Appraising Quality in Action Research in Healthcare Settings
Mary Casey, Áine Carroll, David Coghlan, Diarmuid Stokes

Abstract: Criteria for establishing the quality of action research is of increasing interest to researchers and practitioners however, it is not known how well these criteria are used. This review addresses this issue by appraising extant measures that assess quality in action research. Taking Coghlan and Shani’s (2014, 2018) four quality factors: context, quality of relationships, quality of the action process and outcomes, this scoping review examines if and how these factors have featured as quality criteria. While all studies included in this review reported on the four quality factors, no study reported in any detail on how any of the factors were integrated with one another. Findings therefore highlight a significant gap in the monitoring and reporting on the quality of action research studies. Addressing these gaps will support the development of future action research aimed at mitigating the lack of quality associated with action research approaches.

Keywords: Quality factors in action research; healthcare, scoping review

Mejorando la Calidad de la Investigación Acción en contextos Sanitarios

Resumen: Los criterios para establecer la calidad de la investigación-acción son de creciente interés para los investigadores y profesionales, sin embargo, no se sabe qué tan bien se utilizan estos criterios. Esta revisión aborda esta cuestión mediante la evaluación de las medidas existentes que evalúan la calidad de la investigación-acción. Tomando los cuatro factores de calidad de Coghlan y Shani (2014, 2018): contexto, calidad de las relaciones, calidad del proceso de acción y resultados, esta revisión exploratoria examina si estos factores han aparecido como criterios de calidad y cómo. Si bien todos los estudios incluidos en esta revisión informaron sobre los cuatro factores de calidad, ningún estudio informó en detalle sobre cómo se integraron entre sí los factores. Por lo tanto, los resultados ponen de relieve una brecha significativa en el seguimiento y la presentación de informes sobre la calidad de los estudios de investigación-acción. Abordar estas brechas apoyará el desarrollo de futuras investigaciones de acción destinadas a mitigar la falta de calidad asociada con los enfoques de investigación-acción.

Palabras claves: Factores de calidad en la investigación-acción; atención médica, revisión panorámica

1. Introduction

Over the past 20 years, action research in health professions education has increased significantly, both in practice and publication. Today, a wide variety of health professions research journals have published at least one article that includes some type of action research,
whether a full study or the inclusion of an action research component more commonly within a mixed methods study. Simultaneously, there have been recurrent calls for enhancing quality in action research, taking quality to refer to a grade of excellence. As members of the academic community, we share responsibility for ensuring quality in action research, whether as researchers and practitioners who design and implement research projects, as manuscript reviewers who critique for journals, as colleagues who discuss and learn from each other, or as scholarly practitioners who draw upon results to enhance and innovate clinical practice. Therefore, a scoping review was performed to establish how the quality of action research studies in healthcare is addressed and to summarise standards of quality and suggest best practices for designing, undertaking and reporting high quality action research.

2. **Background**

Although, Waterman et al., (2001) recognised action research as a promising strategy for organisational change and health care improvement, nevertheless, healthcare systems across the globe are struggling to cope with the dual challenges of emerging and increasing demands and system constraints (WHO, 2016). A systematic review (Montgomery et al., 2015), examined implementing action research in hospital settings and identified action research as having the potential to optimise operational performance by guiding staff toward a salutogenic (as opposed to pathogenic) approach to the organisation. Previous authors, compliment these findings and show that action research has the potential to facilitate organisational change, teamwork and the empowerment of health care professionals in hospitals and communities thus contributing to improvements in the quality of care (Beringer & Fletcher, 2011; Clark, 2009; Moxham et al., 2010; Viswanathan et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2008).

Key tenets of action research can be summarised as follows (Argyris et al., 1985; Coghlan, 2019).

1. It involves tests of change on real issues in socio-ecological systems. It focuses on a particular issue of concern and seeks to resolve the issue.
2. It involves iterative cycles of steps: constructing an issue, planning action, taking action and evaluating action.
3. The intended change typically involves the positive disruption of established patterns of behaviour.
4. It is a participatory and collaborative endeavour undertaken by individuals who share a mutual concern.
5. It contributes simultaneously to basic knowledge in social science and to social action in everyday life.

Reason and Bradbury (2001) preferred to use the term ‘quality’ in action research rather than validity. They suggest the judge for quality action research be on the basis that it develops a praxis of relational knowledge and knowledge generation reflects co-operation between the researcher and participants. Morrison and Lilford (2001) proposed five key tenets of an idealised version of action research, Levin (2003) has four. Eden and Huxham (1996) developed fifteen characteristics of ‘good’ action research, as a checklist to guide thinking about