

# 1

## FOUNDATIONS OF ACTION RESEARCH

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It is important to understand the foundations of action research and to explore different approaches to action research as there are subtle differences of emphasis and suitability for different situations.

### Chapter objectives

This chapter will examine:

- some of the philosophical issues underpinning action research and outline the work of early theorists, including Kurt Lewin's pioneering work and the influence of critical theory
- some of the key theoretical and interrelated aspects of action research, including:
  - human inquiry, cooperative inquiry and action science/action inquiry
  - participatory action research
  - action research and **feminsim**
  - appreciative inquiry

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### Introduction

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Simply put, action research is a process by which change is achieved and new knowledge about a situation is generated. These two objectives go hand-in-hand to a greater or lesser degree in most action research studies: it is difficult to change a situation without working to understand it more fully, and in trying better to understand things, the possibilities for change often emerge.

Coghlan and Brannick (2010) outline four broad characteristics of action research. These are:

- 1 Action research is about research *in* action rather than *about* action. Thus a 'scientific' process of inquiry is used in social settings to link important issues with those who experience them.
- 2 It is a collaborative, **democratic** process, meaning that there is active participation of those who experience the situation in working towards solutions. This is distinct from traditional research approaches, both quantitative and qualitative, where research participants are subjects rather than collaborators.
- 3 Action and knowledge are joined so that change occurs while there is a simultaneous process of knowledge generation.
- 4 It is a sequence of events and an approach to problem solving which contributes to knowledge and understanding.

### Box 1.1

This is a lengthy quote, which illustrates the challenge of being able clearly to define AR! For Waterman et al. (2001: iii), action research is

a period of inquiry that describes, interprets and explains social situations while executing a change intervention aimed at improvement and involvement. It is problem-focused, context-specific and future-oriented...founded on partnership...educative and empowering. ... Knowledge may be advanced through reflection and research, and qualitative and quantitative research methods may be employed to collect data.

Action research has been described (Reason and Bradbury 2006) as a 'new **paradigm**' in its focusing of research on participation and change. Research approaches are frequently discussed as coming from qualitative or quantitative **paradigms**, and although there is discussion and debate in the methodological literature concerning the underpinning theoretical positions each occupies, they are still frequently discussed as quite different ways of thinking about and doing research (there is more on this in Chapter 2). Quantitative research seeks to demonstrate an external reality through manipulation and control of variables and is based on a tradition of objectivity and **positivism**. This is frequently contrasted with qualitative research, which comes from a **hermeneutic** or **interpretivist paradigm**, in which the ability of human beings to construct and understand their lives is emphasised, and there is no fixed external reality (these arguments are more fully explored in Chapter 2). While some argue that this qualitative/quantitative dichotomy is a false one

(Morrow and Brown 1994), it is clear that action research fits fully with neither of these traditions, but has features of each, in that a process of change is applied to social life, whereas the reflexive nature of individuals and groups within any setting is also emphasised. This can be radical as it challenges traditional research approaches, existing forms of social organisation in the workplace and in society (Coghlan and Brannick 2010), and is described as **democratic** and participatory.

Action research has been quite recently adopted by healthcare professionals seeking to develop aspects of their practice and that of their organisations. It is not simply a 'tool' for practice development or change management; it has a long history in many sectors, and roots and a philosophical tradition which, arguably, go back to the early part of the twentieth century.

### Philosophical issues and action research

The philosophical issues encompass the extent to which participation and change can be fostered in action research, and it is important to consider these because they provide a different emphasis and intention from traditional research approaches. A foundation stone for action research appears to lie in the political philosophy of the critical theorists.

#### Critical theory

Originally a term associated with the Marxist-oriented Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, which was founded in Germany in 1923, 'critical theory' is now taken to mean an approach to social sciences that offers a critique of existing social relations as well as a perspective on how things should be changed, developed or improved. The original Frankfurt School included 'famous names' from the broad field of sociology and psychology, such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Fromm, many of whom moved to Columbia University in the USA in the 1930s to avoid Nazism. A 'second generation', including figures such as Offe, and Habermas, was influential in the 1960s and beyond, with Marcuse in particular influencing **democratic** and political reforms in favour of the 'new social movements', which sought greater freedoms for groups such as women, ethnic minorities and followers of single-issue politics such as the Green movement (Bronner and Kellner 1989).

Critical theory is seen as an 'antidote' to the quantitative or '**positivist**' tradition in research, which is argued to be uncritical, and therefore unlikely to generate social change (Bronner and Kellner 1989). The underlying premise of critical theory is concerned with human happiness and that this

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••• What is action research? •••

can be attained only by transforming all aspects of social life (Marcuse 1989). Critical theorists' focus is on the issue of domination: how some groups in society control all aspects of the lives of others, and thus inhibit those in oppressed groups from realising their full potential. Following Marx, critical theorists argue that economic power and class are the roots of oppression and the crucial factor is changing these existing power relations. Some critical theorists thus have an interest in beneficial change, or 'transformative praxis' (Morrow and Brown 1994: 27; although it is not the case that all critical theorists unambiguously associate 'critical theory' and a drive towards 'praxis') and their work is frequently described as being concerned with **emancipation** (Kellner 1989).

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••• REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 1.1 •••

- 1 What is your understanding of the term 'praxis'?
- 2 What is the additional meaning implied by adding 'transformative' to make 'transformative praxis'?
- 3 How would you define the concept of '**emancipation**'?

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••• ANSWERS •••

- 1 Praxis means a process by which a theory or skill is applied to the real world. It also has a political meaning: to change social relations, with connotations of theory and practice informing each other as change occurs. It can also mean 'making visible' and acting upon one's values.
- 2 While different authors use the term differently, it seems as if adding the term 'transformative' implies the intention on the part of authors to change aspects of social life in conjunction with those with whom they are interacting. There is an explicit 'looking forward' to the achievement of greater equality, or social justice, or overturning of exploitative power relations. 'Transformative praxis' thus has a more overtly political tone than using the term 'praxis' alone.
- 3 **Emancipation** means to become free or be set free. In the context of critical theory, **emancipation** can mean freedom from oppression or exploitation, in terms of economic power, gender relations or ethnicity.

### Habermas's critical social science

The work of Habermas may be unfamiliar to you but it can provide a philosophical basis for change in contemporary society. Habermas (1981) identifies three **knowledge-constitutive paradigms**, underpinning what he calls the 'empirical-analytical', the 'historical-hermeneutic' and the 'critical' sciences. The empirical-analytical sciences' base is technical control of the natural world. This instrumental knowledge generates rules, which the **Natural sciences** use for explanation and prediction (Carr and Kemmis 1986), for example as in quantitative research. The historical-hermeneutic sciences owe their genesis to the need for effective communication in contemporary societies, both between individuals and traditions and between different traditions. Methods in the historical-hermeneutic sciences are interpretive and 'practical', allowing people to understand their social worlds and their histories (Carr and Kemmis 1986), as for example in qualitative research; where communication breaks down, interaction becomes problematic. However, it would appear that only the 'critical' sciences offer the potential for transcending the constraints of the former two sciences, to grasp at **emancipation**: action research is taken as an example of a research technique from the critical sciences (Morrow and Brown 1994). This **emancipation** does not, for Habermas, preclude using either empirical-analytical, or historical-hermeneutic methods, but the potential for self-reflection is implicitly critical, challenging dysfunctional and oppressive structures whether they are political, economic, social or organisational. Thus an ethical dimension can be re-introduced into contemporary social life (Carr and Kemmis 1986), and praxis can be established as a guiding principle in social science research.

However, identifying and establishing praxis as a central tenet of contemporary life is problematic, not least because there may be many interpretations of what challenges there should be, how praxis can be identified and sustained, and what constitutes a new ethical dimension. For Carr and Kemmis (1986), Habermas's critical social science cannot reconcile the need for praxis with the need to meet the 'scientific' **positivist** notions of rigour which society has come to expect in research. Even so, Habermas shows that social science can claim **validity** based on shared understanding rather than the laws of the **natural sciences**, meaning that consensus about the **validity** of a discourse is not subject to the measurement of objective criteria but is a **democratic** event, as people participate equally in what he refers to as the 'ideal speech act'. This discourse involves four **validity** claims: (1) that what is said is *true*; (2) that the utterance is *comprehensible*; (3) that the speaker is *sincere*; and (4) that it is *right* for the speaker to be speaking.

For social scientists, Habermas implicitly calls for change-centred action, as critical social science is about the development of theory, the organisation

of learning processes and the organisation of action: political 'doing', aimed at **emancipation**. In this manner, social scientists can facilitate 'communicative action', which tests the accuracy, sincerity and rightness of social processes, including organisational life. For Habermas, social life in contemporary society has been appropriated by purposive-rational action and functional reason, meaning that mutual understanding and consensus are virtually suspended in modern organisational life: people are divided and fragmented by the social relations of bureaucracy and expert systems (Kemmis 1996); they simply get on with the job but this is not cost-free, causing crises borne by individuals and systems. As work roles become increasingly elaborate and differentiated, communities are increasingly difficult to sustain, and there is an 'uncoupling' of system and **lifeworld** (see below) for those who inhabit them (Habermas 1987).

### Habermas and action research

For Kemmis (2006), action researchers engage with the Habermas thesis, as they explicitly act on three kinds of **lifeworld processes**. These are: (1) the process of individuation-socialisation, by which participants' identities are formed; (2) social integration, forming and developing social relations; and (3) cultural reproduction, by which shared cultures and discourses are developed. Moreover, action researchers investigate and seek to change the ways in which participants are enmeshed in systems functioning. Kemmis (2006) argues that action research (AR) is an opportunity to create communicative action in participants as it illustrates and improves the alienating nature of contemporary organisations by its imperative to participate.

However, the action research movement predated Habermas by many years, and so Habermas provides retrospectively a philosophical background for methodologies advocated by action researchers (Kemmis and McTaggart 1990). Also, it is worth reflecting that although Habermas (1981) argues that contemporary societies should look critically at the over-arching dominance of **natural science** understanding, it is here that a key question arises for critical theory and similarly for action research, that is: Whose **emancipation** are we talking about? In critical theory there is an assumption that the 'common good' will appear from collective action, but this is by no means certain as what is good for one group or individual is not necessarily good for others, and the will of the majority is not necessarily clearly expressed or unconditionally good. Action researchers must be clear that they themselves do not simply impose the majority will on others as this would be oppressive.

## The diversity of action research

### Kurt Lewin's pioneering work

Kurt Lewin is frequently credited with pioneering early AR work (Dickens and Watkins 1999; McNiff 1988), and with coining the term 'action research' (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Greenwood and Levin 1998), although there is debate about the extent to which he inherited the idea from others (McNiff and Whitehead 2002). Lewin criticised his contemporaries' disconnected academic research, saying 'research that produces nothing but books will not suffice' (Lewin 1946: 35). He was convinced that social scientists should develop and apply techniques to equip groups with the ability to change aspects of their social or organisational lives for themselves (McNiff 1988). He conceptualised action research as a spiral methodology involving discrete phases (Lewin 1946):

- first, a planning or fact-finding phase, beginning with a general idea following extended 'diagnosis', and next,
- the implementation or execution of the plan, with this 'experimental' phase followed by further fact finding to evaluate the results of the action.

Lewin's (1946) work on 'minority problems describes a four-step cycle of action research (Figure 1.1), and he advocates repeated turns around the cycle so that the experience gained in the evaluation phase can be reapplied to the experimental phase.

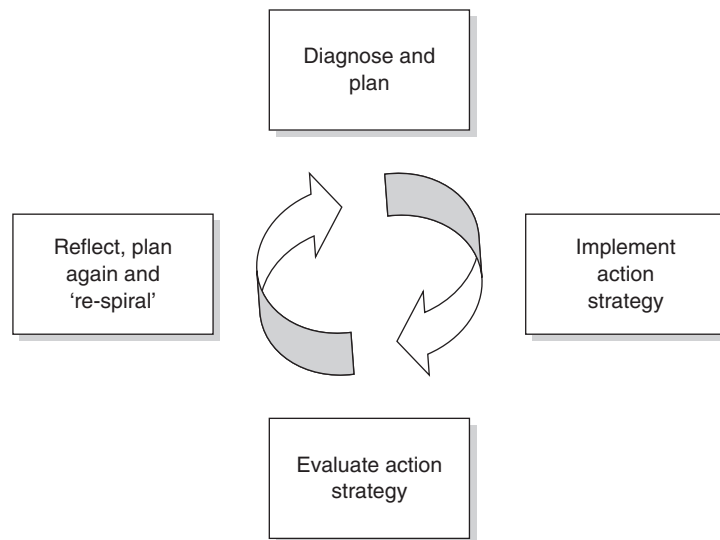


Figure 1.1 Action research spiral framework (adapted from Lewin 1946)

However, a critical evaluation of this spiral framework indicates that it has certain weaknesses (Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001).

- 1 It appears to oversimplify a complex iterative process, suggesting that the overall 'goal' in AR remains fixed when this is frequently not the case.
- 2 The emphasis on repeated spirals implies that AR must have a long time scale when this need not be the case.
- 3 AR seems difficult to distinguish from everyday interaction with colleagues, and so a criticism is whether or not AR really is a 'research' methodology.

Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001) continue by saying that AR is actually an ideal methodology for changing workplace practice, and the emphasis on reflection means that new knowledge and understanding are generated.

In work aimed at changing eating habits, Lewin (1966) demonstrated the relative efficacy of group decision-making processes compared to experts' exhortations by setting up a series of 'experiments' using his spiral AR methodology. In a study which aimed to alter mothers' preferences for certain foods, he examined whether his female participants would serve orange juice, cod liver oil, and fresh and evaporated milk to their families. He found that they were much more likely to introduce these 'new' foods when involved in a group decision-making process as opposed to receiving only a health education lecture. He was able to show that he could change elements of a pre-existing social system.

Although Lewin discusses 'experimentation' as predictive of participants' behaviour and sees the social system as relatively fixed following his 'intervention', unlike in a traditional scientific **paradigm**, results are studied in order to adjust the strategy and to refine it. There are no tightly set limits or controls on the 'experimentation', and the action researcher approaches the participants in their 'natural' state (Dickens and Watkins 1999).

Lewin's work was the building block for today's AR movement, setting the stage for a methodology that produces knowledge for the solution of real-world problems. He developed a new role for the researcher, and redefined criteria for judging the inquiry process. He also 'relocated' researchers, so that instead of disconnected observation, participation and concrete problem solving are central to their role. This was a radical departure from previous 'command and control' strategies intended to regulate workers' lives (Greenwood and Levin 1998), meaning that, rather than simply diffusing or disseminating new ideas in academic journals, action researchers are



instrumental in the implementation of solutions to the problems they help to identify (Sitziá 2001).

### **Varieties of action research**

Although in the following discussion the major strands of AR are treated distinctly, they are by no means so distinct, and there is a considerable overlapping and sharing of ideas, despite a somewhat different emphasis. These slightly different perspectives are included so that readers can get a flavour of the AR work that has taken place.

### **Human inquiry, cooperative inquiry and action science/action inquiry**

Human inquiry, cooperative inquiry and action science/action inquiry are closely related AR strands (Greenwood and Levin 1998). The central emphasis is on human experience and engagement, as distinct from today's perceived alienated living.

#### **Human inquiry**

For Reason, AR is a philosophical movement with an approach to living as much as a research approach, and it is not only about the search for truth, but should 'heal' (Reason 1994a: 10) the alienation of modern existence. Critics may see this as a call for bias, but this is false as, he argues, human beings are fundamentally located in the world, not abstracted from it. **Positivistic** principles bring a detrimental loss of relationships with other people, but this can be overcome by participation. This is a **dialectical** process of change where tension and contradiction drive forward the evolution of a future participatory human consciousness.

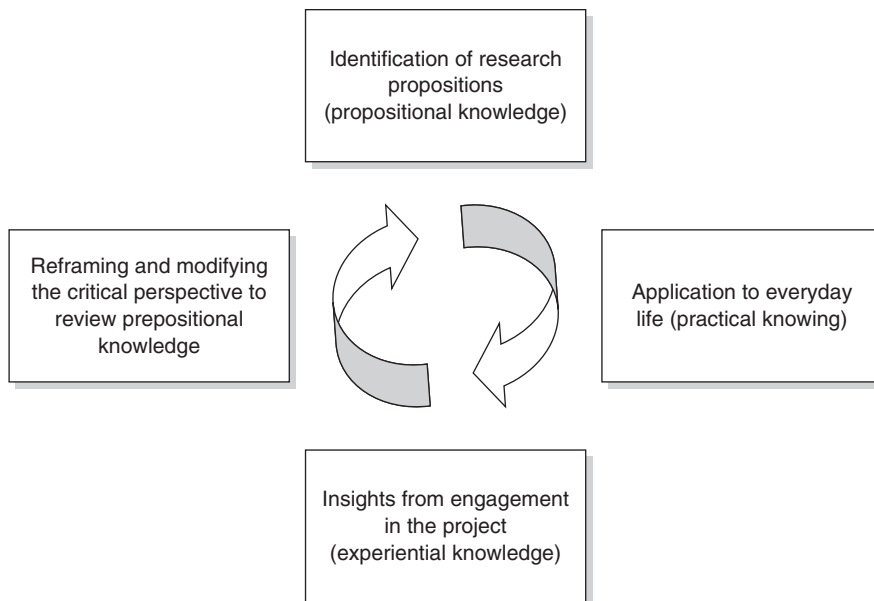
#### **Cooperative inquiry**

Cooperative inquiry is a variant of AR which is about finding ways of working with people who have similar concerns in order to understand the shared aspects of their worlds and to learn how to act to change things for the better (Heron and Reason 2006). Its micro-political format encourages individuals and groups to cooperate against controlling authoritarian processes (Heron 2001), and it has roots in humanistic psychology. Cooperative inquiry seeks 'authentic communication', for which orthodox social science methodology is inadequate as it excludes human beings from decision-making processes in research. In cooperative inquiry, those involved should be reciprocating co-researchers, reflecting the essential self-determining character of human

beings. It takes place in four phases of action and reflection, which rely on certain ideas about the nature of knowledge. These are:

- that co-researchers identify research propositions based on their experience, and identify procedures to observe and record their experience (propositional knowledge);
- that these procedures are applied to their everyday life and work, searching for nuisances and subtleties in the work (practical knowing);
- that new insights arise for the researchers as a result of their engagement in the project, developing an openness that allows them to bracket off personal beliefs to see the issues in a new way (experiential knowledge);
- that after a time in phase three, co-researchers return to their original propositions, reconsider and modify them in the light of experience, reformulating and reframing the question. This phase involves returning with a critical perspective to co-researchers' propositional knowledge (Reason, 1994b) (see Figure 1.2).

Critical examination of Figure 1.2 indicates how action research links insights from participants' real-world experience with a drive to change social situations in a similar fashion to that identified by Lewin (1946) and presented in Figure 1.1 (Reason (1994b) and Heron and Reason (2006)). What neither figure shows is how this circular two-dimensional representation is



**Figure 1.2 Four-phase spiral of action and reflection (adapted from Reason 1994b and Heron and Reason 2006)**

actually a three-dimensional spiral in which action researchers can reflect on and revisit their understanding with new insights gained from the project.

### **Action inquiry and action science**

In action inquiry and action science, there is an emphasis on developing effective action to transform organisations, producing greater effectiveness and justice (Reason 1994b). Central to action science are two cognitive theories of action. These are espoused theories, which individuals claim to use, and theories-in-use, which can be inferred from actions (Argyris and Schön 1974). These may be consistent or inconsistent, and the actor may or may not be aware of any inconsistency. In organisations, there are two models of action relating to cognitive theories-in-use. Model I is a defensive and self-protective theory, and Model II encourages free choice and open inquiry (Argyris and Schön 1974; Reason 1994b; Coghlan and Brannick 2010). Overcoming organisational defensiveness is a key element in action science to enable personal learning and practice development.

In action inquiry, organisations create structures to enable learning to take place so that individuals can become self-reflective about their work practices (Reason 1994b). For Torbert (2006), all action is a form of inquiry. Individuals and organisations need to go beyond the single-loop nature of learning from the impact and consequences of immediate actions only, to the more powerful double-loop reconstruction of personal and professional life strategies. However, it can be difficult to be self-reflective, and traditional social science research does not offer a means for doing this. Therefore, action inquiry is required to study both the 'outside' of the external universe as well as the 'inside' of 'territories of experience' (Torbert 2006: 208). There are four of these, which Torbert calls:

- visioning, which is a planning function looking to the future;
- strategising, which is developing ways of moving forward;
- performing, which is about carrying out the strategies; and
- assessing, which is about deciding on successes, failures and future actions.

Thus there is an emphasis on cognitive transformations in the individual, located in a wider organisational context (Greenwood and Levin 1998).

### **Participatory action research**

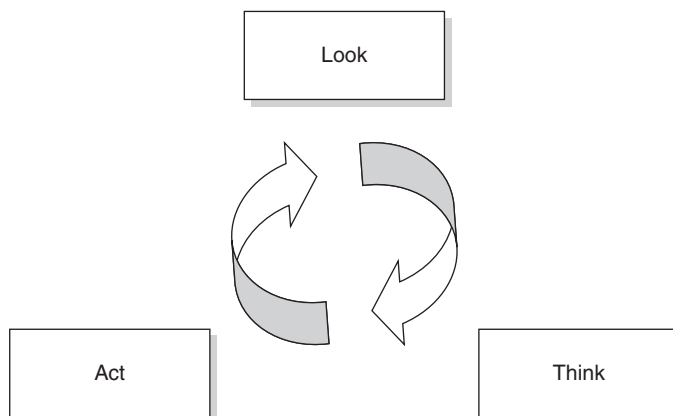
Participatory action research (PAR) emphasises the emancipatory potential inherent in AR methodology, involving a transformation of some aspect of a community's situation or structures. It focuses on issues of power, the exclusion

of the powerless from decision-making and how they can be included (Coghlan and Brannick 2010), and harnesses the lived experience of oppressed groups (Reason 1994b). It has an explicitly critical stance, which paradoxically seeks to transform the wider social order but is usually most effective in local situations (Healy 2001).

For Koch and Kralik (2006), there is an explicitly transformative agenda in their PAR work (examples of their work are discussed in Chapter 3), one that seeks to liberate, empower and reform situations as well as give substance to the voices of participants, who may previously have been excluded and marginalised. Their overriding concern is with 'making a difference' and their methodological approach is informed by critical theory and feminist thought. Thus PAR is a form of action directed towards social change which also includes a strong element of consciousness-raising: enabling participants to see how they may unwittingly contribute to their own oppression through discussion and reflection, and helping them to develop ways of overcoming it. This can be an explicitly political purpose where the intention is to restore power to oppressed groups. PAR is intended to go beyond abstracted 'scientific' methodology and narrowly focused Lewin-type AR to lay foundations for change in social conditions which communities themselves fashion. It is critical of ineffective research techniques, exhibits a radical social conscience, and demands **democratic** participation to find better scientific, technical and social ways to improve living conditions (Fals Borda 2006). In healthcare settings, PAR may not be so overtly political but is more concerned with changing practices and understanding of needs; while change is central, generating new knowledge is also an important consideration.

In PAR, researchers and participants systematically work in cycles to explore issues that have an impact on the lives of participants (Koch and Kralik 2006). A simple, three-stage cyclical approach of 'Look, Think and Act' (which Koch and Kralik adapted from Stringer's 1999 work; see Figure 1.3) gives structure as well as flexibility to the work, as it enables researchers and participants to focus on a particular area, reflect on and discuss its characteristics, and then reconstruct these experiences and decide courses of action.

This structure is not rigid or prescriptive and moves along according to the needs and requirements of participants. Research meetings may include Looking, Thinking and Action planning all together or may simply focus on one element. In the Looking phase, a picture is created of the issue in question. In the Think phase, there is a focus on interpreting and explaining things. In the Act phase, action is taken to resolve issues and this action is evaluated. Frequently, more than one cycle is undertaken.



**Figure 1.3** PAR cycles 'Look, Think and Act' (adapted from Koch and Kralik 2006: 28)

PAR is a community-based approach in that a community is constructed and maintained in which the researchers and participants are considered to be on an equal level, with the premise that a social situation or organisation ought to change for the better to enhance the lives of its members. Thus (drawing on Stringer's 1999 work) Koch and Kralik (2006; Figure 1.3) describe PAR as:

- **democratic,**
- equitable,
- liberating, and
- life-enhancing.

Critical examination of Koch and Kralik's (2006) framework indicates that, similar to Lewin's (1946) spiral, it would appear to simplify too much what Koch and Kralik (2006) themselves identify as flexible and complex action research processes, and again does not acknowledge fully the spiral nature of action research.

••• REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 1.2 •••

- Identify an area from work life with which you are not content. Explain why you not are content. Are there elements of power and powerlessness in what you identify?

- Using a three-stage PAR process of Look, Think and Act, write down your thoughts on what the issue is and how you might change the situation.
  - Look: identify the issue.
  - Think: reflect on its nature and characteristics. You are thinking through this alone, but as you will need colleagues and friends, users and carers to help and support you, reflect on who would be good co-researchers and participants. You will no doubt find that working with others on this gives a deeper understanding of the situation, a greater sense of purpose, an element of camaraderie and ownership of the project which would be of benefit to you all.
  - Act: how might you change things and how would you know you have been successful? Who would be the key people you would need to convince and what mechanisms and resources would you use to do so?

As this is a personal activity, no suggestions for answers have been included. However, if you were to use this as a project framework, can you see how identifying new knowledge in the Look and Think phases could quickly become change-focused action in the Act phase? (See Chapter 4 for a more detailed presentation about using AR to develop clinical care.)

### Action research and feminism

Feminist research is more than simply research done by women for/or with women; rather, it is an approach that makes its central concerns the needs of women and improving their lives, as well as breaking down the barriers between researcher and participants. For some authors, there is an explicitly critical dimension in that existing power relations between men and women are unequal and men's domination of society is oppressive to women (Webb 1993).

Several feminist writers have seen the emancipatory potential of AR. Greenwood and Levin (1998) outline how the feminist agenda and PAR overlap: suspicion or inappropriateness of **positivism**; analysis of power relations; respect for the knowledge of the 'silenced'; interest in transforming and emancipating praxis. These ideas should replace traditional research approaches in the social sciences, which are currently in turmoil as new **paradigms** replace old certainties in society and well as in research (Lather 1991). **Feminism** and AR are not competing frameworks but share a critical perspective that makes them allies as, for Lather (1988) and Piran (2001), **feminism** has helped create a space where a debate about power and the

production of knowledge can be held. Feminist research, then, is about both change and developing new knowledge, and thus shares similar aims to AR, albeit with the intention of uncovering and redressing the distorted power relations that exist between men and women.

Maguire (2006) argues that **feminism** has informed AR and helped create the conditions for its success because of the feminist critique of abstract knowledge. Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001) and Meyer (1993) note that both AR and feminist research value experiential knowledge and the importance of doing research *with* rather than *on* participants. Pioneering feminist work such as Oakley's (1981) redefined interviewing by relocating it away from traditional 'scientific' and detached approaches, focusing instead on women's shared identity, usable findings and a more open and participative process. 'Standpoint', meaning the position from which issues are viewed, is important. Thus women will have a very different perspective on, for example, childbirth, than a man ever can, and this shared understanding can and should inform their research. This applies in AR in that proximity and shared understanding with participants is a goal, and this is likely to be enhanced if a researcher shares membership of a particular group. Arguably, this is particularly important in research in healthcare, where a whole dimension of experience is potentially lost because subjects are frequently women, and policy-makers and researchers are often men.

AR and feminist research point in the same direction: to uncover, analyse and improve the position of disadvantaged groups within society by hearing their hidden voices (Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001). Feminists and action researchers should collaborate, as both make possible research avoiding the temptation for academics to speak for individuals, instead allowing them to use their own skills and voices to develop an understanding of their lives (Hollingsworth 1997). This is particularly important in practice settings where women predominate, such as in teaching, social work and nursing. Hollingsworth (1997) notes that AR is inherently emancipatory because it challenges existing masculine forms of authority and knowledge, arguing that one measure of success in feminist AR is the extent to which it is transformational. This is echoed by Koch and Kralik (2006) and Weiner (2004), who see PAR as offering genuinely emancipatory potential for feminists, arguing that PAR offers the ability for women to realise their potential by overcoming masculine domination, and so gender relations are their central focus. Koch and Kralik (2006) further identify five issues of importance when using PAR for feminist research. These are as follows:

- The researcher's position. Here, the aim is a non-hierarchical and reflexive approach to research that may challenge the researcher as well as the participants, but the researcher must understand that the research is owned

by the participants, that their voices must emerge, and that this can be very powerful.

- Participation and action. Here, Koch and Kralik (2006) argue that, as feminist researchers, they experience close connections with their participants. This leads to genuine mutuality in the production of data – they are all co-participants rather than ‘researchers and researched’.
- Disclosure of experiences. This means that telling the story is incredibly important and therapeutic for participants, and that in the telling new meaning occurs as people’s experiences are voiced and receive affirmation from others.
- Consciousness-raising. As feminist research aims to raise consciousness of women’s oppressed position in society with participants and with those in the wider arena, specifically with participants, the intention is to narrow the gap between them and encourage reciprocity through reflexive understanding.
- Feminist PAR with non-feminist women. Feminist conceptions of power may not be helpful to those without a feminist understanding, so researchers’ conceptions may dominate the research agenda when they are not explicitly wanted by non-feminist participants, and thus researchers can be accused of leading participants down paths of discussion to suit their own agenda. Sensitivity and balance are therefore always required in feminist PAR.

Griffiths (1994) aligns herself with the critical theory perspective, saying that AR is political for individual participants and can have a wider political impact, but also argues that AR should rightly begin with the personal. She argues that AR, and writing about AR, are essentially autobiographical acts. Journals or diaries form part of the ‘tool-kit’. This gives a powerful critique of abstract ‘masculinist’ knowledge, which seeks distance and abstraction from reality. Autobiographical writing opens the door for a subjective conscience, and this enables the ‘hidden’ voices of women to become heard in a way not previously possible. This is empowering and is part of a new theorising of ‘difference’, or gender inequality. There is emancipatory potential for men as well as women because mutual and inclusive gender relations are only possible if both genders’ voices are heard. AR thus has a wider political significance because as a methodology it can uncover women’s voices, particularly in ‘hidden’ occupations like teaching and nursing. However, the relationship between AR and **feminism** remains ‘uneven ground’ (Maguire 2006), as action researchers have been slow to acknowledge and develop the links. Weiner (2004) goes further, arguing that linking critical theory and action research misses the potential to explicitly link change through action research with a feminist emancipatory agenda.



### Appreciative inquiry

A change process known as appreciative inquiry (AI) uses elements of AR. AI was developed in his doctoral studies by David Cooperrider in the 1980s. When he interviewed Cleveland Clinic clinical staff about their successes and failures, he found the success stories powerful and focused on them. His findings had a huge impact on the Clinic and its board, who requested that he use them throughout the organisation (Seel 2008). AI focuses on the need for change, but is based on taking a positive approach, so rather than focusing on what is wrong, AI results in the synergy and commitment of individuals and departments by seeking to discover the best possible outcomes and working towards them, seeing the glass as half full rather than half empty (Lewis and Van Tiem 2004). As Cooperrider (2008) puts it, AI turns change management on its head, as instead of expecting another survey of low morale to change the workplace culture, what is required is an awareness of high 'commitment work systems', which can occur by tapping into how workers experience the best aspects of their own working lives. Rather than a small group of managers doing the work and rolling out the findings, if strategic change is required, the number of participants should be hundreds, even thousands of employees at once, in the same place, cooperating to bring about real organisational change.

A '4-D cycle of discovery' is utilised (see Figure 1.4): discovery, dream, design and destiny. This is not a fixed or prescriptive framework, but rather a map of a journey of engagement between participants and organisational change (Moore 2008). The process begins with an appreciative interview and focuses participants' energies towards identifying an answer to the question 'What do you really want?' It is thus concerned with consolidating a vision of a better future into achievable directions. This is a wholly positive endeavour, with an unconditionally positive question framed for participants (Cooperrider et al. 2005). AI is based on five principles (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005). These are:

- 1 The constructionist principle. This states that individuals are continually negotiating, communicating and interacting with those around them, and that this interaction builds organisational change. Knowledge thus has a communal basis. The function of AI is to chart future success based on previous achievements, rather than simply solve problems.
- 2 The simultaneity principle. This states that inquiry and change are intertwined. These are reflected in the questions asked, and these questions are an important factor in the direction in which change occurs.
- 3 The poetic principle. This holds that organisations are not closed machines but open, human activities. The past, present and future are

constantly open to change from the different interpretations placed in them by different people, in the same way that poetry or literature is interpreted differently by different people.

- 4 The anticipatory principle. Positive images of the future lead to positive transitions. What organisations focus on is what they get, so a positive focus on beneficial change is more likely to be successful than a continual focus on short-term problem-solving.
- 5 The positive principle. The more positive and uplifting, the more a sense of shared understanding and camaraderie are generated by AI, the more likely successful and long-lasting change will be.

Critical appraisal of Figure 1.4 suggests that it too has an emphasis on a singular turn of the circle, rather than an evolutionary spiral. However, this may make it suitable for visionary or transformative events in clearly defined contexts.

In the Discovery phase, the emphasis is not on identifying problems, but is about listening to and understanding what individuals believe to be the positive aspects of working in the organisation, what they consider to work well, and their successes. As Lewis and Van Tiem (2004: 21) state, '[t]elling their stories and having witnesses is an exceptionally transforming experience' for individuals and ultimately organisations. In the Dream phase, the drive is to promote a vision of excellence so that groups of workers are encouraged to dream about what the organisation might be like if the excellence they identify in the Discovery phase were, in fact, their routine practice. In the Design phase, groups of participants work out how to change the

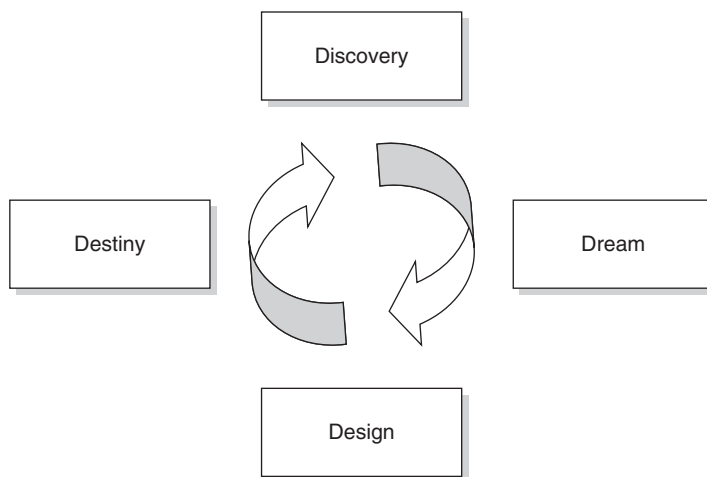


Figure 1.4 Appreciative inquiry 4-D cycle (adapted from Moore 2008)

organisation for the better to make their dreams for it come true, looking at the specifics of how to get things done. The Destiny (or Deliver) phase is where organisational cultures and structures are actually changed. Further work should also take place using further 4-D cycles.

This positive emphasis and imagery is very powerful. Even the most profoundly negative elements of a workplace can be accommodated by good facilitation (see Chapter 6), which can work to turn the negatives into positives: using empathy and good listening skills, participants can be induced to outline how things *should* have been and thus how they *might* be (Seel 2008). AI thus encourages a collaborative approach between members of different organisational departments, and potentially between other organisations, which might otherwise find themselves in opposition or working towards conflicting goals. By focusing on the positive aspects of social life, AI reduces defensiveness and encourages discussion and collaboration (Reed et al. 2002).

For Oliver (2005), AI is uncritical in the sense that it does not challenge existing power relations, and she seeks to reframe it as *critical appreciative inquiry*. This should acknowledge power relations and encourage a less hierarchical approach than is the norm in organisations, and this understanding can be beneficial for management practice.

In healthcare, AI has been used to improve care for patients and clients. For example, Guilar and Start (2001) used AI for South Southwark Primary Care Group to improve diabetes care with six general practices in London. Patients and professionals including nurses and doctors attended. The workshop focused on the question 'How can we enable people with diabetes to manage their diabetes as well as possible?' This question focused on positive aspects, hoping to turn them into reality. Their interviews used a script full of positive potential.

### Box 1.2

- 1 Talk about a particular incident when you enabled someone to manage their diabetes more effectively.
- 2 What do you think you/your organisation/the service does really well when managing diabetes?
- 3 If overnight a miracle happened and the diabetes service you and your practice/unit provided was exactly how you would like it to be:
  - a What would be the same?
  - b What would be different?

Guilar and Start's (2001) diabetes care interview script. Adapted from Guilar and Start (2001: 85)

Including patients as participants was extremely valuable, as they offered useful insights when asked 'What has been really helpful in managing your diabetes care?' The whole project enabled real change to take place in the management of diabetes care in this area of London, and three new services were established as a result (Guilar and Start 2001). These were:

- A GP/Practice Nurse Diabetic Forum for collaboration between the community staff and the consultant diabetologists.
- A Diabetic Patients' Support/Education Group to examine patient-focused resources.
- Patient-held notes.

Reed et al. (2002) discuss their large project which involved a wide range of agencies and included older people, and which developed practice in the area of 'going home from hospital'. The study used three workshops in one English health district, with 71 participants. Group members were also required to carry out some activities between workshops. Workshop 1 discussed the planned research schedule and introduced the basic concepts of AI. Participants were asked the 'miracle question': they were asked to imagine that a miracle had happened overnight and now every hospital discharge went well every time. They were then asked to tell the interviewer:

- What would be different about the world after the miracle?
- What would be in place?
- What would be happening?
- What would the results be?

Notes from the interviews were sent to the coordinators prior to workshop 2, where these interview data were analysed by the group using the nominal group technique. The key themes were the need for understanding, coordination, empowerment and evaluation. A number of provocative propositions were then constructed. These provocative propositions were used at the third workshop when participants were asked to join groups to consider them and their work was developed into action plans. Reed et al. (2002) conclude that while the AI process was useful as a facilitation exercise, the actual project outcomes were difficult to track successfully, as they were working in such a complex, multi-agency setting. As senior management had not participated, it was noted that the 'real' decision makers had not been involved, but the 'networking opportunity' in a positive and blame-free environment was valuable nonetheless.

How might appreciative inquiry help you?

- Think about your own organisation or clinical setting.
- Using the 4-D cycle, think about how you would like things to be.
  - Design: Ask yourself the question ‘What do you really want?’ from your work.
  - Dream: Dream about how things might improve for you, your patients and clients, your colleagues and the organisation.
  - Design: What would you need to do to make things better? Who would you need to convince? Who would you need to collaborate with? What new networks would you need to establish?
  - Destiny: Once established, how would you evaluate and demonstrate the benefits? What extra work might you need to do to embed and sustain your new practices?

### Summary

AR originated as a recognisable entity with Kurt Lewin, who was concerned with developing techniques applicable to the real world for generating change in behaviour (Lewin 1966). Philosophically, AR has been linked to the work of the critical theorists, who sought to change social and economic relations with overtly political action. The long history and methodological diversity of AR is reflected in numerous writers’ development of the original concepts and, as Greenwood and Levin (1998) argue, the diffusion of AR ideas is a success story for the movement. While there are many strands, the key point is not which strand you favour as a matter of orthodoxy, but which will work for you in your setting or workplace.

### Further reading

These books relate to key issues discussed in the text above, and will be useful as further reading to illustrate the diversity of action research approaches

Coghlan, D and Brannick, T (2010) *Doing action research in your own organisation* (3rd edition). London: Sage.

Cooperrider, D L and Whitney, D (2005) *Appreciative inquiry: A positive revolution in change*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Koch, T and Kralik, D (2006) *Participatory action research in healthcare*. Oxford: Blackwell.

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••• What is action research? •••

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Reed, J (2007) *Appreciative inquiry: Research for change*. London: Sage.  
Tyson, L (2006) *Critical theory today* (2nd edition). London: Routledge.

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**Useful websites**

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- Action Research Resources: [www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html](http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html) has a number of useful resources.  
Actionresearch.net: <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/> has a number of useful links and resources.  
Appreciative Inquiry Commons: <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/> has a number of useful resources on AI.  
Appreciative Inquiry Consulting: [www.ai-consulting.co.uk/](http://www.ai-consulting.co.uk/) has a number of useful resources and video clips on AI.  
Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP) , University of Bath: [www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/](http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/).  
Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN): [www.did.stu.mmu.ac.uk/carnnew/](http://www.did.stu.mmu.ac.uk/carnnew/).  
Kurt Lewingroups, experiential learning and action research: [www.infed.org/thinkers/et-lewin.htm](http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-lewin.htm).  
New Paradigm Consulting: [www.new-paradigm.co.uk/index.htm](http://www.new-paradigm.co.uk/index.htm) has a number of useful resources on AI.  
Social and Organisational Learning as Action Research, University of the West of England: [www.uwe.ac.uk/solar/](http://www.uwe.ac.uk/solar/).

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**Action research journal websites**

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- Action Research*: <http://arj.sagepub.com/>  
*Action Research International* (online journal): [www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/ari/arihome.html](http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/ari/arihome.html)  
*Educational Action Research*: [www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t716100708](http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t716100708)

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Coghlan, D and Brannick, T (2010) *Doing action research in your own organisation* (3rd edition). London: Sage.  
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