

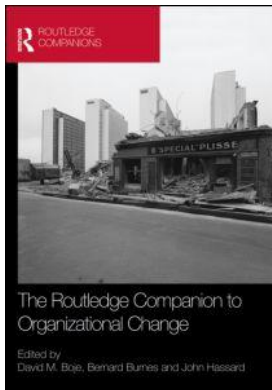
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Organization development and action research

Then and now

David Coghlan

Introduction

While organization development (OD) and action research (AR) are closely related, they exist independently of one another and there are important roots and strands of action research existing outside of OD (McArdle and Reason, 2008). In parallel with Burnes' and Bargal's contributions (Chapters 1 and 2) in this volume, this chapter reflects on the joint origins of organization development and action research in the work of Kurt Lewin and explores how organization development through action research was understood and practised in the latter half of the last century and how it is understood and practised now.

The roots of action research

Action research is one of the distinctive features of OD and one of its core origins (French and Bell, 1999). Schein (1989) argues that the tap root of OD was Lewin's seminal work. Lewin was able to combine the methodology of experimentation with solid theory and a concern for action around important social concerns. For Lewin, it was not enough to try to explain things; one also had to try to change them. It was clear to Lewin and others that working at changing human systems often involved variables that could not be controlled by traditional research methods, developed in the physical sciences. These insights led to the development of action research and the powerful notion that human systems could only be understood and changed if one involved the members of the system in the inquiry process itself. So the tradition of involving the members of an organization in the change process which is the hallmark of OD originated in a scientific premise that this is the way (a) to get better data and (b) to effect change. Action research is not only a methodology and a set of tools but is also a theory of social science (Peters and Robinson, 1984). The roots of OD are in science and Lewin built a cadre of colleagues and students whose work in group dynamics and organizational research became the foundation for what emerged later as OD. As Bargal's chapter in this volume demonstrates, Lewin framed the interdependence of theory, research and practice. In Schein's view OD was a 'quiet revolution'.

Argyris et al. (1985) summarize Lewin's concept of action research:

- 1 It involves change experiments on real issues in social systems. It focuses on a particular issue and seeks to provide assistance to the client system.
- 2 It, like social management more generally, involves iterative cycles of identifying a problem, planning, acting and evaluating.
- 3 The intended change in an action research project typically involves re-education, a term that refers to changing patterns of thinking and action that are presently well established in individuals and groups. Effective re-education depends on participation by clients in diagnosis, fact-finding and free choice to engage in new kinds of action.
- 4 It challenges the status quo from a participative perspective, which is congruent with the requirements of effective re-education.
- 5 It is intended to contribute simultaneously to basic knowledge in social science and to social action in everyday life. High standards for developing theory and empirically testing propositions organized by theory are not to be sacrificed nor the relation to practice lost.

Approaching the relationship between OD and action research from the other perspective, OD is one of the roots and expressions of action research. Action research has several roots (Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Reason and Bradbury, 2008). While the work of Lewin and the OD tradition which grew out of the T group and NTL Institute, the socio-technical work of the Tavistock Institute in the UK and the workplace democracy work in Scandinavia are the major roots in the northern hemisphere (Pasmore, 2001; Bradbury et al., 2008), there are important roots and strands of action research existing outside of OD. The consciousness raising work of Freire and the Marxist-based liberation movements in the southern hemisphere (frequently referred to as emancipatory or participatory action research), feminist approaches to research, the return to epistemological notions of praxis and the hermeneutic school of philosophy associated with the work of Habermas are important strands and expressions of action research which did not grow out of the OD tradition (Reason and Bradbury, 2008).

The two fundamental differences between the action research tradition within OD and the emancipatory action research tradition lie in the purpose and location of the research. The OD tradition of action research occurs within organizations and aims to help organizations change and at the same time to generate knowledge. The emancipatory action research tradition tends to be located in rural and urban communities and aims to empower the participants to take control of some aspect of their own environment, which frequently pits the less economically powerful against the more powerful. Indeed OD action research may be criticized by the emancipatory tradition as supporting the capitalist status quo and not being radical enough. So while OD and action research are closely interlinked, each has an existence independent of the other.

Organization development and action research then

The action research model that developed in OD in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s was a consistent one and was captured in a number of important publications (Shepard and Katzell, 1960; Clarke, 1972; Foster, 1972; Frohman et al., 1976; Shani and Pasmore, 1985; Cunningham, 1993; French and Bell, 1999) and found application in published cases (Coch and French, 1948; Shepard and Katzell, 1960; Pasmore and Friedlander, 1982; Burnes, 2007). This model is captured by the following definition that expresses both traditions.

Action research may be defined as an emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioural science knowledge is integrated with existing organizational knowledge and applied to solve real organizational problems. It is simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in organizations, in developing self-help competencies in organizational members and in adding to scientific knowledge. Finally it is an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry.

(Shani and Pasmore, 1985: 439)

One of the most clear and practical accounts of the relationship between OD and action research is found in Frohman et al. (1976). This article may be judged to be a seminal and typical piece in how it captures the essence of how OD and action research complemented each other and differed from each other at this time. The authors describe how action research used with OD is based on collaboration between the behavioural-scientist-researcher and the client where they collaborate on exploring problems and generating valid data on the problem (the research activity), and jointly in examining the data to understand the problem. They then develop action plans to address the problems and implement them. They evaluate the outcomes of the actions, both intended and unintended. This evaluation may then lead to further cycles of diagnosis, action planning and action. Cyclical-sequential phases may be identified that capture the movements of collaboration from initial scouting to evaluation. Frohman et al. (1976) note that these activities may serve also to generate new behavioural science knowledge, which is fed into the depository of information for other behavioural scientists as general laws, types of problems or the process of consultant – client collaboration, thus addressing issues beyond the specific case.

What was distinctive about OD and action research at this time was that both followed a cyclical process of consciously and deliberately (a) diagnosing the situation, (b) planning action, (c) taking action, (d) evaluating the action, leading to further diagnosing, planning and so on. The second dimension is that both approaches were collaborative, in that, with the help of a consultant/facilitator, the members of the system participated actively in the cyclical process. This action research approach to organization development was powerful. It engaged people as participants in seeking ideas, planning, taking actions, reviewing outcomes and learning what worked and didn't work, and why. This approach was in stark contrast with programmed approaches that mandated following pre-designed steps and which tended not to be open to alteration. These latter approaches were based on the assumption that the system should adopt the entire package as designed. Action research and OD, on the other hand, were based on assumptions that each system is unique and that a change process has to be designed with that uniqueness in mind and adapted in the light of ongoing experience and emergent learning.

Process consultation and clinical inquiry/research

A significant counter-position within the OD field that challenged the underlying framework of phased activities whereby organization development/action researchers enter a system, gather data, make a diagnosis and plan and implement interventions has been Schein's notion of process consultation (1969, 1988, 1999). Here, Schein focuses on the efforts of the OD consultant to be helpful to the client and so he argues strongly that, through collaborative engagement, diagnosis and intervention are concurrent as the process consultant works to help the client make sense of his/her own organizational experience. From reflection on his experience as a process consultant, Schein (1987, 1995, 2008) developed an expression of the form action research takes within OD as what he calls 'clinical inquiry'. This notion is built on the assumption that the OD practitioner

is invited into an organization to help (and be paid for it) and that diagnostic and intervention activity is aimed towards enabling the system to function more healthily. In Schein's view (1995, 2008) there is a fundamental difference between clinical inquiry and action research. In action research the researcher may be present in the organization at the researcher's instigation and, to meet the researcher's needs, clinical inquiry takes place at the organization's instigation to meet the organization's need for help. As Schein argues, when the researcher is present in the organization at the organization's instigation and is being paid for it in order to be helpful, then the data which are made available are likely to be of a higher quality because as the members of the organization want help they are more likely to reveal what is really going on.

In summary, the OD tradition of action research as expressed in clinical inquiry is built on four working principles (Schein, 1997):

The issues that one works on are important.

One accepts the assumption that unless one attempts to change a system one cannot really understand it.

The primary source of organizational data is not what is 'out there' but is in the effects of and responses to interventions.

The OD process whereby the external OD practitioner is contacted and then enters and begins to learn how to be helpful is central.

For Schein, this approach constitutes authentic OD. As Coghlan (2009) demonstrates, it has a rich underpinning philosophy, whereby the method of intervention needs to cater for the need of the client system and the need of rigorous social science that advances useful and valid practical knowledge.

OD/action research in universities

It has to be noted that OD and action research also developed an ambivalent relationship, particularly in the universities. While the central role that action research held in the definition and heritage of OD was acknowledged, it tended to be relegated to the practice of OD and excluded from the forum of scholarly research. This was due to the dominance of the positivist approach to research in the academy and the denigration of forms of research that incorporate action as smacking of subjectivism and consequently which excluded action research from the universities, especially in the Anglo-Saxon academy, led by the United States (Greenwood, 2002; Levin, 2003). Despite action research's solid grounding in Dewey's pragmatic philosophy (Pasmore, 2001; Greenwood and Levin, 2007) and Aristotelian praxis (Eikeland, 2006), action research was not understood to be 'scientific'. This perspective perpetuated although, as it is well argued, its methods are far more scientific in the sense of knowledge tested in action and in mobilizing relevant knowledge from people in a position to know their conditions better than conventional researcher can (Greenwood, 2002). OD research, therefore, was typically expressed through traditional research modes (Bowers and Franklin, 1972; Culbert, 1972). Recent reviews of the state of the field of OD (e.g. Bradford and Burke, 2004 and Bradford and Burke, 2005) made no reference to action research.

The transition from then to now

At the same time, there was a growing unease that positivist science was not being useful to the world of practice. Susman and Evered (1978) argued that the conditions from which people try to

learn in everyday life are better explored through a range of philosophical viewpoints: Aristotelian praxis, hermeneutics, existentialism, pragmatism, process philosophies and phenomenology. They proposed that action research provides a corrective to the deficiencies of positivist science by being future-oriented, collaborative, implying system development, generating theory grounded in action, agnostic and situational. Schon (1995) contrasted how researchers can view practice from the high ground, where they can study issues from a distance, for example because they are not organizational members or because their data are based on pre-constructed surveys or interviews. Or they can be immersed in 'swampy lowlands' where problems are messy and confusing and incapable of a technical solution, because they are either organizational members, whose actions influence the reality they see, or are outsiders who are contracted to influence what they see. He concluded that unimportant issues may be studied from the high ground according to predetermined standards and rigor, while the critically important ones, such as how to generate whatever changes in practice we wish to see, can only be confronted by being immersed in the swampy lowlands. In his view work in the swampy lowlands involves a new scholarship which requires a new epistemology.

The changing view of research

Understanding of the nature of research is changing also. As Gibbons et al. (1994) have argued it is time for a mode of research (which they call Mode 2 research) that is transdisciplinary, heterogeneous, socially accountable, reflexive and is produced in the context of application. 'The new production of knowledge' as articulated by Gibbons and his colleagues is a network activity and research, therefore, needs to follow and move away from a model whereby it is embedded currently in the expertise of isolated individuals operating from a top-down expert model (Gustavsen, 2003). MacLean et al. (2002) make the point that action-oriented research, such as action research, has the potential to meet the criteria of Mode 2 research. Levin and Greenwood (2008) note wryly that action research has been engaging in Mode 2 research since the first action research experiments in the 1940s and 1950s. Shani et al. (2008) argue for the notion of collaborative management research and focus on the dynamics of collaboration between practitioners and academic researchers and between insiders and outsiders as central to the formation of communities of inquiry emphasize the generation of actionable knowledge that meets the requirements of both practitioner and academic communities.

Action research has also undergone a transition. In what was a radical, if not revolutionary exploration of 'new paradigm' research, Reason and Rowan (1981) identified a range of approaches to human inquiry that provided alternatives to orthodox ways of doing research in human sciences. That landmark publication opened the way to viewing action research in broader terms than the OD approaches described above.

Organization development and action research now

Both OD and action research have continued to develop. Rees' chapter in this volume discusses the challenges that have confronted OD as it has developed from its early expressions and practice. The premise underpinning action research began to clarify that the purpose of research is to forge a more direct link between intellectual knowledge/theory and action so that each inquiry contributes directly to the flourishing of human persons and their communities (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). Action research rejects the separation between thought and action that underlies the pure – applied distinction that has traditionally characterized management and

social research. Action research incorporates a collaborative enactment of cycles of action and reflection whereby the intended research outcome is the construction of actionable knowledge.

OD now

Bushe and Marshak (2008) explore the emergence of new forms of OD in the postmodern world. They contrast classical and postmodern OD. Classical OD is grounded classical science and modernist philosophy and thought and views organizations as living systems. Postmodern OD is influenced by the new sciences and postmodern thought and philosophy and views organizations as meaning-making systems. Accordingly, postmodern OD views reality as socially constructed with multiple realities which are socially negotiated rather than a single objective reality that is diagnosed. Data collection is less about applying objective problem-solving methods and more about raising collective awareness and generating new possibilities which lead to change. In sum, postmodern OD emphasizes changing the conversation in organizations by surfacing, legitimating and learning from multiple perspectives and generating new images and narratives on which people can act. In a subsequent piece, Bushe and Marshak (2009) describe classical OD as ‘diagnostic OD’ where reality is an objective fact and diagnosis infers collecting and applying data and using objective problem-solving methods to achieve change to an articulated desired future. As an alternative, they propose what they call ‘dialogic OD’, where organizations are viewed as meaning-making systems, containing multiple realities, which are socially constructed. Accordingly, the focus of OD is to create the space for changing the conversation. See Oswick and Marshak’s chapter in this volume for a specification discussion of the role metaphors play as a form of ‘dialogic’ OD.

A feature of the newer forms of OD is the large-group intervention (Bunker and Alban, 1997). While these large-group interventions have different names – search conferences, future search, open space among several terms (Holman et al., 2007; Purser and Griffin, 2008) – what they have in common is the notion of bringing the whole system in the room and engaging in conversation about present realities and how to create future realities. While large-group interventions have had their origins and expressions in traditional OD (Beckhard, 1967) they have flourished as ‘dialogic OD’ in how they provide the setting for multiple perspectives to be shared and how they aim to develop new shared agreement. Such large-group processes have integral links to action research (Martin, 2001).

Action research now

Now it is understood that, as Reason and Bradbury (2008: 1) put it, action research is ‘a family of practices of living inquiry ... it is not so much a methodology as an orientation to inquiry’. As Greenwood (2007: 131) expresses it:

Action research is neither a method or a technique; it is an approach to living in the world that include the creation of areas for collaborative learning and the design, enactment and evaluation of liberating actions ... it combines action and research, reflection and action in an ongoing cycle of cogenerative knowledge.

Accordingly, what is noticeable is that there is a wide diversity, not only in practice, but in the discourse on action research practice. Raelin (2009) reflects on the multiplicity of what he refers to as ‘action modalities’ and identifies a number of similarities. These modalities focus on contextualized and useful theory rather than testing decontextualized and impartial theory. They invite learners to be active participants, leading to change in both self and the system in

question. They emphasize reflection-in-action, rather than reflection-on-action, the development of double-loop rather than single loop learning, and meta-competence over competence. Reflection needs to be facilitated rather than taught. They are comfortable with tentativeness rather than certainty. They follow a dialectic, rather than a didactic classroom approach. The normal learning outcomes are often more practice-based than theory-based.

Within action research we can now identify multiple 'action modalities': action learning, action science, appreciative inquiry, cooperative inquiry and developmental action inquiry, to name a selection (Raelin, 1999; Coghlan and Brannick, 2010; Coghlan, 2010).

Action learning: For Revans (1998), the founder of action learning, action learning involves engagement with real problems rather than with fabrications, is both scientifically rigorous in confronting the problem and critically subjective through managers learning in action. While its practice is demonstrated through many different approaches, two core elements are consistently in evidence: participants work on real organizational problems that do not appear to have clear solutions; and participants meet on equal terms to report to one another and to discuss their problem and progress (O'Neil and Marsick, 2007). Action learning has traditionally been directed towards enabling professionals to learn and develop through engaging in reflecting on their experience as they seek to solve real-life problems in their own organizational settings. As such it is a powerful OD approach (Rigg, 2006). As a form of research that seeks to generate knowledge beyond the direct experience of its participants it has not received a great deal of attention. In recent years, there have been explorations of action learning's philosophical grounds (Pedler and Burgoyne, 2008; Coghlan and Coughlan, 2010), and, from a research perspective, on research accessible through empirical engagement in practice and in collaboration with those who seek to resolve problems.

Action science: Action science is a term used by Argyris (1983), who considered that action research had lost its scientific edge and so he wanted to bring the word 'science' back into the study of practice and intervention. Argyris (1993, 2004) places an emphasis on the cognitive processes of individuals' 'theories-in-use', which he describes in terms of Model I (strategies of control, self-protection, defensiveness and covering-up embarrassment) and Model II (strategies eliciting valid information, free choice and commitment). In Argyris' (1987) view, practice-oriented OD scholars became so client-centred that they failed to question how clients themselves defined their problems and ignored the building and testing of propositions embedded in their own practice. On the theoretical side, OD scholars conducted research that met the criteria of rigour of normal science but was disconnected from everyday life. As Friedman and Rogers (2008) demonstrate action science is more of a grounding of action research than a discrete method of practice.

Appreciative inquiry: Appreciative inquiry aims at large system change through an appreciative focus on what already works in a system, rather than what is deficient (Ludema and Fry, 2008). It utilizes a cycle of appreciative inquiry, that is sometimes expressed as the 4 Ds (Discovery, Dream, Design, Delivery/Destiny) or alternatively the 4 Is (Initiate, Inquire, Imagine, Innovate) (Watkins and Mohr, 2001; Reed, 2007). Appreciative inquiry is often misunderstood and perceived to be a simple process of focusing on the positive. As Bushe argues in his chapter in this volume, appreciative inquiry did not begin its life as an intervention technique. Rather, it began as a research method for making grounded theory building more generative. Accordingly, as Bushe (2010) argues, it is a deeper and richer process than a change technique and has an underlying capacity to leverage the generative capacity of metaphors and conversation in order to facilitate transformational action. Appreciative inquiry has become a prolific way of engaging in OD (e.g. Yaeger et al., 2005).

Cooperative inquiry: Heron and Reason (2008: 366) define cooperative inquiry ‘in which the participants work together in an inquiry group as co-researchers and co-subjects’. The participants research a topic through their own experience of it in order to understand their world, make sense of their life, develop new and creative ways of looking at things, and learn how to act to change things they might want to change and find out how to do things better.

Developmental action inquiry: Developmental action inquiry is an expression of action science in that Torbert adds the developmental dynamic of learning to inquire-in-action, emphasising that as leaders progress through adulthood they may intentionally develop new ‘action-logics’ by progressing through stages of development (Torbert and Associates, 2004). Developmental theory offers an understanding of leaders’ transformation through a series of stages so that they gain insight into their own action-logics as they work to transform their organizations (Fisher et al., 2000).

These five ‘action modalities’ provide examples of contemporary OD that may be considered to be ‘dialogic OD’ in Bushe and Marshak’s (2009) terms. In each of them the emphasis is on exploring subjective experience and how the participants construct the meaning of the situations in which they find themselves, which they seek to change and how they frame and implement action strategies. Selecting a modality as appropriate to a given situation requires an insight into both a given modality and to what might be required in a given situation (Coghlan, 2010).

OD and action research now: towards a synthesis

A synthesis between then and now for OD through action research is possible through exploring different forms of change programmes and different approaches through the lenses of diagnostic and dialogic OD.

Mitki et al. (2000) cluster change programmes as, limited, focused and holistic:

Limited change programmes are aimed at addressing a specific problem, such as team building, communication improvement, management development operational improvement and so on.

Focused change programmes are ones that identify a few key aspects, such as time, quality, customer value, and then use these, by-design, as levers for changing the organization system-wide.

Holistic change programmes are aimed by-design to simultaneously address all (or most) aspects of the organization.

While OD has always espoused working with the whole system, this has not always been realized. Many OD projects have and continue to be have limited and focused programmes. In such settings, ‘diagnostic’ OD continues to be operative though there is also potential for ‘dialogic’ OD in these programmes.

Buono and Kerber (2008) make an important distinction between three approaches to change: directed change, planned change and guided changing:

Directed change is where there are tightly defined goals and leadership directs and commands.

Planned change is where there is a clear goal and vision of the future and leadership devises a roadmap to reach it and influences how it is reached.

Guided changing is where the direction is loosely defined and leadership points the way and keeps watch over the process.

Table 3.1 Approaches to OD through action research in different change programmes and approaches

<i>Change Programmes</i>	<i>Change Approaches</i>	<i>Organization Development/Action Research</i>
<i>Limited</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Directed approach ■ Planned approach 	Focus is likely to be diagnostic, drawing on traditional action research. May also be dialogic and draw on any of the action modalities
<i>Focused</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Directed approach ■ Planned approach 	Focus is likely to be diagnostic, drawing on traditional action research. May also be dialogic and draw on any of the action modalities
<i>Holistic</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Guided changing 	Focus is dialogic and builds on conversation about change and changing

Mitki et al.'s and Buono and Kerber's frameworks provide a way of framing how both old and new OD/action research may sit side by side (Table 3.1). In limited and focused change programmes where management adopts 'directed' or 'planned' approaches as diagnostic OD, the action research approach is likely to be one that accords with what was discussed above under Frohman et al.'s (1976) description. In limited and focused change programmes where management adopts 'directed' or 'planned' approaches as dialogic OD, the action research approach is likely to be one that works with some of the action modalities outlined above. In a holistic change programme 'guided changing' fits with much of what is understood as dialogic OD and accordingly builds on dialogue and conversation about change.

Insight into the type of change programme under consideration and the type of approach adopted by leadership opens up insights into how OD can be of help to an organization. At the same time, attention to the act of insight itself provides critique of core assumptions as to how programmes and approaches are framed and what role OD may play (Coghlan, 2008, 2010).

Conclusions

This chapter has explored the relationship between organization development and action research. It has examined the nature of this relationship and how it evolved over the past sixty years. It is critical to note that not only has the theory and practice of each entity developed respectively but also that their relationship has also developed and continues to do so. With regard to organization development, Coghlan and Shani (2010) noted seven themes, which, in their view, continue to capture the essence and challenges of OD. These themes apply equally to action research and to OD enacted through action research.

- OD through action research is continuously evolving and timely as it has the ability to adapt and respond to the variety of emerging challenges experienced by individuals, groups, organizations, communities and societies.
- OD through action research is reflexive and continues to be self-aware, reflexive and to be open to its own learning and development, in the light of emerging economic, social and business trends and learning how to be relevant in each generation.
- OD is collaborative research in that it has always espoused research *with* people rather than *on* or *for* them. At the core of most OD work there is commitment to the generation of

scientific knowledge that can guide practice. Action research provides a clear approach to achieving these conditions.

- OD work is embedded in relationships, between OD practitioners and clients, between OD scholars and clients, between members of the system that are involved in an OD project, between OD practitioners that work together and, between OD scholars and OD practitioners, the quality of which have a direct impact on both process and outcomes of any OD project. Action research provides a clear approach to achieving these conditions.
- OD continues to focus on the sustainable development of human, social, economic and ecological resources. Action research provides a clear approach to achieving these conditions.
- OD through action research is relevant in any context. While any context has its own particular characteristics and challenges, the core values and processes of OD and action research have remained relevant.
- Educating for OD and action research remains a constant challenge.

The nature of action research in OD as a collaborative, interventionist form of research makes demands on the OD scholars to attend explicitly to their own learning in action, to the dynamics and quality of their engagement of OD with a client system and to the generation of actionable knowledge (Reason, 2001; Coghlan and Rashford, 2006; Shani et al., 2008; Coghlan, 2009; Coghlan and Brannick, 2010). While the academic world has struggled traditionally to accept such forms of inquiry and action as ‘scientific’, in the postmodern world this is increasingly less so. In today’s context there are increasing demands for organizational research to be rigorous, reflective and relevant (Pasmore et al., 2008). OD through action research continues to provide such rich possibilities.

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