data, member checking the accuracy of data and the interpretation and using criteria to test the credibility and trustworthiness of the data (see Titchen, 1995). Action research is future oriented because it is about striving to improve practice and/or introduce innovation or reform. The role of reflection, reflexivity and evaluation is integral to the action research spiral and it is participative to varying degrees according to the research worldview adopted. Action research is situational –that is, relevant to the situation in which the research is carried out, but if principles for action are developed through creating and testing action hypotheses (see below), local theory is created and/or rich descriptions are provided, then readers of the work can judge whether the work is potentially transferable to their own contexts, settings and situations.

Action research is values driven and rooted in the values of those involved. A study will often start with a clarification of people's values in order to create a shared vision and common purpose for the action and the research. It is essential too that these values are articulated in any public accounts of the research so that others may judge the rigour and criticality of the findings and interpretations before deciding to use them or not in their own practice (cf. Snoeren and Frost, 2011). Finally, action research is commonly used as a practice development research strategy.

Action hypotheses

Definition 5 above by Brown and McIntyre (1981) includes reference to hypothesis generation. There, I explained that developing action hypotheses helps participants to demonstrate that the outcomes of their action are linked to what they have done, rather than to chance or anything else going on. Some action researchers choose to work systematically through developing action hypotheses from an informed and theorised understanding of the current situation that is to be changed. This understanding, derived from theory, empirical research and/or experience in the setting, will then inform their imagining about the strategies they could use to reach their desired goals (outcomes or endpoints). An action hypothesis then can be formulated thus:

In situations type X, goals of type Z can be achieved by strategies of type Y.

Action hypotheses are tested and refined through the action research spirals to create tentative principles for action. These tentative principles are then refined through reflection, reflexivity, critical dialogue, debate and contestation with others (Titchen, 2000).

However, exactly how to reach the goals is often more complex than we might imagine, as unexpected problems and situations develop along the way. Therefore, unlike with experimental research, we are not concerned with creating one-off, big-bang hypotheses that we stick with throughout the research; rather we work in a more flexible way that is responsive to the unexpected. Flexibility is achieved by working with chains of causation. A chain of causation then is a series of action hypotheses that show how various intermediary points have been reached in order to achieve the desired goal (outcome or endpoint).

As the research team in the RCN Expertise in Practice Project, we tested the following action hypothesis:

In contexts where practitioners rarely, if ever, research their own practice and where nursing expertise is invisible, even to those who have it, and/or is not recognised by others in their organisation, the outcome of nurses becoming practitioner-researchers of their own expertise and gaining national recognition of that expertise can be achieved by a combined strategy of:

- Action learning
- Critical companionship
- External critical review of a portfolio of evidence

As introduced above, we helped the nurses and critical companions to learn how to gather holistic qualitative evidence, including:

- 360-degree feedback
 - Based on the principle of systematic data collection from stakeholders on performance of the individual
 - Qualitative feedback tool and protocol developed with the nurses and critical companions to gain feedback from nurse participant's role set (including user narratives and staff interviews)
- Observing, listening and questioning
- Reflection in and on practice (Schön, 1983)
- Formal and structured reflection to explore tacit knowledge
- Case vignettes (nurses' accounts of patients' experiences)
- Reflective responses to evidence
- Critical dialogues

Methods used by nurse participants/critical companions to analyse evidence of expertise included:

- Inductive thematic analyses
- Deductive analyses using research-based models or frameworks of nursing expertise
- Member checking with evidence providers for trustworthiness, faithfulness
- Checking analytic/interpretative methods with critical companion

At action learning sets, the expert nurses and critical companions presented their data and analyses. Discussions about the data and emerging interpretations and meanings were taken back by the individual nurses and companions to explore and critique further in their own settings. Through a re-iterative process, each nurse created a portfolio of evidence that was critiqued during action learning and through written feedback from the team. The final portfolios were scrutinised by national expert panels in the various clinical areas prior to a face-to-face defence of the portfolio. Each of the nurses who submitted portfolios successfully achieved RCN accreditation for their expertise.

Along with evaluation data gathered about people's experience of action learning and critical companionship and reflective reviews in the portfolios, this evidence showed convincingly that our action hypothesis held up during the study and that our outcome was achieved (see Manley et al., 2005; Brown and Harrison, 2009; Greggans and Conlon, 2009).

'The action learning sets have been useful as in how it worked. It helped in formalising a way of helping us to reflect, you know, that process of continually bringing people back to the point and helping them in formulating questions' (Critical companion: Manley et al., 2005, p 29).

'Participating in this project has helped me develop as a practitioner. Analysing and reflecting on what I do, and how and why I do it, in a systematic way has helped me recognise my own skills and knowledge. Prior to this project, I did not recognise a lot of what I do, articulating them has made them visible to me. I feel this portfolio can make them visible to others' (Expert nurse: Royal College of Nursing, 2002, p 92).

I move now to the final section of this paper to put the above discussion into a historical perspective and show, broad-brush, something of the genesis and evolution of action research. Fuller discussions can be found in McNiff (1988), Holter and Schwartz-Barcott (1993) and Hart and Bond (1995).

Genesis and evolution of action research

The main proponents of action research emerged in the US, South America, the UK, Europe and Australia. This work falls into four modes of action research (Figure 3). The first three – technical, practical and emancipatory modes – were described by Grundy (1982). These modes link respectively with the empirico-analytical, interpretive and critical research worldviews (paradigms). A fourth mode, developed more recently by Brendan McCormack and myself, is a transformational mode that is located in a critical creativity research worldview (McCormack and Titchen, 2006; Titchen and McCormack, 2008, 2010). This worldview is a synthesis of the practical and critical (emancipatory) research worldviews with creative, ecological and ancient/spiritual traditions. Broadly, these four modes developed sequentially.

Figure 3: Four action research modes



I want to stress here that there are no hard and fast boundaries around the different modes or types of action research. Breaking action research down into types or typologies can be helpful for novice action researchers in grasping the practical, historical and paradigmatic differences between the modes and

how they have been melded and blended to form new modes over time. Typologies can help novices to decide which paradigmatic assumptions are most relevant to their questions and purposes and choose an appropriate specific or blended research paradigm for their work. Experienced action researchers, while being clear about the research worldview they are working in, will often cross boundaries to meld and bend any philosophical and theoretical assumptions in other worldviews that will enable them to develop an appropriate methodology for their own work (see Titchen and Horsfall, 2011). For example, in my own doctoral action research (Titchen, 2000), I located my study of patient-centred nursing and the facilitation of its development in the interpretive research worldview. In addition, I drew on the concepts of consciousness raising, problematisation, self-reflection and critique in the critical research worldview and assumptions around causal relationships in the empirico-analytical worldview. I ensured the consistency of these concepts and assumptions with those of my chosen interpretive research worldview.

Technical mode - doing social experiments

Action researchers using the technical mode tend to adopt an *empirical-analytical research worldview*. This appears to relate to the genesis of action research as a means of rational social management. In the 1940s in the US, social psychologists, notably Kurt Lewin (1946) began to respond to post-second world war problems in industry, such as productivity, morale and absenteeism. Using new tools and knowledge created by psychologists in their work with personnel during the war, Lewin began to engage in organisational action research. Given social unrest and a rise in racism in the US at this time, he saw a need for engineering social change. Thus he developed change experiments that were conducted in the workplace – for example, a real life action experiment in a factory investigating the effect of worker participation on productivity of work groups. These factory workers collaborated in developing a democratic way of life in their work groups, but they did not participate democratically in the design and conduct of the research.

A similar pattern of relationships within social experiments emerged in other fields of action research, such as community development projects in the 1960s. For example, anti-poverty programmes in the UK applied social science knowledge and research techniques to the solution of social problems. Teams of researchers provided survey findings to teams of actors who used the findings to inform action. The purpose of generating new knowledge about solutions was that it might become accepted social policy.

The technical mode of action research, with its separation of roles and initiators of the action research coming from an outside organisation, continues today. One of the major limitations of this mode is that the people in the setting do not own the research, they are subjects in it. Therefore, when the researcher leaves the setting, there is a danger that the change or innovation will fall away. In nursing, I have observed that novice action researchers tend to start with technical action research. Perhaps this is due to the cultural valuing of empirico-analytical research traditions and what their organisations expect from them. However, I have also noticed that, over time, these same action researchers start moving towards practical and emancipatory modes as the limitations of technical action research in terms of sustainable change become apparent.

Practical mode – seeking new understanding of practice and innovation

This mode sits in the *interpretive research worldview* and in the early days continued the separation of actor and researcher roles. Notably, in the 1940s and beyond, the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations in the UK offered organisational consultancies based on traditional client-consultant relationships. These consultancies, underpinned by psychoanalysis and social psychology, were problem specific in their substance and conclusions. The purpose was for the consultant to ‘enable an organisation to work through conflict through a therapeutic process underpinned by action research’ (Hart and Bond, 1995, p 24). For example, Isabel Menzies (1970) illuminated how UK healthcare organisations had unconsciously developed social systems as defence mechanisms. These mechanisms were to protect nurses from the anxiety that could be caused by the physical intimacy nursing involves and nurses’

proximity to death and dying. In her research, she showed how these social systems resulted in task-focused routines that prevented nurses from delivering patient-centred care.

Later in the 1980s, participatory action research located within New Paradigm research emerged (Reason and Rowan, 1981). As noted above, this paradigm promoted qualitative human inquiry 'with' participants and not 'on' them. In parallel with thinking in the critical paradigm, this shift in the relationship between researchers and practitioners opened the way for co-operative inquiry and practitioner-research approaches. This shift of thinking has made a lasting impact on action research conducted in the health and social care professions (cf. Snoeren and Frost, 2011; Ollerton, 2012).

Emancipatory mode – democratising, empowering, liberating

The emancipatory mode of action research is located in the *critical research worldview*. It is concerned with seeking understanding but, to recap, it is also concerned with democratising, enabling empowerment, emancipation and power sharing. Emancipatory action research has primarily pedagogical origins in Latin America and in Europe.

In South America, the idea of Paulo Freire's (1972) community empowerment work was that the poor could learn to liberate themselves from poverty and that they could be helped to do this through literacy programmes and education. Influenced by Karl Marx, Jean-Paul Sartre and Ivan Illich among others, Freire's critical pedagogy is ideological and visionary, and shapes the work of international development agencies and local community organisations around the world. In the Netherlands in the 1960 and 1970s, emancipatory action research (*Acties Forshung Actieonderzoek*) was shaped by critical humanist pedagogy and neo-Marxist ideology (see Ponte and Rönnerman, 2009).

In the 1970s in the UK, Lawrence Stenhouse was developing the idea of teachers as researchers and critical communities of teacher-researchers committed to the improvement of their work and their understanding of it (Stenhouse, 1975). Later, this idea was linked with the reflective practitioner work of Donald Schön (1983). Thus, emancipatory action research was used, not only for curriculum development, but also as a professionalising strategy for teachers. It was seen as enabling the closure of the theory-practice gap (cf. Elliott, 1991).

Critical educational science, influenced by the philosophical ideas of Habermas (1972) and a pursuit of social justice and reform was further developed in Australia and the UK in the 1980s, significantly through the work of Carr and Kemmis (1986). They promoted Habermas' notion of communicative spaces for teachers generating new understanding and knowledge for practice and political (small 'p') change through critique. Thus action researchers in this tradition might start by critically reviewing the historical, cultural, social and political contexts of practice that are constraining social justice and reform of their educational practices. Understanding these constraints and other challenges is essential to planning effective action to overcome them. Critique of ideas and empirical data gathered in their action research also takes place through debate, dialogue and contestation (agreeing to agree or disagree). These ideas can be seen in the RCN Expertise In Practice Project example above.

In the early 1990s, emancipatory action research shaped by the above influences gained ground in health and social care professions. However, with experience, action researchers began to modify these approaches to suit the different contexts of health and social care. For example, in the Expertise In Practice Project, to involve all stakeholders in shaping the research, we combined it with Guba and Lincoln's (1989) Fourth Generation Evaluation approach (see Titchen and Manley, 2006). In the 2000s, emancipatory action research became widespread as a strategy for practice development research in nursing and increasingly in other healthcare professions in the UK, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand (see McCormack et al., 2004; Manley et al., 2008).

Transformational mode – enabling creativity and human flourishing

This particular approach to transformational action research was developed in nursing action research in the 2000s under the auspices of the International Practice Development Collaborative. It is now being used by nurses in the UK, Australia, Norway and the Netherlands. It is concerned with enabling creativity and human flourishing in addition to seeking new understanding, democratising, empowering and liberating. As indicated earlier in Definition 7, it can be located in the *critical creativity worldview* (McCormack and Titchen, 2006; Titchen and McCormack, 2010; McIntosh, 2010) in which the philosophical assumptions of critical social science are entwined with creativity and ancient wisdom traditions. An interdependency between human beings and the natural world is acknowledged. Creativity is a blending and weaving of art forms and reflexivity (critical consciousness) through professional artistry to achieve the ultimate outcome of human flourishing. Human flourishing focuses on maximising individuals' achievement of their potential for growth and development as they change the circumstances and relations of their lives.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have shown what action research is and offered a brief overview of its genesis and evolution. I have shown that action research has a hybrid genealogy with different action research modes drawing on different research paradigms, but all stemming from Kurt Lewin's (1946) initial idea of collaboration between researchers and workers to bring about social change.

My concluding remark concerns the importance of action researchers being intentional in their choice of worldview and philosophical assumptions. Before we step into the field of practice where the study is to be carried out, we have to be very clear about our paradigmatic origins and the philosophical, theoretical and methodological assumptions that we are going to work with. This clarity is needed because these assumptions influence our decisions about our research questions, products, methodologies, roles, the way we will relate with others, what we do and how we act. And the challenge is to help participants have a clear sense of the fundamental assumptions of the approach chosen. If you decide to set off on an action research adventure, understanding the genesis, evolution and orientations of action research will help you to be intentional in the design of your study. For further help in choosing your paradigm, you could refer to Titchen and Horsfall (2011).

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