

Editorial

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For several years the EGOS (European Group of Organisation Studies) conference hosted a standing working group on action research. Each year a number of researchers engaged in action research met to discuss their research projects. Although the commonalities in approaches were always the most salient, there have always been differences popping up in various places in the discussions. These differences have not always been clear to everyone. But gradually different ways of conceptualising action research practices have surfaced. The differences within action research are partly dependent on whether action research is being done with organisations, local communities, families, professional practice, etc. but not always.

This situation is the starting point for this special issue of the IJAR. In the call for papers we asked: “Do different ways of talking about action research indicate different concepts of action research and different ways of doing action research?” We have ended up with focusing mainly on three different approaches or conceptualisations, wondering whether their differences are merely terminological, or conceptual and practical as well. The different approaches are the following.

1) *Action research as collaboration.* Many talk about action research as essentially a collaboration between professional researchers in educational and research institutions, and practitioners in local communities or work life organisations. Although this collaboration or co-operation may be modelled and conceptualised quite differently, the common denominator seems to be some kind of collaboration and division of labour between people working in research or education and people having “ordinary” jobs in “ordinary” work life. For some, this approach even deserves a slightly different name from action research, for instance “interaction research”.

2) *Action research as intervention.* Others, or even the same who talk about collaboration, often talk about their action research as “intervention research”, often in analogy to some form of engineering, therapy, or medicine. Intervention research seems most often to be seen in contrast to a disengaged and non-interfering science positioned outside what it studies.

3) *Action research as practitioner research.* Finally, an increasing number of people – mostly coming from within different professions and semi-professions – talk about action research as “practitioner research” or even “native research” or more specifically as “teacher research”, “nursing research” etc. In practitioner and native research the research tasks seem to have been taken over by the practitioners themselves or by the “insiders” to the social units concerned.

The purpose of the special issue has been to explore the differences and similarities between these and other approaches to action research, and to relate them explicitly to each other. Do these different ways of talking about action research really represent different ways of doing action research or different ways of thinking and conceptualizing action research? Are they mostly different dialects without much substantial differences (hiding similar practices), or do they really represent different practices and epistemological approaches to or interpretations of action research?

The intention was to explore these issues and differences critically by getting people who insist on or at least prefer calling what they do by either of these names to present their reasons and justifications for doing so, and simultaneously to relate explicitly to other ways of thinking about action research, demonstrating advantages and disadvantages with the different ways of understanding.

So, did we succeed in clarifying the matter through the contributions to this issue? Probably only partly. Three of the contributions in this issue have one of the approaches as its starting point; Shani, Coghlan, & Cirella, the collaborative perspective, Savall, Zardet, Péron, & Bonnet, the interventionist perspective, Schaenen, Kohnen, Flinn, Saul, & Zeni, the practitioner perspective. The first two articles make an effort at presenting and describing their approaches, which is clarifying, of course, and Shani et al. provide a detailed comparison of action research and collaborative management research. But

the justifications and reasons why one approach is called “intervention”, another one “collaboration” and others maybe both, may not be completely clarified by these presentations and comparisons. Somehow we could be right in saying that everyone who “interacts” also “collaborates” and “intervenes”, something that would trivialise the differences and make whatever you call it a matter of total indifference; i.e. differences that don’t make a difference. But somehow there are bigger issues than terminology at stake here. The collaborative and interventionist approaches are at least relatively clearly distinguishable from the practitioner research approach. While the collaborative and interventionist approaches emphasise the coming together of “outsiders” and “insiders”, the practitioner research approach does not. The contribution from Schaenen et al. discusses several differences and tensions between “insiders” and “outsiders”, which in turn raise interesting questions.

Finally, Eikeland’s contribution tries to relate the different terms used to different “ways of knowing” extracted from the texts of Aristotle. This may succeed in indicating that there really are “big issues” at stake in the discussions of these differences, but exactly how is perhaps not as crystal clear.

Eikeland’s text challenges all the others with its promotion of “praxis research”, which he understands as based in accumulated practical experience, as knowers extracting and articulating patterns (ways-of-doing-things) in their own practices by means of critical, distinguishing dialogue.”

Nevertheless it remains somewhat unclear how the modern terminology and practices correspond to the different ways of knowing introduced. In relation to the different ways of knowing, the practices of the different approaches appear to remain a “mixed bag”. All in all, the discussion hardly ends with the articles in this issue. But hopefully they bring the discussion a step further by putting these differences on the agenda, and by trying to analyse and characterise the differences as either trivial or important. If they are trivial, a more homogenous terminology might help. If they really are conceptual and important in designating practical differences, further discussion is needed. The four contributions to this issue were written in parallel, i.e. without commenting directly on each other. Future contributions may need to enter into a critical dialogue with each other in order to progress.

Last but not least journal's editors want to thank Olav Eikeland for his initiative resulting in the present special issue of International Journal of Action Research, and especially for his careful attention for and cooperation with the authors of this issue as a guest editor. We invite readers to continue the discussion initiated by Olav; IJAR's discussion forum might be the right place to do so.