

# Why Should Mainstream Social Researchers Be Interested in Action Research?<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The essay tries to argue why conventional researchers are obliged as researchers to be interested in certain forms of action research. The 60 years of ignorance have been illegitimate. The essay starts by listing two commonly encountered arguments paraphrasing Karl Marx and Francis Bacon via Kurt Lewin. It tries to show why a certain simplified reading of Marx cannot provide the necessary arguments. It then presents different variants of action research in order to single out approaches that according to this author require attention from mainstream social researchers. The action research approach emerging as central, by demonstrating its presence and effectiveness within mainstream research as well, is immanent critique. The method of research methodology is immanent critique. Immanent critique has to be demystified, however. When it is brought down to earth, immanent critique is really the kind of dialogical and experiential learning approach associated with apprenticeship learning and with organisational learning. This conclusion, making self-reflective practitioner-research the “hard-core” of action research, even internal to mainstream research, also requires a revision of the experimentalist-as-interventionist credo of action research.

**Keywords:** action research, counter-public spheres, immanent critique, method of methodology, practitioner research, research methods

The purpose of this essay is to answer one question: Why should conventional social researchers be interested in action research? My general background for trying to provide an answer is 1) being a philosopher with a special interest in the relations of ancient Greek philosophy of dialogue to modern social research and action research (cf. e. g. Eikeland 2007a, 2007b), and 2) having worked practically as an action researcher in projects in Norwegian work life, mostly municipalities, almost continuously since the mid-1980 s, and with similar projects for several years before that.

There are many reasons why conventional social researchers *should* be interested in action research, but only limited space is available here. Hence, I will try to focus on my arguments searching for reasons, writing as if reasoning actually *could* direct the interests of anyone. Trying to let the arguments speak for themselves, references will be kept to an absolute minimum in what follows<sup>2</sup>. As another consequence of the space limitations, none of the arguments can be elaborated extensively, of course. They will all have to be in outline, only.

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2 Further arguments and references to other authors and research literature indicating what I try to argue here are to be found in e. g. Eikeland (1985, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d, 2007a, 2007b). Interested readers will also find my reasons for thinking that answers to almost all the challenges raised in this text can be developed by taking seriously into account the more than 2000 years old works of Aristotle, among many others, of course.

But there are many different variants of action research as well, requiring some kind of selection. All of them are not equally defensible, neither to the same degree nor in the same ways. Conventional social researchers are hardly obliged to show an equal interest in all forms. But I think they are obliged in relation to some, that is, if they take their own research business seriously. In a way, I will be experimenting my way ahead openly and argumentatively in what follows, having a kind of textual dialogue with myself and with the reader. I will try to select, by way of gradual elimination, what I think are the most promising action research approaches to defend. In real life, many of the approaches are combined, of course. But this makes it even more important to keep them analytically apart when arguing.

On the way through this text, then, many secondary and subsidiary arguments supporting some forms of action research will be examined and passed by, which I am sure will weigh heavily for some. But such arguments are not the *main* reasons why conventional researchers should be interested in action research. I consider them subsidiary arguments because they appeal to researchers *qua* human beings, *qua* socially or politically responsible individuals, *qua* commercially interested actors, etc. but not *qua* researchers. This means, in other words, that subsidiary arguments appeal to all human beings, all socially and politically responsible individuals, etc. but not to researchers in particular. But secondary and subsidiary arguments still carry considerable weight. I will end up with what I think are some quite strong reasons, seen from the perspective of research in general, for some quite promising variants of action research.

## Two arguments

The starting point for raising the question to be answered at all is the fact that action research has been carried on by dedicated researcher-practitioners at least since the 1940 s. During the same period of time, and in spite of its origin in “hardcore” social science, action research has been almost completely ignored and neglected by what might be called “mainstream” currents of social research. It still is. But the challenge in this essay is not to explain why 60 years have passed by in this way. It is to provide arguments justifying why this situation should not be allowed to continue. So, why should mainstream social researchers be interested in action research?

Let me start by saying generally and imprecisely that action research is research, somehow concerned with practice and with some kind of social and personal change. Why should mainstream researchers be interested in anything like that? One argument often encountered sounds somewhat like this: (I) Mainstream researchers should be interested because they ought to change the world, instead of just interpreting or explaining it, like Karl Marx pointed out in his famous Feuerbach theses.

A second argument often found is (II) that researchers should be interested because we simply have to change things in order to understand them, as Francis Bacon argued in promoting experimentalism in natural science 400 years ago, and action researchers often quote Kurt Lewin for paraphrasing. Personally, I think the second argument (II) provides the best starting point for a discussion. It strikes researchers more in particular, while the first one (I) strikes everyone equally.