

ACTION RESEARCH IN ORGANISATIONS AND COMMUNITIES: ORIGINS, EVOLUTION AND SUCCESS STORIES

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Abstract: *The paper begins with a short incursion into the origin and evolution of action research as a form of knowledge and of specific intervention in organisations and communities. It proceeds then to reveal the interferences with the participative research and with the classical research technique of findings restitution, towards the goal of organisation and community change promotion. Some success stories are then presented: that of Xerox, of the Mondragón-Cornell project, of Pasmore and Friedlander project and, from Romania, that of the Alba Iulia Local Community Barometer 2015.*

Key words: *Action research, intervention, findings restitution.*

1. Introduction

Some researchers, like Somekh (1995, p. 340) characterize the action research through its general methodology and identify the borderline between research and practice. Similarly, Miftode (2004, pp. 339-340) saw in action research the main avenue for attaining a sociologist's objectives, especially that of the transformation of the social environment and of the achievement of improvements in peoples' living conditions. We tie up these observations with one important theoretical problem, that of the relationship between intervention method and action research. Brincker and Gundelach (2005, p. 369) assert that the intervention method differs from the integrative type of action research by its insistence on conflict and social change, and also by the social actors' role. The Action research attempts to create consensus, among collective actors, over their roles and potential for social change.

Small (1995, pp. 941-942) observed that, historically speaking, action research has traditionally been associated with the economic domain and with organisational development, later on having been applied to other fields like education, agriculture and human development.

Senn remarked that action research is the oldest type of research method in the study of social change. Lewin, Senn said, claimed that *when they wish to facilitate social*

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change, psychologist must conduct comparative research on the conditions and on the effects of different forms of social action which will lead to social action. According to Senn, Kurt Lewin used action research in various situations ranging from the optimisation of intergroup (inter-racial) relationships to democracy and democratic leadership and all the way to how the war effort had been sustained through changes in housewives food buying and preparation habits (Senn, 2005, p. 357).

The "classical" stages of action research according to Miftode (2004, p. 344) are: (1) - The *group dynamics* stage; (2) - the *participative action-research* stage with actions in the British army, particularly applied to psychological problems, the "in-group" treatment; (3) - The *institutional therapy* stage, the example being that of the Saint-Alban Asylum in France during the 40's.

Action research intertwines with participative research and implies the use of results restitution technique. What distinguishes the participative research from action research is that the origin of the research questions is the community and not the researcher (Stoecker, 1999). In this context, the researcher is seen as an educator/leader that helps the community to successfully control the transition away from false conscience, the research process itself having the benefit of making subjects more conscious of their true resources and abilities. This purpose requires the researcher to assume the role of a facilitator, rather that of a finding producer (*idem*). As to the forms action research takes, Argyris and Schön (1989) see the participative action research as a form of action research whereby the beneficiaries are both subjects and co-researchers. McIntyre (2008), Dentith et al. (2009) associate the participative action research with Lewin's name.

References to result restitution methods can be found as early as the seventh and the eighth decades of the last century in France, where considerable efforts were undertaken towards the modification of the French rural space. The importance of a well-defined rural survey, Mucchielli (1976) appreciated, was measured by the extent to which the restitution to the community of the surveys' findings was able to unlock the local dynamics.

More recently, Bergier (2000, p. 8) proposed the following definition for restitution: "That act or dynamic through which the researcher shares with his field collaborators the results of processing the collected data (preliminary or final) for analysis, and for ethical or heuristic purpose".

Now that we have laid down some of the theoretical and historical premises of action research, we shall review some success stories of employing it in some organisations and communities. Following these, a short incursion will be made into its use in the particular case of Romania, according to current sources of information. Some conclusions and prospects will also follow.

2. Action Research: Success Stories

Argyris and Schön (1989) relate the story of Xerox company who, with the intent of saving \$3.2 million a year, was on its way to close down a cabling department, lay 180 workers off and outsource the department's process. Lazes, a Cornell University

researcher proposed an alternative: the assembly of a cost analysis team that was also to look into alternative internal changes that would save the company the \$3.2 million and the 180 jobs. An eight-person team was assembled including management and labour representatives and they were given six months to study the problem, Lazes being the facilitator of the team on a consulting basis (Argyris and Schön, 1989, pp. 614-615). Solutions were found in two areas. One was the employment "bumping" policy (the redistribution of vacancies based on length of service) where costs could have been reduced - contingent on contractual changes - through the stabilisation of workers for longer periods of time on current jobs. The second area was that of cabling department's utility costs which were excessive. The reduction of expenses in these two areas was sufficient to offset the yearly costs of \$3.2 million. More importantly than the solution itself however, was the organisational learning process through which it was achieved, and which relied on opening participants' access to hidden information and on developing a cooperative relationship among stakeholders which traditionally were in opposing positions.

Established in 1943, the Mondragón cooperative complex in the Basque region of Spain was considered a notable example of successful industrial cooperative (White, Greenwood and Lazes, 1989, p. 526). The story elicited the interest of Cornell University researchers who, while initially studying the success of the cooperative, begin to shift their focus towards its problems. The research has been coordinated by Greenwood, a well-known promoter of industrial anthropology. He first assembled a team made up of human resource specialists who put together a study on a seed cooperative. The research involved a series of interview-based surveys, the subjects being under continuous education and involvement into the design of the instruments. Greenwood's role was that of a facilitator. Team members practiced role-based interviewing and held long meetings, analysing both the interviewing process and various results of it (White, Greenwood and Lazes, 1989, pp. 529-531). The interviews were pivotal in supplying a systematic body of information on conflicts and on other problems in a way that facilitated the systematic reflection upon the findings. The most notorious problem identified by the system was the alienation of cooperatives as a result of their growth in size, complexity and of their bureaucratisation. Another noteworthy observation is that members of the human resource departments have become more prepared to advance their own projects of action research, and so departments' budgets started to benefit from higher allocations for these types of activities (*ibidem*, pp. 531-533).

Two American researchers, Pasmore and Friedlander, have been hired by a private firm to investigate the occurrence of a possibly work-related medical condition called tenosynovitis (inflammation of tendons) among its workers; the increased incidents of it had several negative consequences: 1) a drop in productivity, 2) an increase in absence and sick leave requests, and 3) the overall risk of closure and lay-offs. Previous medical efforts were unsuccessful in identifying the cause of the syndrome. A first thing that Pasmore and Friedland noticed, according to Senn, was that the workers had no control over their work environment. They had never been asked about the causes of their illness (Pasmore and Friedland, 1982, apud Senn, 2005, pp. 357-358). To implement the intervention programme, Senn describes, the researchers put together a Studies and

Communication Group made out of five workers, two team leaders, the manager responsible for employee relations, and the researchers themselves. Group members were then presented the principles of action research and the employees were encouraged to freely express their opinions on the issue. During the following months Group members developed an interview guide and a questionnaire while being helped to develop research abilities (like that of administering a participative research). The Group then administered the research survey to all employees and finally prepared a series of conclusions and recommendations based on the analysis of 50 interviews and questionnaire responses. The results were disseminated to all employees, management included. Some findings - like the critique of the stressful management style - predictably were not happily acknowledged by management, but the interesting bit is that the research process itself resulted in lower incidence in injuries, long before any organisational change be implemented. The build-up of trust that occurred during the cooperative research process, together with the massive employee information campaign on the progress of the project, the assurances of serious commitment to solving the problem, and the change in the power dynamics between management and labour, they all contributed to a reduction in general stress level. The issue of stress, which had been overlooked by medical researchers in spite of the available means specific to their professional field, appears to have been the main driver for the existing medical problems (Pasmore and Friedland, 1982, apud Senn, 2005, pp. 358-359).

At community level, one of the most interesting examples of action research in our opinion is the one undertaken by Lundy and McGovern (2006) in Northern Ireland. The two researchers studied a series of groups having been in conflict over the existing space. The experimental project also included 30 persons, relatives of victims of the Northern-Ireland conflict. Following a series of meetings, discussions and debates, the idea of a commemorative book emerged. During the four years of study, over 300 people were interviewed and, in 2002, at the commemoration of 33 years from the occurrence of the first victim in the community conflict, the book called *Ardoyne: the Untold Truth* was published. A few hundred relatives of the victims and other community members participated in the event. The book included 99 case studies, each being supported by 2-3 oral testimonies, and a series of historical chapters for incidents' contextualisation. Prior to being published, each interview and testimony had been reviewed by its source to be validated and corrected if necessary. More so, the series of interviews in some cases have been returned to their respective sources in their entirety, in order to be validated or rectified, based on complementary sources' testimonies. At the action level, the main purpose of the project was that of reducing the existent tensions among the descendants of those killed in the previous decade's conflicts.

Under the coordination of Associated Professor PhD. Lucian Marina, the *Local Community Barometer* of the city of Alba Iulia (Romania) gathered data from 2014, 2015 and 2016. The first results were published in a book (Marina and Pascaru, 2015) that was made available to authorities and other local stakeholders. A few months after the publication some findings became the object of interviews with local city councillors, occasion on which results from the 2014 survey have been returned through restitution

interviews by Lecturer PhD. Rodica Stănea. The local councillors' responses showed some positioning on the side of or against the barometer findings, but also more or less successful attempts to explain the results. During the 2014 results restitution process local councillors have also been encouraged to come up with proposals for further research in the years to follow. One issue was the functioning of the Local City Council itself, another one being healthcare. A proposal for studying the younger generation and the options being available to them was equally interesting. And finally, future concerns about their city, as expressed by citizens, have all been forwarded to attention by local councillors (Pascaru, 2015, pp. 25-26).

3. Action Research in Romania

Action research in Romania is connected to some authors from Bucharest Sociological School (Sandu, 2012), a social and academic movement with roots and most notable activity in the period prior to World War II.

The more systematic theoretical efforts have been made more recently though, after the year 2000, by researchers from Iași School of Sociology like Miftode (2003) and Cojocaru (2004). Cojocaru (2005) and Sandu (2009) also deserve being mentioned for their contribution to the development of appreciative methodology as a form of action research. Their path is more akin to the one followed by us when approaching action research in a series of European projects that more or less explicitly promoted the concept. Ampler observations on action research were included by us in another paper focused on participative research and applied social science (Pascaru, 2011).

As to the formation of specialists in action research projects, the educational field seems to be privileged. We will limit ourselves on this matter to mentioning a work like *The Psycho-pedagogy of People with Special Needs. Strategies for Integrated Education* (Gherguț, 2001) which was recommended by its author by saying it is time that, through a series of research and action research activities, we intervene on all avenues towards the formation in new teachers and educators of the real image of what "school for everyone" means, and, at the same time, we draw the attention of parents and teachers to the necessities and the advantages of an integrated education.

At the University of Timișoara, Florin Alin Sava PhD. implemented the project *Graduates' Competencies and Employers' Needs. An Action Research for Labour Market Integration*.

The University of Craiova implemented the project *Cognitivism and Constructivism - New Paradigms in Education. Consequences on the Initial Formation of Teachers as Future Actors in the European Educational Space*, under the coordination of Professor Elena Joița PhD., a project based on applicative and improved action research.

In the Romanian cities of Aiud and Cluj-Napoca in 2015 the project *Action research LERI-Romania for Ensuring the Right to Housing* was implemented having in its focus a series of Roma communities.

The Department of History and Theory of Architecture and Conservation of Patrimony from the Architecture and Urbanism University "Ion Mincu" of Bucharest city implemented the project *Art - Urban Communities - Mobilisation*, under the

coordination of architects Ana Maria Zahariade and Irina Băncescu. The project is based on oriented research and on action research, proposing the unification under an interdisciplinary theoretical framework of the knowledge of the relationship between architecture and urbanism on the one hand and art and community in public space on the other.

As to research centres that explicitly endorse action research, one should mention the University of Timisoara and its Centre for Action Research on Discrimination and Social Inclusion, coordinated at one point by Professor PhD. Teodor Mircea Alexiu.

4. Conclusions and Future Prospects

A significant advantage of action research over traditional research appears to be that of producing change earlier, during the research phase, and not just after the analysis, design and intervention implementation phases. Action research would not be possible however without a proper formation of its beneficiaries, which in many cases involves their withdrawal from productive activities in order to obtain their full immersion into the research process. This results in additional costs and inconveniences which most frequently end up being the main reason for managements' reluctance to attempt such strategies, whether involving private companies or local communities' administrative institutions. The success of some projects makes a compelling argument however in the methods' favour. The savings achieved at Xerox, the preservation of Mondragón's cooperative system, or the disappearance of medical problems as a result of Pasmore and Friedlander experiment are notable success stories that come to confirm its merit. The decrease in intra-community tensions in the divided communities of Northern Ireland are also reasons not to ignore the potential of this approach.

The research undertaken in the city of Alba Iulia, with its finding restitution strategy speaks to the merit of the participative model of governance, the participation being sociologically induced, as we mentioned in an older work (Pascaru, 2010).

The short incursion into the use of action research in Romania at a national level is not very encouraging though. It remains to be analysed more profoundly to understand why the action research method is not employed enough and what should be done to encourage a wider use of it. Speaking to our particular case, at the University of Alba Iulia, while we did introduce a while ago into our master programs the discipline of Participative Action Research, the practical experimentation through specific undertakings is extremely unlikely for us and our students. A related area with promising potential for us remains the finding restitution technique mentioned above and which proved quite successful at the level of territorial communities.

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