Review:

John E. Glass

David Coghlan & Teresa Brannick (2001). Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization. London: Sage Publications, 133 pages, ISBN: 0-7619-6887-3 (pbk), US $27.95

Abstract: This text provides the philosophic, conceptual, and pragmatic orientation for conducting action research within one's organization. Beginning with a review of the origins of action research, the authors detail the methodology and its relevance to organizational growth and progress. The text is divided into two main sections. The first provides the theoretical foundations for the use of action research within an organizational setting. The second section furnishes an in-depth discussion of the implementation process including potential pitfalls and challenges. Although one can glean all that is necessary to implement such an endeavor from the text, this would not be an approach for a first-time researcher to undertake without comprehensive assistance from a more seasoned researcher.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

As a sociologist conducting program evaluations for a non-profit agency, I was delighted at the opportunity to review this text. My delight was born out of two reasons. The first was that I always enjoy broadening my knowledge about research methodologies, especially those that seek to enlist as many people as possible. I find these to not only be the most egalitarian methods, but also the ones that have the greatest opportunity for individual and organizational growth to occur. [1]

The second reason I was delighted to review the text was because I had been hoping for some time to introduce action research not only to the organization at which I work, but also to the greater non-profit community of which our agency is a part. I am rarely satisfied with one social science research methodology as I find humans to be somewhat limitless in our abilities, capacities and expressions and that one methodology as a means to generate knowledge about us is insufficient. [2]

As such, my reading of the work was from two perspectives: 1) to learn more about action research and 2) to see if the text could provide me, a practitioner, with a step-by-step manual that I could use in my own work conducting program evaluations. Briefly, I was fulfilled in regards to the former and left a bit wanting in regards to the latter. [3]

2. Text Overview

The text is comprised of two "Parts." The first is entitled, "Foundations" with four chapters and the second, "Implementation," contains five chapters. The titles of each of the parts are self-explanatory. Their respective chapters detail the philosophic and pragmatic aspects of action research within an organization. [4]

"Foundations" provides a thorough enough survey of the history and influences of action research as a methodology. As a newcomer to the methodology, it left me with enough information to allow me to situate the approach within other research frameworks and to develop a keen understanding of its dynamics. I especially enjoyed the first chapter's review of similar approaches (participatory action research, appreciative inquiry, reflective practice, etc.). [5]

Drawing on LEWIN as the primogenitor of the "generic" approach, the authors elaborate their particular action research framework in the subsequent chapters of Part I. Their approach is essentially composed of four steps: diagnosing, planning action, taking action and evaluating action. They note that a spiral of these four steps cycling over and over again actually best represents the entire endeavor. [6]

Nested within these cycles is yet another cycle, that of "inquiry-reflection." Made up of four processes as well—experiencing, reflecting, interpreting and taking action—these nested processes are engaged in during the implementation of each of the four steps outlined above. In this way, the action research effort propels itself forward in an iterative and reflexive matter. The rationale behind this integrated approach is one of organizational and individual learning as the endeavor moves forward. [7]

The remainder of the section addresses in-depth the issues surrounding these iterative processes, such as the interaction between the researcher and the organizational system, the role of the researcher as researcher and as employee, and organizational access considerations. [8]

The second part, "Implementation," provides considered discussion of the topics especially relevant to the actual implementation of the action research project. One can easily glean the substance of this part in reviewing the titles of each chapter: managing organizational politics, framing and selecting your project, implementing your action research project, making sense: using frameworks to study organizations in action, and writing an action research dissertation. [9]

The first chapter on organizational politics is quite exhaustive in explicating the many different relationships that exist within organizations and the challenges that they present for the action researcher. The identification of the different relationships that exist is helpful from a theoretical viewpoint, but, when placing oneself into the role of a potential action researcher, they can seem quite daunting. To put it succinctly, if I knew that there were this many potential relationships to consider before undertaking an action research project, I might think twice about doing it—especially if I were a novice researcher. Perhaps then, the trick is to not develop a plan to address each one, but to use them to sensitize one to the competing and potentially conflicted relationships that may exist. [10]

The next chapter focuses on how to frame the project. In keeping with the highly reflexive and contextual approach outlined in the first part, this chapter outlines the iterations one moves through in attempting to identify the organizational issues to be researched. Again, rather in-depth discussion of each step, consideration, challenge, etc., is presented. [11]

In the third chapter, the authors detail an "ideal type" model of implementation. It consists of primarily four steps: determining the need for change, defining the future state, assessing the present in terms of the future and managing the transition. Once again, emphasis is placed on reviewing what has occurred and is occurring, and learning from this. The authors also point out that data generation within an action research model can serve as an intervention in and of itself. Maintaining their reflexive stance, they discuss the need for reflection, noting any participant responses to the collection of data as a source of data, and staying sensitive to the issues of advocacy and political impact. [12]

The fourth chapter addresses the analysis (or "sense made") from the data collected. Included in this chapter are overviews of system thinking, a model of the change process and organizational dynamics. Unfortunately, instruction on how to actually conduct the analysis is somewhat lacking. [13]

The final chapter offers a discussion of the relevance of action research for dissertations with subsequent considerations. [14]

3. Usability

As noted at the beginning of this review, I did learn more about action research than I had previously known. I am not convinced, however, that I could use the text as a manual for the actual implementation of an action research project within my organization. My reasons for this apprehension follow. [15]

Although I appreciate the depth and breadth of a reflexive, contextual stance in human sciences methodology, I was left, in this case, with a slight sense of anomie. Not suggesting that the text advocates infinite, contextual regress, it does, however, seem to fail in providing grounded direction on how to actually employ action research in an organizational context. There are plenty of examples of questions to entertain, models to use and issues to consider, but

these left me with more of a general sense of direction rather than a step-by-step, detailed map. Granted, the authors make a compelling argument that this is precisely what action research is about—reflexive and iterative discovery. At some point, though, in order to be useful for practitioners, the methodology requires a practical and tangible plan of implementation. One way that this could have been achieved in the text was to have detailed an actual action research project from start to finish. [16]

Another shortcoming was the lack of realistic discourse about power in organizations. Although there was ample discussion of organizational politics and challenges, there was not a fundamental situating of the approach within the context of organizational power. The problem with this failure is that if the text were to be read/used by a novice researcher, he/she could be easily left to believe that simply by following the outlined strategies and by being aware of potential politically-charged relationships, implementation of such an effort would be easy. This seems to be a naive and unrealistic image of modern organizations and far from the actuality of day to day organizational life. This oversight appears to be indicative of contemporary models of organizations as systems in which power is embedded, but can be easily handled with the right strategy. [17]

My final comment concerns the continued reference of using the approach for a dissertation. This left me wondering who exactly was the intended audience of the text? The title leads one to believe that it is addressed to individuals within organizations that wish to utilize action research for organizational learning and change. To be sure, there are individuals employed in organizations working on an advanced degree that requires completion of a dissertation. I, as a practitioner who has already completed a dissertation, however, found the running discussion distracting. Furthermore, it left me wondering what the actual purpose was in including this. If the authors were interested in writing a text on using action research for a dissertation, then they should have titled it that way. [18]

4. In Sum

Although I found the text lacking in being able to provide me with a detailed manual for implementing action research in an organizational setting, it did expand my knowledge of the methodology and increased my awareness of the benefit that it can have for organizations. [19]

I would suggest that the text is perhaps best suited for seasoned researchers who have experience with qualitative/reflective methodologies and are well-versed in organizational politics. Attempting to employ this approach without this foundation would, in all likelihood, result in frustration and disillusionment for the researcher. [20]

Author

John E. GLASS is an Adjunct Professor of
Sociology at the University of North Texas and the
Director of Program Evaluation at The Family
Place in Dallas, Texas, USA. He is an applied
sociological practitioner with over 10 years
experience in the fields of substance abuse,
program evaluation, family violence and
counseling. In a previous issue of *FQS* John
GLASS reviewed Action Research for Gender
Equity.

Contact:

John E. Glass

P.O. Box 7999
Dallas, Texas, USA 75209

E-mail: johneglass@yahoo.com

Citation

Glass, John E. (2002). Review: David Coghlan & Teresa Brannick (2001). Doing Action Research in
Your Own Organization [20 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative
Social Research*, *3*(4), Art. 44, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0204446.