

DISTINGUISHING ACTION RESEARCH FROM PARTICIPATIVE CASE STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Action researchers contend that a complex social process can be studied best by introducing changes into that process and observing the effects of these changes. The approach used by organizational consultants must also introduce change, but in this case, the theoretical development and the rigorous empirical foundation are prerequisite elements of the activity. Participative case studies are a common scientific report proceeding from consulting projects. This paper discusses the contrasts between the action research method, consulting, and participative case studies. Ethical problems arise when action research is knowingly or unknowingly conflated with consultation practices, since this combination makes the usual set of action research dilemmas even more problematic. An improved understanding of the action research-consulting contrasts aids in distinguishing the contributions of participative case studies to the information systems literature.

INTRODUCTION

Within the information systems research community, action research is a widely known research approach in Scandinavia, Britain, and The Commonwealth. However, outside of these areas, the approach is seldom considered. This may be due to the rigorous nature of the interpretive science that underlies the approach. In addition, there is some confusion that results from the failure to distinguish between action research and consulting activities. In some situations, a researcher may be lured into a position of fraudulently posing action research as consulting. In others, the naive researcher may erroneously report a participative case study as action research.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the distinctions between consulting and action research. In this undertaking, we will also consider the participative case studies that may be accepted by the scientific community in support of research findings that arise in consulting settings. The paper is organized as follows: First, the work will describe the widespread sociological view of action research and summarize the relevant literature in organizational consulting. Second, the work will compare the two processes on the basis of their foundations and a critical review of the similarities between the two approaches. This review will permit a broad summary of the key distinctions between these processes. Third, on the basis of these distinctions the paper considers the problems of combining the two processes in any one project. Fourth, the work will suggest rigor as a common theme in these problems, describing rigor in action research versus participative case studies. In conclusion we consider the possibility of fraudulent consultation and mislabeled participative case studies and possible inappropriate outcomes in action research projects. We also discover some implications for the

evaluation of action research.

ACTION RESEARCH

Action research presumes that complex social systems cannot be reduced for meaningful study. The fundamental contention of action research is that a complex social process can be studied best by introducing changes into that process and observing the effects of these changes. Thus, the action research method approaches scientific research from an interventionist's viewpoint. Researchers both observe and participate in the phenomena under study. Rapoport is widely-quoted for this definition of action research:

Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework. (Rapoport 1970, p. 499)

Susman and Evered (1978, p. 588) add an important third aim: "to develop the self-help competencies of people facing problems."

Blum (1955) explains the action research method as a simple two stage process. First, the *diagnostic stage* involves a collaborative analysis of the social situation by the researcher and the subjects of the research. Hypotheses are formulated concerning the nature of the research domain. Second, the *therapeutic stage* involves collaborative change experiments. In this stage changes are introduced and the effects are studied. However, in order to achieve scientific rigor, additional structure is usually imposed upon action research projects. The most prevalent description (Susman and Evered, 1978) details a five phase, cyclical process. The approach first requires the establishment of a client-system infrastructure or research environment. Then, five identifiable phases are iterated: (1) diagnosing, (2) action planning, (3) action taking, (4) evaluating and (5) specifying learning. Figure 1 is a diagram of this action research structural cycle. We will review each of these phases below.

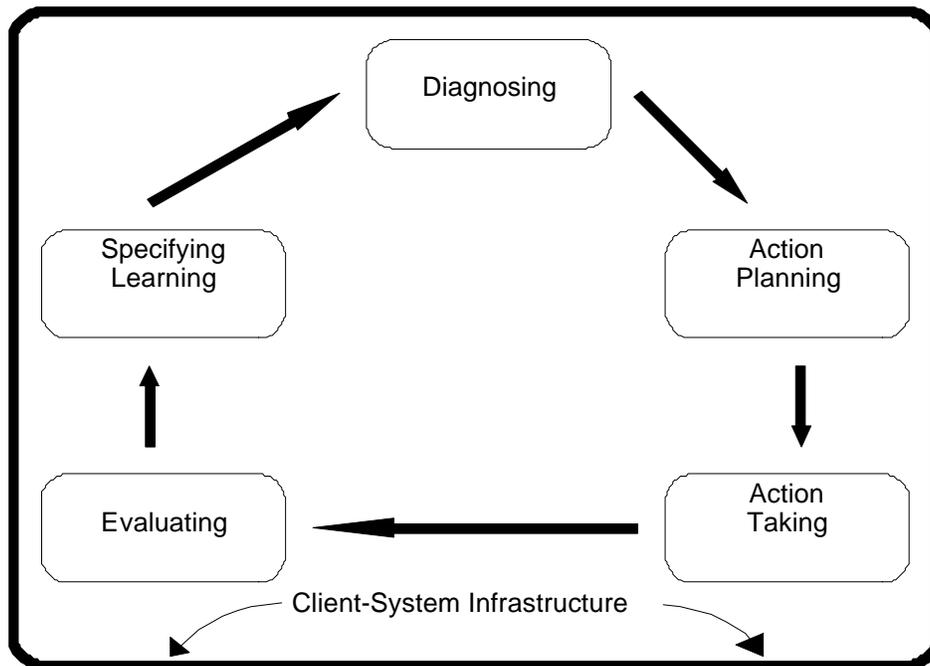


Figure 1. The action research cycle (from Susman 1985)

The *client-system infrastructure* is the specification and agreement that constitutes the research environment. It provides the authority, or sanctions, under which the researchers and host practitioners may specify actions. It also legitimates those actions with the express expectation that eventually these will prove beneficial to the client or host organization. Considerations found within the agreement may include the boundaries of the research domain, and the entry and exit of the scientists. It may also patently recognize the latitude of the researchers to disseminate the learning that is gained in the research. This infrastructure should also define the responsibilities of the client and the researchers to each other. For example, the infrastructure will probably assume that the researchers will not purposely specify actions that are harmful to the organization.

A key aspect of the infrastructure is the collaborative nature of the undertaking. The research scientists work closely with practitioners who are located within the client-system. These individuals provide the subject system knowledge and insight necessary to understand the anomalies being studied. Peter Clark describes these practitioners thus:

For convenience it is useful to think of the practitioner as part of a set of actors who are oriented to solution of practical problems, who are essentially organizational scientists rather than academic scientists. (Clark, 1972, p.65)

Diagnosing corresponds to the identification of the primary problems that are the underlying

causes of the organization's desire for change. This involves self-interpretation of the complex organizational problem, not through reduction and simplification, but rather in a holistic fashion. This diagnosis will develop certain theoretical assumptions (*i.e.*, a working hypothesis) about the nature of the organization and its problem domain.

Researchers and practitioners then collaborate in the next activity, *action planning*. This activity specifies organizational actions that should relieve or improve these primary problems. The discovery of the planned actions is guided by the theoretical framework, which indicates both some desired future state for the organization, and the changes that would achieve such a state. The plan establishes the target for change and the approach to change.

Action taking then implements the planned action. The researchers and practitioners collaborate in the active intervention into the client organization, causing certain changes to be made. Several forms of intervention strategy can be adopted. For example, the intervention might be directive, in which the research "directs" the change, or non-directive, in which the change is sought indirectly. Intervention tactics can also be adopted, such as the recruiting of intelligent laypersons as change catalysts and pacemakers. The process can draw its steps from social psychology, *e.g.*, engagement, unfreezing, learning and reframing.

After the actions are completed, the collaborative researchers and practitioners undertake the *evaluating* of the outcomes. This includes a determination of whether the theoretical effects of the action were realized, and whether these effects relieved the problems. Where the change was successful, the evaluation must critically question whether the undertaken action, among the myriad routine and non-routine organizational actions, was the sole cause of success. Where the change was unsuccessful, some framework for the next iteration of the action research cycle (including the adjustment of the hypotheses) should be established.

While the activity of *specifying learning* is formally undertaken last, it is usually an ongoing process. The knowledge gained in the action research (whether the action was successful or unsuccessful) can be directed to three audiences. First, what Argyris and Schön (1978) call "double-loop learning," the restructuring of organizational norms to reflect the new knowledge gained by the organization during the research. Second, where the change was unsuccessful, the additional knowledge may provide foundations for diagnosing in preparation for further action research intervention. Finally, the success or failure of the theoretical framework will provide important knowledge to the scientific community for dealing with future research settings.

The action research cycle can continue, whether the action proved successful or not, to develop further knowledge about the organization and the validity of relevant theoretical frameworks. As a result of the studies, the organization thus learns more about its nature and environment, and the constellation of theoretical elements of the scientific community continues to benefit and evolve.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONSULTING

The common view of organizational consulting holds that this activity is a process of temporarily introducing external expertise in order to obtain objective analysis, specialist knowledge, or the benefits of cross-organizational experience, without permanently acquiring additional organizational members (*cf.* Steele, 1975). Most scholarly work in the consulting process is generally considered part of the organizational development stream. The work is highly cross-disciplinary because the principles and techniques are widely adopted by specialists in many management fields, *e.g.* marketing consultants, computer consultants, manufacturing consultants, *etc.* (*cf.* Kubr, 1986).

The process of organizational consultation is projected in various stages or phases. For example, Lippit and Lippit (1978) describe phases such as engagement, analysis, action, and disengagement. Engagement is the process by which the consultant or consulting group is introduced into the organization, including the formal agreement with management and the structures under which the consultation is to take place. A clear and concise agreement on the deliverables is the critical output of this phase. The analysis phase is the period during which the consultant or consulting group studies the present organizational elements in order to identify problem areas and possible solutions. This phase concludes with a presentation of a report to management which usually proposes a number of possible alternative favorable actions that have been identified during the analysis. During the action phase, the consultant or consulting organization works within the organizational structures to implement the actions that have been selected by management. The disengagement phase includes a final review of the process and a report to management that details the impact of the process. An internal report within the consulting organization may also detail the knowledge acquired during the process.

These internal consulting reports occupy an unusual and poorly understood niche in the professional literature. These are a form of participative case study, that is, a case study in which the authors make no strong claims to being objective or uninvolved observers. Rather, the case describers very often have a pronounced and understandable bias in promoting their claims to having identified actions leading to successful outcomes. Reports can be found that describe utter failures in consulting practice, but these are very few in number when compared with the favorable reports. This is understandable in light of the ultimate outcome of too many utter failures: dissolution of the consulting firm (or severance of the failing members of the consulting team).

What we normally consider "scientific" case study research does not permit intervention by the researcher into the events being observed. Case studies assume a "fly on the wall," uninvolved listener, watcher and recorder. Further, case research methods differ in the assumption that the observer can be objective and unbiased in making and recording their observations. That is, the researcher's empirical experience is a true view of reality and that other researchers would have observed essentially the same reality. Milton Jenkins describes case methods as follows:

Using this methodology a particular subject, group of subjects or organization is observed by the researcher without intervening in any way. No independent variables are manipulated, no control is exercised over intervening variables and no dependent variables are measured. The case study attempts to capture and

communicate the reality of a particular environment at a point in time. (Jenkins, 1985, p. 112)

It seems non-participatory case studies suggest an impartiality not found in participatory case studies. Non-participatory case studies can be expected to be less biased in reporting the failures of an effort aimed at improving organizational performance (such as an information systems implementation). The observer has no personal interests in an unrealistically positive evaluation of the outcomes of the events. Using Jenkins' definition as a point-of-departure, the below working definition for participative case studies addresses the emphasis on the close relationship between these reports and the consulting process:

Using this methodology a particular subject, group of subjects or organization is observed by the researcher, who is one participant in the process being observed. The researcher is to some degree exercising control over some intervening variables and is a stakeholder in the outcome of the process. The participative case study report attempts to capture and communicate the biased interpretation by a stakeholder or stakeholders of their particular environment during a particular period in time.

COMPARING ACTION RESEARCH AND CONSULTATION

There may seem to be substantial similarities between the action research and consulting processes. It is not surprising to find such a strong relationship. This is because the main streams of both the action research and consulting literature can be traced back to the work of Kurt Lewin. In this section we will examine the roots of the action research literature in relation to consultation. The paper will then critically examine the apparent similarities and on this basis will derive the key distinctions between consulting and action research.

Foundations

A genealogy of action research and consulting thought is outlined in Figure 2. Both streams of thought originate with the development of action-based social psychology in response to the calamities of World War II. At this time social science recognized the resultant massive social changes in the research arena of the social sciences. Kurt Lewin (1947) developed action research at the Research Center for Group Dynamics (University of Michigan) in order to study social psychology within the framework of field theory. However, another group working independently at the Tavistock Clinic (later the Tavistock Institute) developed a similar method as a sort of psychosocial equivalent of operational research (see Trist, 1976).

The Tavistock Institute dealt with psychological and social disorders caused by battlefields and prisoner-of-war camps. Previously to this war, these psychological syndromes had not been identified in such a large population of patients. Scientists did not understand enough about the complex causes of such 'social illnesses' to formulate any confidence in any universal treatments. Each case appeared somehow 'different'. Hence, the idea of social action arose. Scientists intervened in each experimental case by changing some aspect of the patient's being or surroundings. Since scientist and therapist were one, the scientists were participants in their own research. The effects of the actions were recorded and studied. In this manner, a

body of knowledge was developed about successful therapy for the illnesses.

We can trace a direct stream of related work in action research that follows Lewin and the Tavistock experience. These arise in the field of organizational sociology and social psychology. In 1955, Blum published a discussion on the implications of action research for science. Then the approach seems to have gone through a period of experimentation that disclosed some essential problems with the approach. It appears to have fallen out of use. In 1970, Rapoport explained the three dilemmas that severely inhibit the use of the technique in practice. These include a goal dilemma between the practical problem-at-hand and the research question; there is a dilemma between the roles of researcher and consultant; and there is a value dilemma (such as the reflective values in academia versus the decisive values in management). Further indicating a fall in the use of action research during this period, Peter Clark published a book detailing the use of action research in the management of organizational change, and cast action research as a methodological "orphan" in post-World War II science. He attributes the failure of action research to "get off the ground" in the 1950's and 1960's to the funding structure of social science research. He reasoned that research was being increasingly sponsored by public money. In response, leading researchers tended to seek projects that relied on "hard" quantitative data: projects that sported the computer analysis that attracted government attention. This post-war emphasis on professionalism and precise data collection methods led to a general decline in qualitative research skills. As a result, action research methods were seldom applied, and often of marginal scientific quality. By 1976, we have Alfred Clark's compilation of action research papers that ask "What ever happened to action research?" (Sanford, 1976).

In 1978, Susman and Evered argued the positive evaluation of the scientific merits of action research in terms of post-positivist science. This was followed by a clearer definition of the important aims of the approach, published in 1980 by Hult and Lennung.

Action research has been linked closely to systems theory from its inception, although Susman and Evered (1978) make the seminal connections. These ideas recognize that human activities are systematic, and that action researchers are intervening in social systems. Peter Checkland's use of action research connection with systems analysis is a landmark for the technique in the information systems research community (1981). Checkland drew heavily both from the philosophy of science and from systems science, and his ideas have bought considerable attention to action research, although his work is not as widely followed in the United States. Checkland not only used the approach extensively in developing his soft systems methodology, but action research concepts for gaining professional knowledge permeate the soft systems approach itself. By 1985, Trevor Wood-Harper was advocating action research as a highly appropriate approach for general academic research into information systems and organizations.

Within the systems science community, work has continued to develop Checkland's ideas. Jackson (1985) has suggested critical systems theory, a composite of some soft systems ideas and critical social theory, as a more viable paradigm for the future of systems science.

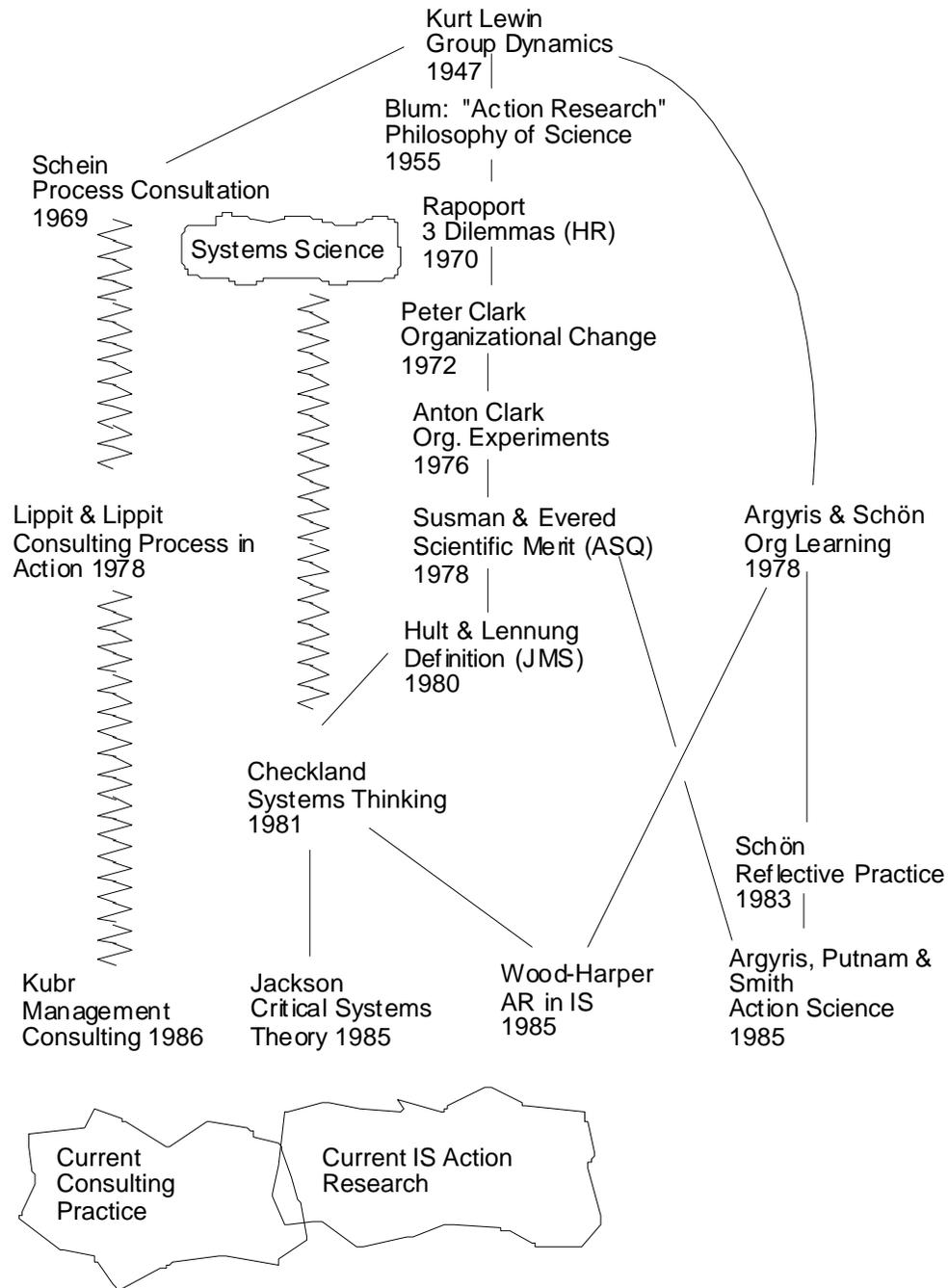


Figure 2. The Genealogy of IS Action Research

In comparison to action research thought, note that most of the scholarly work in management consulting is also rooted in Lewin's original action research. This work is largely derived from Edgar Schein's 1969 book in process consultation. Schein borrows heavily from

action research, and the cycles are very similar. However, much of the literature that follows, exemplified by Lippit & Lippit (1978) and Kubr (1986) discard the iterative process in favor of the linear "engage-diagnosis-action-disengage" model described earlier.

It would be an oversight to leave a discussion of this genealogy of thought without considering the work by Argyris and Schön in double-loop organizational learning, which can also be traced back to Lewin. This work is often cited by action research and consulting literature. This stream of thought reconnects with action research in a book by Argyris, Putnam and Smith in 1985. However, they openly seek to distance their work from earlier, "corrupt" forms of action research by using the term *action science*. These authors believe that action research has progressively become separated from theory building and testing, and that the method had become further corrupted by positivist attempts to impose the rigor of more traditional scientific experiments into action research projects. From their viewpoint, the effect disconnected theory from reality, and rendered the resultant findings irrelevant. Their work suggests many new structures for action science, and has yet to be widely adopted by the information systems research community.

Figure 2 illustrates the four major streams of thought vertically. These are process consultation, systems science, action research, and organizational learning. Of course, the linkage down the diagram from Lewin is not intended to imply exclusion of the influence of large bodies of other literature, nor even progression. These are simply streams of related work. A complete inventory of ideas in the systems science and consultation literature is beyond the scope of this article, and these unlisted works are denoted by jagged lines. See the bibliographies of Checkland (1981), Kubr (1986) and Lippit & Lippit (1978) for these details. Current information systems action research and consulting are shown at the bottom of the diagram. Action research is located in an area under the influence of Checkland's soft systems. Both Jackson's later versions of critical systems theory and Wood-Harper's later 'multiview approach' suggest methodological pluralism is more appropriate than action research alone. The action science work does not seem to be influencing practice or research at this time, so this stream is shown at an abrupt end. Current consulting is mostly dominated by the concepts traced to Schein, but there is some overlap with current action research.

A Critical Review of The Similarities Between Action Research and Consulting

Because of the common intellectual heritage, action research seems to share many attributes with consultation. The steps for these two activities appear to be directly equivalent. In this section the paper will consider and reject the apparent similarities between these two processes (see Table 1). These include the close appearance of the consulting contract to the client-system infrastructure, analysis and diagnosis, planning and alternative formulation, action and implementation, evaluation and follow-up meetings, and specified learning and internal reports. No doubt there are many exceptions to these generalities in practice. However, the taxonomies and characteristics used in Table 1 are soundly constructed on the basis of consulting and action research literature and the published generalizations of underlying practice. On the basis of these authorities, the characterizations should be highly valid.

Table I. Similarities between consulting and action research.

Action Research	Consulting
client-system infrastructure	well-defined, clear consulting contract
diagnosis	analysis of problem situation
action planning	alternatives formulation, presentation and client selection of most suitable
action taking	implementation -- client execution of consultant's recommendations
evaluation	follow-up meetings by consultant to capture client satisfaction or complaints
specifying learning	thorough consultant's internal project documentation

In action research, the *client-system infrastructure* assumes collaboration between the client's professionals (practicing scientists) and the research scientists. The infrastructure emphasizes the need to collaborate in the discovery of beneficial changes. The infrastructure recognizes that a series of experimental changes must be introduced into the organizational social system in the quest for a successful hypothesis and a beneficial change. The client explicitly prepares to accept the uniqueness of their problem situation, and the necessity of experimental solutions.

A consulting *contract* containing mention of the term "experimental" will draw worried scrutiny from many clients. Management usually expects consultants to bring their broad knowledge of very similar problem situations into the organization, and suggest those solutions, based on experience, that have a very high probability of success. The participants infer that solutions which were operable in other organizations will succeed against the problem at hand. Multiple, iterative attempts at discovering the solution are considered the mark of inexperience or incompetence in consultants.

In short, action researchers clearly expose to their clients at the commencement of the project the nature of their experimental approach . . . that they are unsure that their initial changes will be beneficial. Consultants must exude confidence in their strategies in order to build their client relationship. Any admissions of their own doubts concerning their recommendations must be carefully qualified in order to preserve their credibility.

Action research *diagnosis* is a collaborative effort between the practitioners and the researchers. The researchers concentrate on establishment of a sound theoretical framework, a scientific hypothesis that might explain behaviors in the social problem space. The practitioners, relying on their intimate familiarity with the problems, help eliminate unreasonable hypotheses and unlikely theoretic constructs. The work is interpretive and idiographic, relying heavily on the context to suggest investigatory methods and theoretical explanations.

In contrast, a primary benefit of consultants is their "outsider's view" of the problems, thus providing an independent, external *analysis* rather than a collaborative one. This is a recurring theme used in justifying the employment of management consultants: that the internal organizational experts are too "close" to the problem, and too influenced by organizational culture or politics to objectively analyze the problem space. Further, consultants are expected

to analyze the problems in the context of their experience in comparable organizations, *i.e.*, discover universal patterns of behavior and select the known, universal solution to a problem shared by many similar organizations. A key presumption here is that the consultant is not developing theory and conducting experiments. Rather, the consultant is applying a body of theory that has evolved from prerequisite experiments in other settings.

The *action planning* phase of action research focusses on the introduction of change into the organization in the expectation of achieving some desired goal state. The nature of the change is dictated by the theoretical foundations and the knowledge gained about the organization. In this stage, action research may focus on describing incremental changes, iteratively moving toward an ultimate goal state through a series of small-scale interventions. Such incremental changes require a solemn commitment by the organization to the action research project. In addition, the means for measuring the effects of the changes must be planned, and future steps will be contingent on the success of early changes. The planning must be collaborative.

Often, consultants are expected to identify several *alternative* courses for their clients. The details of costs and benefits of each alternative may be required, sometimes based on experience of similar firms. The client selects the most appropriate alternative from the list. Given the presumption that the suggestions are largely based on the successful experience of other firms, the planned changes are expected to succeed without likelihood for in-project course changes. The theoretical basis of the alternatives is less important than their empirically defined profiles and tradeoffs relative to risk and success. Even though the consultants may plan with the aid of internal organizational experts, the process is dominated by the experience of the consultants.

The research *evaluation* may focus on the effects of the change, measured in terms of the plan, rather than the achievement of the final goal state. Collaboration remains important in what may be an essentially interpretive process. Where the change appears to have failed to achieve the desired behavior, the hypotheses may be discarded and the theory adjusted to compensate for the actual effects of the changes.

Consultants often seek to review the success of their recommendations after the organization has settled into its goal state. These are usually called "*follow-up*" meetings, and chiefly serve two functions. First, the follow-up enables the consultant to keep the door open to the organization for future work, perhaps related to the completed project. Second, these permit the consultants to gather information about the success or failure of their recommendations that may be useful in future practice.

The final phase, *specifying learning*, follows from the theory adjustments by the action researchers. Knowledge is codified and flows in two directions. First, the organization learns about its own nature. Second, the scientists feed this knowledge into the scientific field to add to the general body of knowledge. The knowledge is considered "contingent," since it is only known to be applicable in one situation, but when considered in light of other scientific facts, may provide insight into the nature of certain generalized human or organizational behavior.

Consultants are expected to transfer knowledge into the organization. The client benefits by learning from the experience of the consultant. Any learning that arises from the course of the project is likely to be retained by the consultant. That is, the *internal project documentation* of consultants often remains proprietary, since it is their superior knowledge of wide-ranging cases that permits them to offer reliable alternatives. The successes are likely to be publicized, and their failures subdued. In either case, the knowledge gained (probably the most valuable knowledge is from the failures) is retained internally for use their future projects.

Table II. Key distinctions between consulting and action research.

	Action Research	Consulting
Motivation	Scientific knowledge, publication	Profit, proprietary knowledge
Commitment	Dual: research community, client	Client only
Approach	Collaboration	External, independent study
Foundation for recommendations	Theoretical framework	Empirical tradition
Essential source of understanding	Experimentation	Critical analysis
Explanations	Idiographic solutions	Universal solutions
Client's side benefits	Contingent learning	Knowledge transfer

Summarizing The Key Distinctions

The key distinctions between consulting and action research as discovered in the preceding analysis are summarized in Table 2. These essential differences surface as themes in the contrasts that arise between action research and consulting. Each is discussed below.

Action research and consulting differ in *motivation*. Not necessarily the motivation of the client organization, for organizations may patronize consultants and action researchers for the same reasons: the achievement of a desirable future organizational state. However, the internal motives of consultants and action researchers are different. Action research is motivated by its scientific prospects, perhaps epitomized in scientific publications. Consulting is motivated by commercial benefits, including profits and additional stocks of proprietary knowledge about solutions to organizational problems.

Action research and consulting are also essentially different in their *commitment*. Where an action research framework has been established, there is a dual commitment. One commitment is to the research community for the production of scientific knowledge. In action research there is also a commitment to the client for the application of practitioner's knowledge to their immediate problems. In a consulting situation, the commitment is to the client alone.

Action research and consulting differ in their *approach*. Collaboration is essential in action research because the essential knowledge about the organization already has been trapped by its members. Action researchers only need to guide the practitioners to new conclusions, theories and hypotheses based on their joint understanding. Consulting values its "outsider's," unbiased viewpoint, providing an objective perspective on the organizational problems.

The *foundation for recommendations* in action research is a theoretical framework suggested by the research scientists based on the collaborative investigation. The proposed solutions are inductively derived from theory. Consulting recommendations are founded on reliable experience with essentially similar problems. Consultants are expected to suggest

solutions that, in their experience, have proved successful in similar situations. These proposed solutions are deductively derived from empirical data.

The *essence of the organizational understanding* achieved in action research lies in the study of experimental changes in the organization, and practical success depends on successful iterations of narrow actions to achieve incremental goal states. Consultants develop an understanding through their independent critical analysis of the problem situation. They observe the organization through the filter of their experience, and detect familiar organizational pathologies.

The *explanations* and solutions suggested by action research are not necessarily "portable" to other social situations, *i.e.*, these are idiographic in nature and difficult to generalize. These explanations may be of little direct use outside of the organizational setting. Consulting makes the opposing assumption, depending heavily on the success of universal solutions that address essentially similar problems in different organizations.

Finally, different *side-benefits* accrue to the organization as a result of these projects. Action research results in "contingent learning," that may or may not prove useful to the organization depending on unknown changes to its future situations. Consulting usually involves some form of knowledge transfer, in which a necessary portion of the proprietary knowledge of the consultant is transferred into the client organization during the course of the consulting project. This knowledge is expected to have definite application in future organizational situations.

In summary, consultants are usually paid to dictate experienced, reliable solutions based on their independent review. Action researchers act out of scientific interest to help the organization itself to learn by formulating a series of experimental solutions based on an evolving, untested theory.

Problematic Nature of Combining Action Research and Consulting

Action research alone raises dilemmas for the researcher. When projected into the context of consulting, the mishandling of these problems can damage the organization and discredit the research. Many difficulties of mixing consulting and action research arise when the researcher fails to distinguish between the two activities either intentionally or accidentally. In the latter case, the question is one of "due care." In the former, it is one of fraud. Both situations are certainly ethical in nature.

Primary among these ethical issues is the maintenance of objectivity while participating in the study subject. Lewin points out that social science places different demands on the courage of its researchers than does natural science. Action researchers must be unafraid ("wisdom in the face of danger") while remaining fair-minded -- and this "fair-mindedness is the essence of scientific objectivity."

The scientist has to learn to look facts straight in the face, even if they do not agree with his prejudices. . . . He has to learn to understand how scientific and moral aspects are frequently interlocked in problems, and how the scientific aspects may still be approached. He has to see realistically the problems of power, which are interwoven with many of the questions he is to study, without his becoming a servant to vested interests. (Lewin, 1947, p. 153)

Such fair-minded objectivity becomes problematic when the researcher is a paid consultant

with a large stake in the rapid resolution of the problem-at-hand. Rapoport (1970) specifies these dilemmas of action research as ethical, goal and integrity. Warmington (1980) revised these as a set of three dilemmas: goal, value, and role. An examination of these reveals that each dilemma can be further polarized when action research and consulting are mixed within the same project.

Goal dilemmas. Two goal sets can compete for project direction and resources. One is the set of goals that represent the practical problems at-hand, including client-system (the organization) and client-component (the individuals) goals. Warmington (1980) notes that organizational goals are inextricably commingled with personal ones. The second goal set consists of the research goals (the institution or the project) and the researcher's professional and individual goals. Conflicts between the goal sets can become serious where an important theoretical notion is dangerous for the client, or where the client-system infrastructure is improperly constructed. That is, where the agreement of the researchers and clients failed to correctly detail the purposes and intentions of the research project.

However, problems can arise because the exact goal set of the client-system is difficult to define. The stipulated organizational goals may be in conflict with departmental or personal goals. Similar problems can develop where the ideal research goals deviate from the personal goals of the researchers. The presence of a consulting arrangement with the researcher can exacerbate these conflicts. For example, the researcher's personal or institutional reputation as a consultant (one who knows universal solutions and offers knowledge transfer) may be damaged if their experimentally-induced organizational changes fail to help the client-system. Thus, risk-adverse behavior may unnecessarily guide the research away from theoretically strong, but risky changes. As a further example, the researching-consultant may be pressured (as consultants often are) to produce rapid improvements. This can lead to the implementation of changes that have not been well-studied, and the theoretical foundations poorly established. The researcher-consultant may lose the scientific content of the project in this manner.

Role dilemmas. The ethical conflict here is one of the most direct for the researcher, since consulting and action research are often distinguished on the basis of role differentiation. Eric Trist is widely quoted in pointing out that "there is a great difference between simply acting as a consultant and acting as a researcher in a role where both professional and scientific responsibility are accepted. In the first case, there is no commitment to the advancement of scientific knowledge, either on the part of the consultant or on the part of those for whom the inquiry is being made. In the second case, this commitment is fundamental and must be explicitly accepted by both sides. It is this that makes the relationship collaborative." (Trist, 1976, p. 47)

Alan Warmington finds these prescriptive arguments may be impossibly severe. These are particularly relevant to those mixing consulting and action research:

The Action Researcher must not present himself as the expert who has some definitive techniques or packaged methods, able to make his own recommendations to the organization concerned. He must, they say, act throughout as a fellow student, collaborator and investigator, of equal status with his managerial colleagues. But his position may be more difficult and ambiguous than this. (Warmington, 1980, p. 36)

The action researcher must certainly bring some external qualities to bear upon the intervention process, such as data collection or analytical skills. Thus the line between consulting and action

research will always remain fuzzy. The researching-consultant is faced with an extremely delicate balance between collaboration and direction, experiment and expertise, professional and scientific priorities, and client-system or research loyalties. In fact, Alfred Clark (1976) considered the client-system and researching-consultant to be victims of each other. The client often will have little basis for assessing the competence of the researching-consultant. The researcher, on the other hand, is dependent the client since the client has a task independent of the researcher and the research has no task without the client.

Value dilemmas. Action research conflicts can arise from culturally determined expectations, such as contrasting values of the academic and management cultures. This might be epitomized in the contrast between the need for critical reflection or decisive action. The former is valued in the academic community, the latter an admired quality in the management profession. The researching-consultant faces certain credibility doubts among professional managers if critical reflection is mistaken as indecision, thus leading to pressure for incomplete initial data collection and theorization.

The researching-consultant, in the management culture, by virtue of payment, assumes certain obligations as an agent or servant of the client. These obligations are not as strong in the researcher conducting "free" action research. Management may assume that the values of their paid consultant will be subjugated to the unquestioned values of the client. However, in collaboration both an independent researcher and researching-consultant may well dispute the moral position of the client with regard to the ultimate purposes of the project, or the methods and changes employed in the process. In the case of the researching-consultant, management might perceive such disputes as insubordination.

In practice, it is not feasible to iron out such differences in establishing the client-system infrastructure, since the nature of such value systems will emerge as the study develops. More likely, the researching-consultant will face withdrawal (or dismissal) under circumstances of strong value conflicts.

Rigor and Action Research

The discussions above have clarified the nature and historical links between action research and the consulting process. The work above has discussed the depth of the dissimilarities between the two processes, and the dilemmas that are extended when the two activities are mixed. In this section we will consider the effect of inappropriately mixed action research and consulting. There are two possible outcomes, depending on the course of the dilemmas. Both are related to rigor and action research.

From our comparison, it is understandable that action research is sometimes branded as "consulting masquerading as research." It is also clear that at least four factors of rigor clearly differentiate action research and consulting (*cf.* Gummesson, 1988): (a) researchers require more rigorous documentary records than consultants; (b) researchers require rigorous theoretical justifications and consultants require less-rigorous (often undetailed) empirical justifications; (c) consultants are subject to client-imposed rigor, *i.e.*, they operate under tight time and budget constraints, while researchers must often impose their own rigor on the projects; (d) the consultation is usually linear--engage, analyze, action, disengage--while the action research process is cyclical requiring additional rigor since each phase must be re-entrant. But these differentiations are widely ignored, and even seasoned action researchers sometimes have trouble delineating action research from consulting (J nsson, 1991).

Seashore recognized the double-loss of credibility for action research if the lack of rigor

could not be corrected. Indeed, he concisely captured the concerns that fundamentally may have inhibited the transition of action research into the main stream of social scientific methodology for almost a half-century:

Without some rational linkage of action and research, we will be increasingly embarrassed and impeded by professional services masquerading as research and by scientific inquiry unjustifiably proffered as a client service. (Seashore, 1976, p. 104).

Participative Case Studies

Where the dilemmas cannot be negotiated, and the researcher surrenders the action research paradigm in favor of the consulting process, any published result becomes a participative case study. This type of report was described earlier, and is characteristic of internal consulting project reports. The objectivity of the report is then qualified by the strong stakeholder interests, and the theory development within the case study is usually not apparent.

We should recognize clearly that within the interpretive research paradigm, especially ethnography, there is great philosophical strength in positing the findings of a participative case study for scientific readership. Since, as we learned earlier, this approach lacks the theoretical rigor and iterative empirics of action research, it would be incorrect to suggest that a participative case study and an action research project are the same process.

A rigorous action research method can help negotiate the dilemmas that lead to the subjugation of action research to participative case studies. Rigor can be imposed on data collection by recording the theory evolution through each iteration of the method. Reports should rigorously maintain Lewin's "fair-mindedness" in reporting theory failures with as much detail as theory confirmations.

Fraudulent Consultation

Where the dilemmas cannot be negotiated, and the consulting process must yield to the action research method, it is critical to make the client aware that the activity underway is action research. The client should have a clear understanding of the experimental nature of the actions undertaken, and the risks involved. Without this understanding, the client is being tricked into paying a consultant for a universal solution, when the consultant fully intends to experiment with the organizational resources for research purposes.

We should recognize that a properly formulated action research infrastructure can include client sponsorship. However, as we have seen, there is a large body of evidence that indicates this is ethically problematic unless the client has a strong understanding of the action research method.

Again, rigor is a key element in assuring that the client infrastructure and research warrants are precise in delineating the nature of the research project. Rigorous adherence to the theory development iteration, even when a previous series of experimental actions have proved disastrous, requires courage. It is especially difficult when a series of experiments fail completely to improve the immediate problem situation, and the client cancels the project. While the scientific merit of the experiment may remain significant, the researcher's status in relation to consultants may be diminished.

Evaluating Action Research

From a scientific viewpoint, the fraudulent consulting that can result in action research is an ethical problem of the researcher. The approach taken in such a case would qualify as valid action research, and produce valid knowledge within the paradigm. As a problem in ethics, it is similar to the human subjects research motive that requires informed consent by any human subject in a research problem. This is by no means an inconsequential issue, but a further discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

However, the prospect of a participative case study being confused with action research is, from our perspective, a simple error in properly describing the research method. Researchers and research reviewers should be aware of the differences and be prepared to differentiate between the two approaches. Action research is more rigorous, more difficult, and longer in duration than participative case studies. For example, an action research report that fails to discuss (at least in an appendix) the client-system infrastructure, the collaborative nature of the research team, the iterative theory development (especially theory failure and modification) may be open to the challenge that the method has been erroneously described, and is indeed a participative case study. Likewise, where the research undertook a single, linear consultation approach from engagement to disengagement, it would be unusual for this approach to match the characteristics of the action research method.

Ultimately, the epistemological nature of action research and participative case studies is different. That is, the findings of the two approaches make different assumptions about theory, the impact of values on interpretation in observation and the researcher's stake in the bias of the reported findings. While both are valid research methods, confusion of the two in the literature will confuse the two sets of assumptions. This must reduce the impact of the findings in both approaches for the body of science in information systems.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper has directly benefited from detailed comments by Heinz K. Klein at Binghamton University and conversational reflections by Finn Kinsing and Keld B. dker of Roskilde University.

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• Case Studies • Action Research • Ethnography (participant. observation) • Participative Enquiry • Feminist Perspectives • Grounded Theory. Positivistic methodologies. Surveys. Surveys involve selecting a representative and unbiased sample of subjects drawn from the group you wish to study. The main methods of asking questions are by face-to-face or telephone interviews, by using questionnaires or a mixture of the two. This research requires active co-operation between researcher and client and a continual process of adjustment to the intervention in the light of new information and responses to it from respondents. Ethnography (participant observation). This form of research evolved from anthropology and the close study of societies.