

Action Research: Its Nature and Validity

Checkland and Holwell (1998)

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Epistemology

Natural science produces knowledge.

- example: sulphuric acid
- basis: testing of hypotheses

What does action research produce?

How can action research produce knowledge, in contrast to a narrative?

Scientific Knowledge

- Three fundamental principles of the scientific method (hypothesis testing)
 - Reductionism
 - Repeatability
 - Refutation
- Scientific knowledge is the accumulation of hypotheses which have not yet been refuted
- Appropriate when a phenomenon is "Homogenous through time" (Keynes, 1938)

The hypothesis-testing research process of natural science

Ideal-type of positivistic research

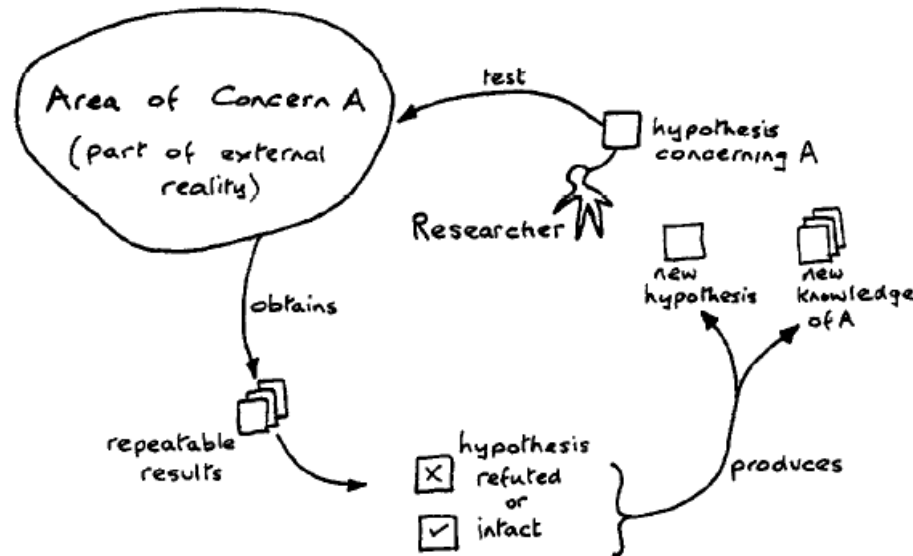


Fig. 1. The hypothesis-testing research process of natural science.

General research process

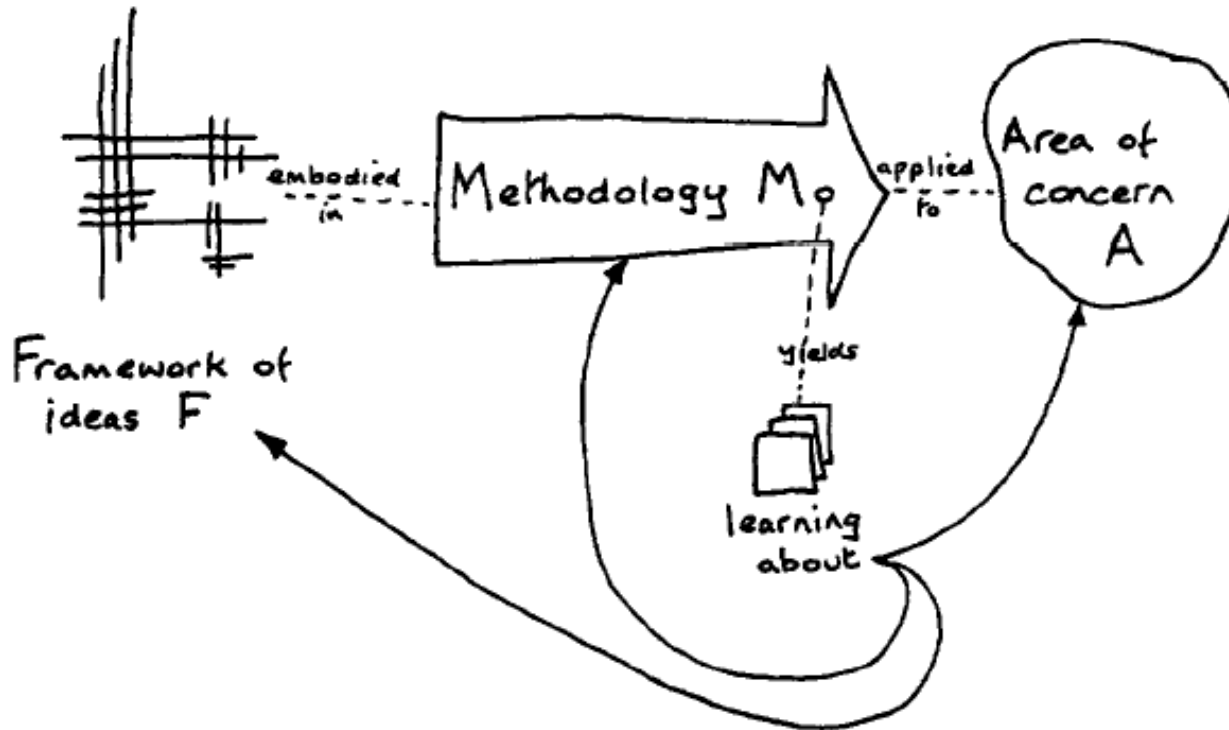


Fig. 2. Elements relevant to any piece of research.

The action research process of social systems

Nature and Validity of Action Research

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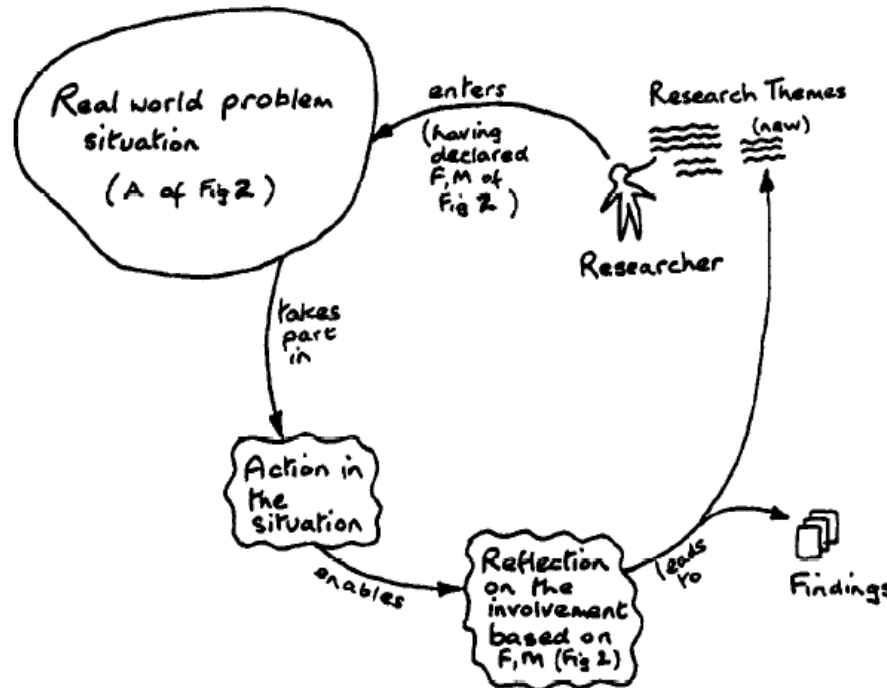


Fig. 3. The cycle of action research in human situations.

The process of action research

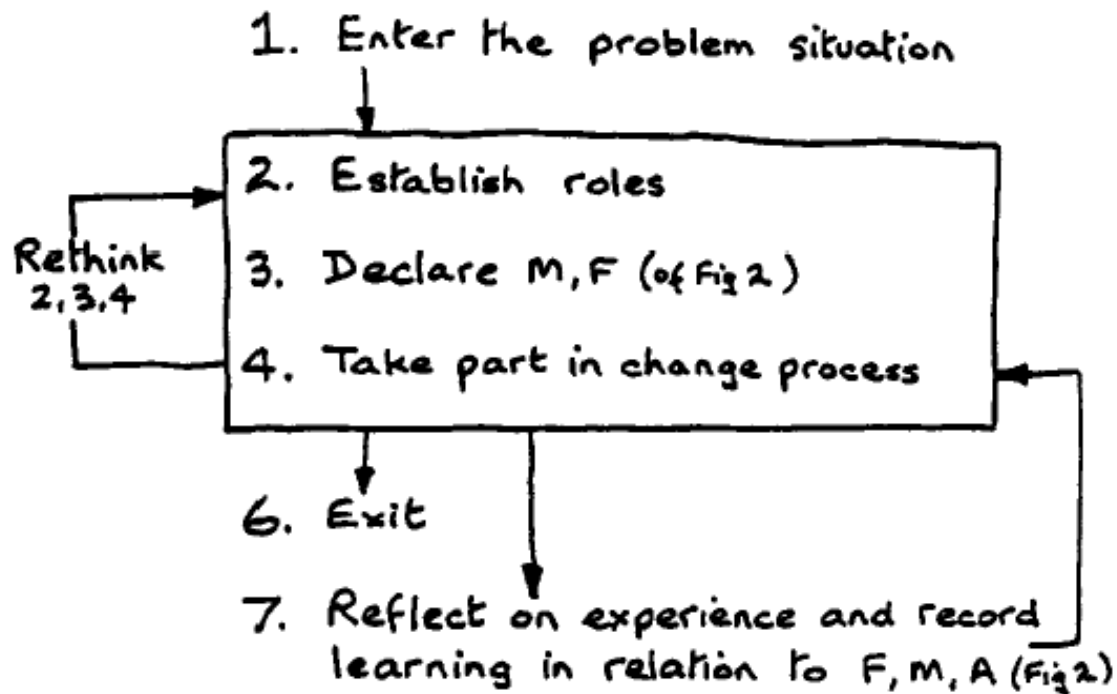


Fig. 4. The process of action research.

Questions to the model of AR

- What exactly is being researched?
 - Themes in contrast to hypotheses
- Roles: Who is researcher, who is participant
 - Should be discussed and may evolve
 - Reflection on the research is the researchers' responsibility
- How do you know when to stop?
 - The researchers judgement
 - An arbitrary act
- How can results be conveyed to others or transferred to other situations?
 - Make research content recoverable
 - Thorough declaration of theme, framework and method (the epistemology)

Conclusion

- Natural science' strong card is repeatability
- Need to recognize the limits to the validity of the approach
- To make research recoverable it is necessary to state the epistemology in advance
- AR may have a stronger "truth claim" than mere "plausibility" by making AR recoverable (vs. repeatable) but still less strong than lab experiments
- The authors stress the need for a declared epistemology and hence a recoverable research process.