



IN5000 - Qualitative Research Methods Action Research

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Feel free to reach out

- If you at some point consider using AR, have any questions, or requests for further readings, feel free to contact me on email.

Learning objectives

For this topic, you should be able to...

- Describe the basic principles of Action Research (AR)
- Compare AR to other qualitative research methodologies
- Discuss the relationship between AR and different qualitative research paradigms (e.g., interpretivism and positivism)
- Reflect on and discuss the potential relevance of AR for your own research project

Why learn about Action Research?

- Adding to the 'buffet' of relevant methodologies for your own research: May be relevant as methodology for the master project of some of you
- Action Research is a common methodology within Information Systems (IS) research; helps you understand the basis of the academic literature you read
- Helps illustrate characteristics of other methodologies such as case studies with contrasting approaches.

Exercise

Exercise

For one minute: note down some bullet points for the following question:

- What do you think when you hear 'Action Research'?

What's the "Action"?

What's the Action?

Two relevant types of research methodologies:

- Methodologies for exploring 'what is' - ***descriptive or explanatory*** (e.g., case studies)
- Methodologies for exploring 'what can be' - ***constructive or interventionist*** (e.g., action research, design research)

What's the Action?

- In contrast to case studies where we study a system “as is” - in AR, interventions in the system (action) are systematically planned, introduced, and evaluated.
- AR thus involves an interest in participating in *change*, and developing a deeper understanding of a phenomenon through processes of change

Exercise

Consider following research question:

- How can software development organizations strengthen their focus on end-user involvement in their software development practices?

For 1 minute: note down some bullet points for the following questions:

- How could you go about exploring this research question?
- Could it involve AR?

Exercise

Consider following research question:

- How can software development organizations strengthen their focus on end-user involvement in their software development practices?

May be examined with descriptive or interventionist research:

- **With case study** → Examine one or several organizations who are in the process of strengthening
- **With AR** → Work with an organization to understand obstacles, and plan and introduce interventions (e.g., new methods, roles), and evaluate.

Action Research = interventionist

- In case studies, one learn about a phenomenon through interviews, observations, etc, or by being an active participant in a system of study
- For instance, an organization is implementing a new information system and the researchers are examining how the process unfold(ed) (either as the process unfold or retrospective) with some phenomenon of interest in mind.
- In action research the researcher tries to learn about a phenomenon by taking an active part in diagnosis, planning, introducing, and evaluating changes related to a specific problem.
- For instance, the researcher collaborate with the organization implementing the information system using scientific knowledge to guide planning, execution and evaluation of change.

Action Research = interventionist

Interventions could be:

- Introducing new IT-artifacts
- Introducing new methods and processes / changing practice
- Competence building / human capacity
- Changing organizational structures / responsibilities / roles

Action Research = engaged

- Another key trait of Action Research is that it is 'engaged'
- Means that the researcher collaborate with practitioners in defining, diagnosing, and addressing problems relevant to the organization and to research.
- Good for relevance!

Key principles (Davison et al., 2004)

Key principles (Davison et al., 2004)

1. Principle of the Researcher – Client Agreement
2. Principle of the Cyclical Process Model
3. Principle of Theory
4. Principle of Change through Action
5. Principle of Learning through Reflection

1. Principle of the Researcher – Client Agreement

Researcher(s)

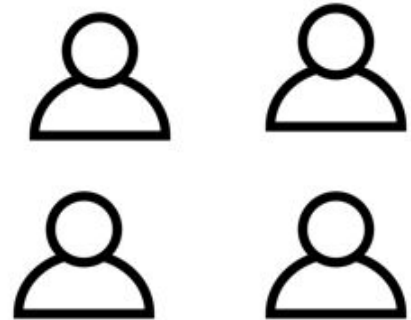


- Competence
- Research interests



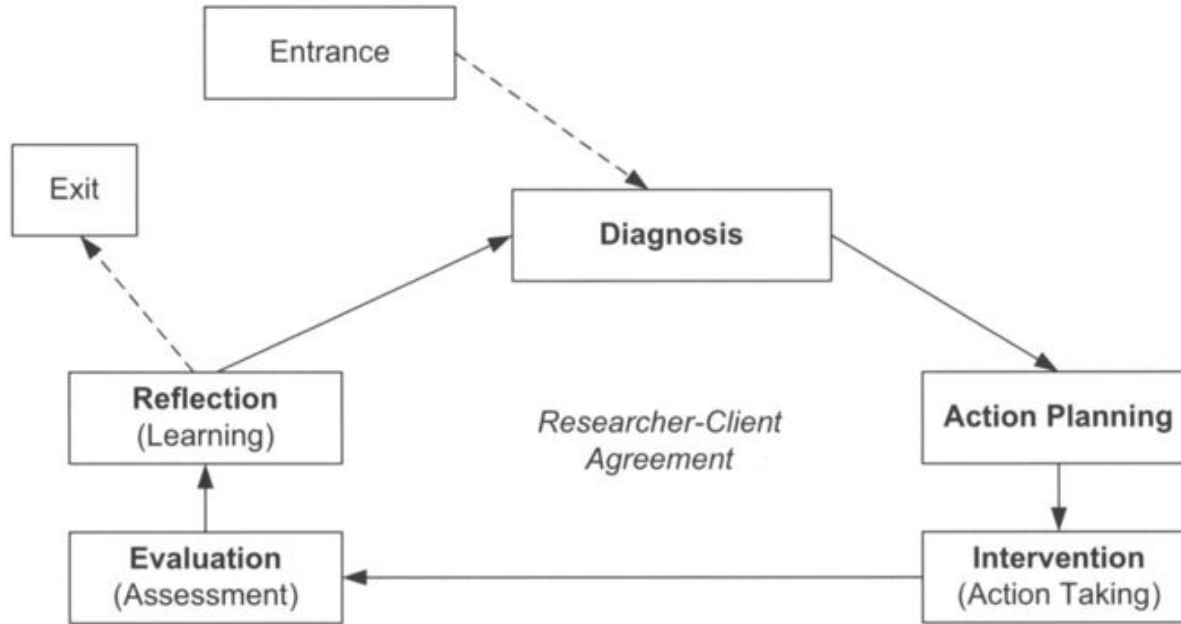
- Mutual interest
- Agreement on practical and academic outcomes
- Obligations and expectations
- Involvement - how

Practitioners



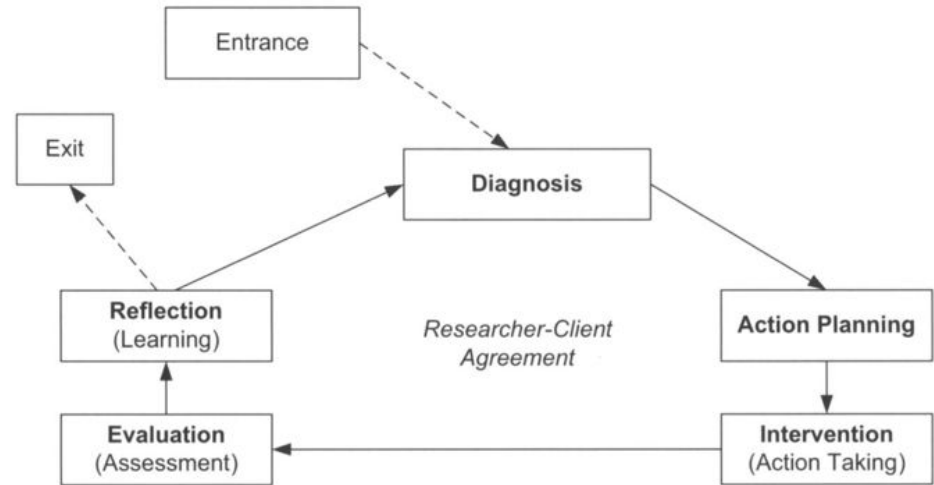
- Competence
- Practical interests

2. Principle of the Cyclical Process Model



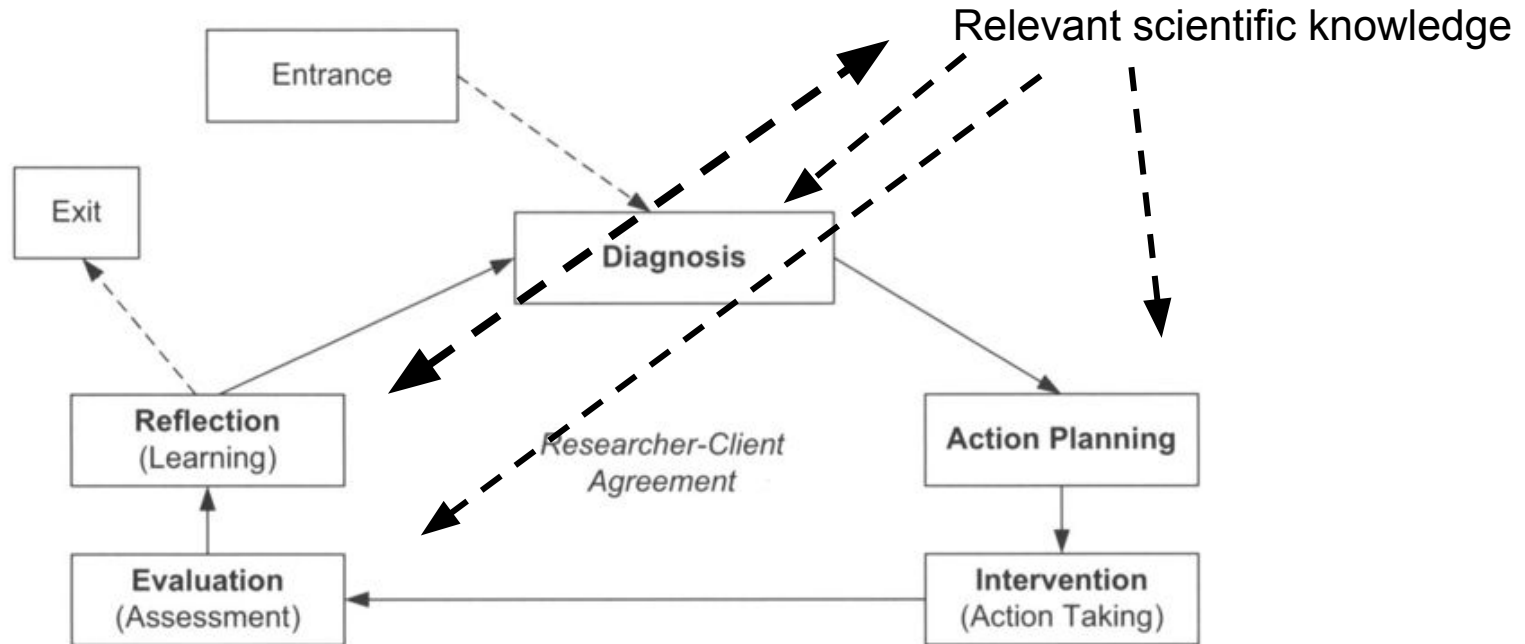
2. Principle of the Cyclical Process Model

- Many specific methods for data collection are relevant within the various stages of action research cycles.
 - Interviews
 - (Participant) observation
 - Document analysis
 - System logging
 - Virtual observation
 - Film and photo
 - Quantitative methods



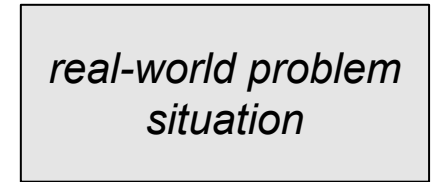
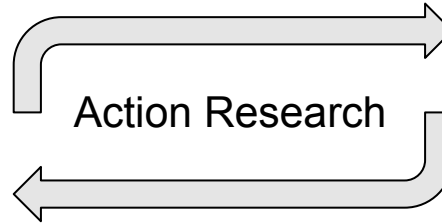
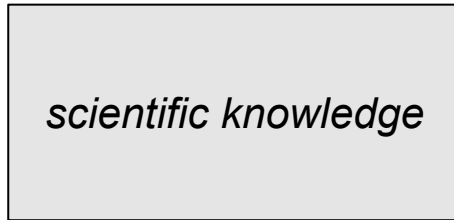
3. Principle of theory

E.g., theory on systems integration is used to guide diagnosis, action planning, analysis in evaluation and reflection + contributed back to following reflection



3. Principle of theory

What is going on here?
What kind of situation is this?
Why is X happening?
How do Y emerge?



Findings and conceptual schemes on similar problem situations

relating specific real-world situation to 'abstract' type of situation

Empirical data on the nature of the problem situation

“abductive leap” (Van de Ven, 2007), “alternative casings” (Timmermans et al., 2012)

4. Principle of change through action

- (Positive) change related to the problem of focus is obviously the goal of 'action' in action research.
- "A lack of change in the unsatisfactory conditions suggests that
 - there was no meaningful problem,
 - that the intervention failed to address the existing problem(s),
 - or that the existing situation could not be altered because of political or practical obstacles that were neglected when the RCA was established."
(Davidson et al., 2005)

Informs further cycles of AR
- or research design! (we will
return to this later)

5. Principle of Learning through Reflection

- Learnings for both the client organization and related research is a key element.
 - To inform further action within the system/organization of study
 - Action in similar contexts
 - General knowledge about the problem and domain
 - On the methodology
- Research articles and theses
- For the client, continuous communication of learnings from the project is important.
 - Project reports (potentially co-written)
 - Workshops
 - Presentations

How to approach AR and engaged research more generally?

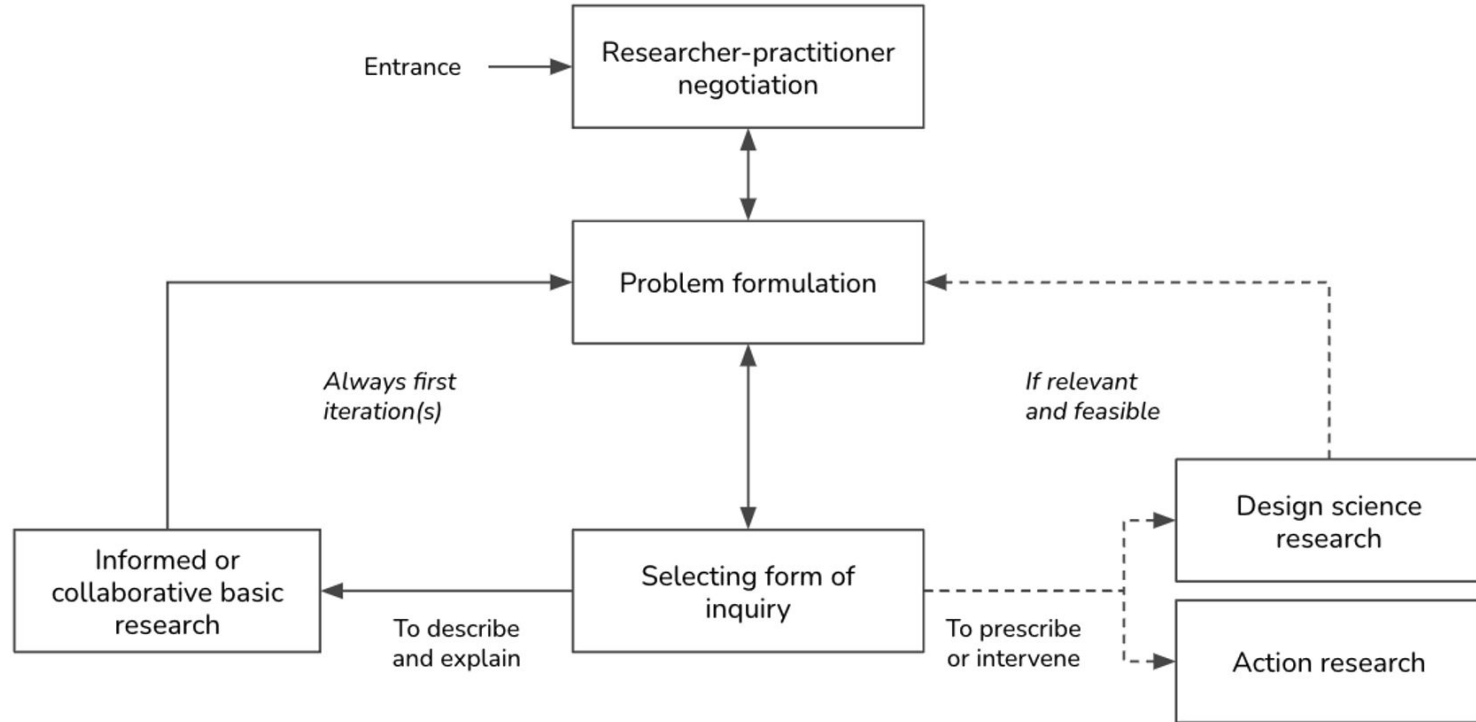
Difficult to plan for AR

- Real-world problem situations and collaborations with practitioners are highly dynamic
- Knowledge interests and possibilities for collaborations evolve
- Difficult to know in advance whether AR will be relevant and feasible
- Also, conditions may change rapidly during a project

A way of organizing engaged research, including AR

- Begin by framing collaborations as “engaged” and using descriptive/explanatory, e.g. case study-framing initially
- Based on a common interest in a problem situation relevant to research and practice
- Later, evolve into AR or other types of constructive/interventionist approaches when relevant

A way of organizing engaged research, including AR



Research Paradigms: Ontology and epistemology

Exercise

For two minutes: note down some bullet points for the following question:

- Are the following research paradigms (views of the nature of knowledge and nature of the phenomenon of examination) is compatible with AR?

Positivist?

Interpretivist?

Critical?

Other?

Organizations are artifacts created by human beings to serve their ends. Organizations obey laws that are affected by human purposes and actions. In this sense, they do not exist independently of human beings, like the planets, just waiting for an Isaac Newton of organizational theory to discover an equivalent of the laws of planetary motion.

[...]

Organizations are planned according to their members' conception of the future. But statements about the future have no truth value according to any criterion of confirmation acceptable to positivist science

(Susman & Evered, 1978)

Final exercise

Exercise

For two minutes: note down some bullet points for the following questions:

- Could Action Research be relevant to your research project? Why (not)?

When and why?

- When there is a desire, relevance, and opportunity to explore 'real-life' problems by testing out potential solutions in real-life contexts
- Active collaboration between researcher and practitioners or «engaged scholarship» can benefit research and have direct contributions to practice.
- Practitioners are experts on the 'real world' situation, while researchers have time and space to reflect on practices and challenges in light of theory and related research
- **Possible:** frame as “engaged research” and start descriptive and turn into AR if relevant (e.g., case study to serve as part of the *diagnosis*)