

# Are action researchers mixed up? Reviewing and revising basic assumptions, concepts, and terminology in and by means of action research

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**Abstract:** The article explores and discusses whether we as action researchers are undermining or subverting our own intuitions and intentions, or at least not doing justice to it, when mixing a) learning and exploration through individual and collective action and reflection, with b) elements from conventional research methods. The article's basic question: Can the intentions and results from a) be reduced to and validated fully or partly through b) conventional methods? Can we save the scientific legitimacy of action research by ultimately resorting to conventional methods and theories? What does action research uniquely add in relation to conventional learning, knowledge generation, and change projects? We discuss some challenges raised by questions like these, and suggest ways of handling them. After exploring ways of being “seduced” by conventional methods, we conclude by recommending a gnoseology to replace a one-dimensional epistemology, and by explaining and recommending the procedure of immanent critique as a way of developing insights and competencies from the inside of practices; i. e. a genuinely Action research method.

**Keywords:** basic historical concepts, conventional research methods, data, experiential learning, external relations, geschichtliche Grundbegriffe, gnoseology, immanent critique, inner inconsistencies

## Están confundidos los investigadores de investigación-acción? Repasando y revisando supuestos básicos, conceptos y terminología in y por medio de la investigación-acción.

**Resumen:** El artículo explora y discute si nosotros como investigadores en investigación-acción estamos minado o subvertiendo nuestras propias intuiciones e intenciones, o al menos, no haciéndoles justicia cuando mezclamos a) aprendizaje y exploración a través de la acción y reflexión individual y colectiva, con b) elementos de los métodos convencionales de investigación. La pregunta básica del artículo es: ¿Pueden las intenciones y resultados de a) reducirse a, y ser completamente o parcialmente validados a través de, b) métodos convencionales? ¿Podemos salvar la legitimidad científica de la investigación acción recurriendo en última instancia a métodos y teorías convencionales? ¿Qué añade la investigación-acción que sea único en relación con el aprendizaje, la generación de conocimiento y proyectos de cambio convencionales? Discutimos algunos retos que se presentan a través de este tipo de preguntas, y sugerimos modos de gestionarlos. Después de explorar maneras de ser “seducidos” por métodos convencionales, concluimos recomendando una gnoseología que sustituya a la epistemología unidimensional, y explicando y recomendando el procedimiento de crítica inmanente como una forma de desarrollar reflexiones y competencias desde dentro de las prácticas; es decir, un método genuinamente de investigación-acción.

**Palabras clave:** Conceptos históricos básicos, métodos de investigación convencionales, data, aprendizaje experiencial, relaciones externas, geschichtliche Grundbegriffe, gnoseología, crítica inmanente, inconsistencias internas

In this article, we explore and discuss whether we are undermining or subverting our own intuitions and intentions as action researchers, or at least not doing justice to it, when mixing **a)** learning and exploration through individual and collective action and reflection, with **b)** elements from conventional research methods. The basic question in the article is: Can the intentions and results from **a)** be reduced to and validated fully or partly through **b)** conventional methods? Can we save the scientific legitimacy of action research by ultimately resorting to conventional methods and theories? What does action research uniquely add in relation to conventional learning, knowledge generation, and change projects? We discuss some challenges raised by questions like these, and suggest ways of handling them.

As authors, our common starting point is that many academic action researchers with their co-researchers, have a shared intuition that basically, action research searches for ways of learning and generating knowledge designed to reflect the diversity and complexity of human knowing and learning, and of different knowledge forms in modern organisations, in order to bring social research in more adequate directions. Of course, not everyone engaged in action research, shares this intuition, but are more pragmatic in their motivations. We, however, share an intuition about the importance of recognising diverse knowledge forms as starting points for developments, transcending *both* the simplified division between experiential learning and so-called data-based empirical research, *and* the similar split between “theory” and “data”. The challenge of overcoming divisions like these is, however, more than terminological. It is conceptual and methodological. Different ways of knowledge generation also take certain institutional forms with their divisions of labour, subconsciously for granted. Hence, the challenge is even institutional, concerning the fundamental division of labour between researchers and researched, knowers and known, on which our dominant modern research-culture is based. So, how could we possibly escape or transcend pre-given frameworks we are born and raised into, and necessarily exist within? Can they be dissolved (*Aufgehoben*) theoretically or practically? Due to space-restrictions, we limit our ambition in this article to indicating directions we consider promising for answers and solutions.

## 1. Current relationships between social research and society: institutionalized assumptions

Various forms of action research (Bradbury, 2015, Reason & Bradbury, 2001, 2008, Greenwood & Levin, 2007) and their relatives (Eikeland 2020) have, for decades, for different reasons, and under different designations, gained popularity in many professions, in management and organisation studies (Coghlan 2019, Hersted, Ness and Frimann 2020), community development (Bradbury et al. 2019, Chevalier & Buckles, 2019, Burns, 2013), and in other areas. The rising interest and spread of action research reflects broader societal changes concerning the social distribution of learning and knowledge generation. Since the scientific revolution in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, modernity has increasingly monopolised knowledge production