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Designing Action Research

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Due to the variety of uses of the term *Methodology*, it is important to make distinctions between Methodological *Approaches*, Methodological *Designs*, and Methodological *Procedures* (adopted from Opie, 2004).

- Methodological Approaches are overarching strategies to gaining knowledge – how can the problem under study be best examined given constraints of the situation? (e.g., experimental, correlational, descriptive).
- Methodological Designs are subcategories of Methodological Approaches – experiments can be *true experiments* or *quasi-experiments*; correlational designs can vary based on scale of measurement of variables (nominal, ordinal, interval, ratio); descriptive designs can be case studies, surveys, archival, or even participant observations.
- Methodological Procedures are specific research techniques that are used to collect and analyze data (e.g., interviews, questionnaires, observations). Multiple *procedures* can be used in conducting research in a given design (e.g., a case study might involve interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, document analysis, and observation).

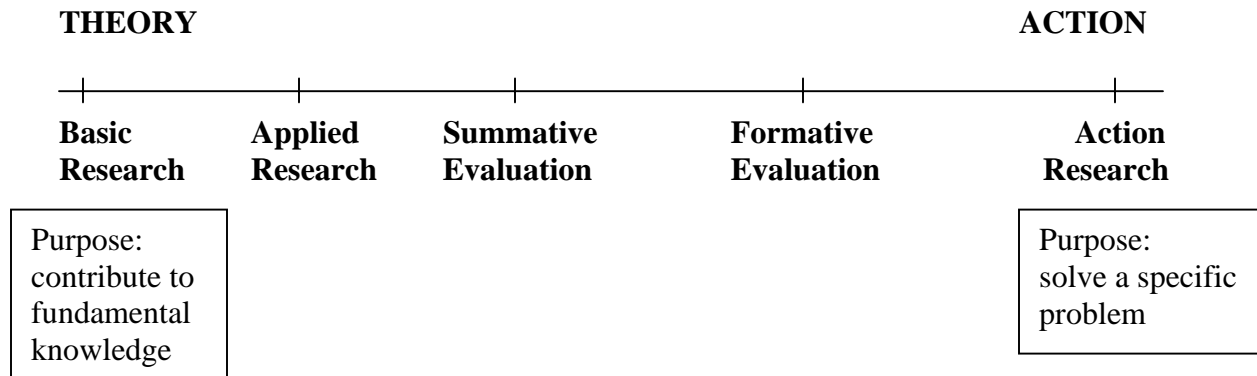
Action Research can involve any of the methodological approaches, designs, and procedures outlined above though the most typical is a quasi-experiment where no random assignment is attempted and a single variable (e.g., an instructional technique) is manipulated.

Opie (2004) suggests considering these factors before conducting research:

- Situational constraints (social, political, physical, historical contexts)
- **Reason for research (purpose)**
- Conceptualization of situation being studied
- Sorts of questions for which answers are being sought
- Information produced by questions
- Scale of research project (investment of personal time, effort, money, other resources)
- Nature of the research population – can potential respondents provide adequate answers to questions posed by researcher?
- Ethical issues related to research

- Expectations of organization funding research (What is expected by PRISM leadership?)
- Timeline for conducting study

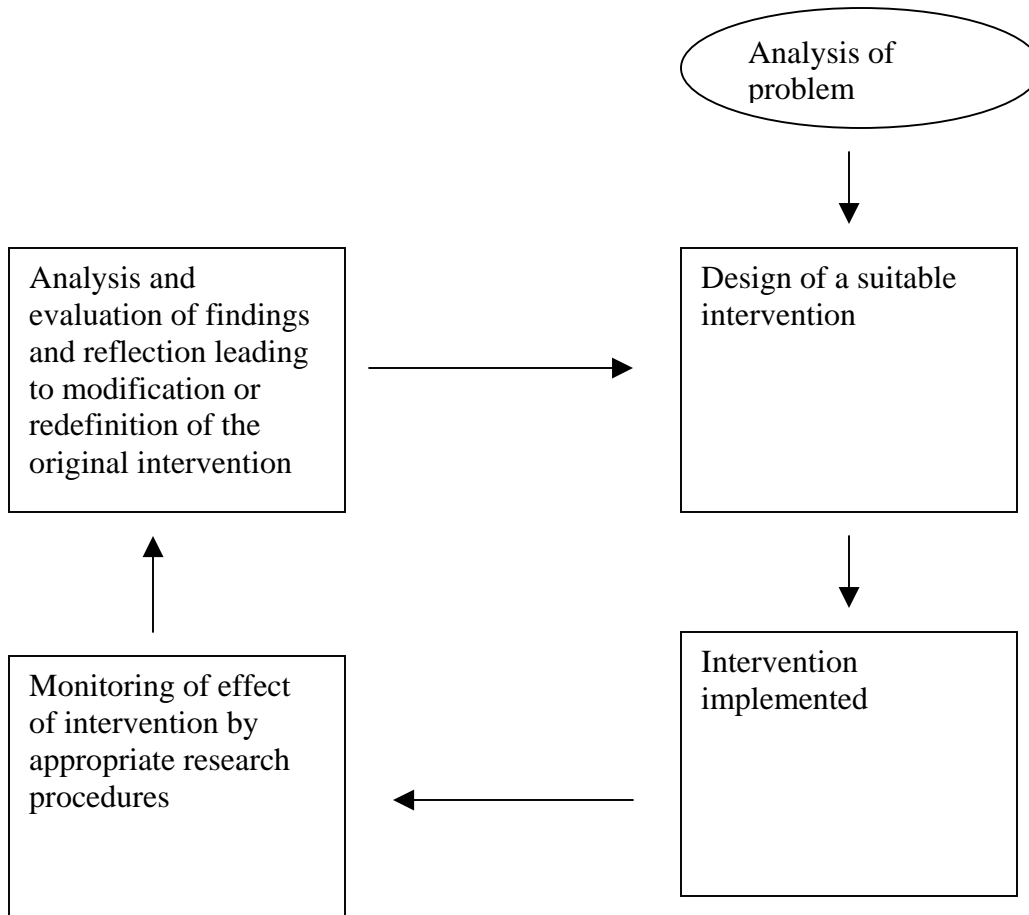
Patton (2002) also encourages researchers to consider the *purpose* of the research before they begin any research program. One way of thinking of this issue is to consider what Patton refers to as the theory-to-action continuum outlined below (adapted from Patton, 2002):



Action Research –

- “is a reflective cyclic process to be brought to bear on the understanding of a problem at hand.” (p. 79, Opie, 2004)
- “action research explicitly and purposefully becomes a part of the change process by engaging people in the program or organization in studying their own problems in order to solve these problems.” (p. 221, Patton, 2002)
- “the distinction between ‘action’ and ‘research’ is quite blurred in action research and the research methods tend to be less systematic, more informal, and quite specific to the problem, people, and organization for which the research is undertaken.” (p. 221, Patton, 2002) NOTE: This does *not* mean the research is hastily and haphazardly designed and conducted.

Model of Action Research (adapted from Opie, 2004)



Kemmis & McTaggart (1992 as cited in Opie, 2004) suggested examining the following personal considerations when beginning action research:

- involve yourself in the action research
- be organized
- start small
- ensure supportive work-in-progress discussions are planned for
- be tolerant and supportive throughout the process
- be persistent about monitoring
- be prepared to work hard to ensure sharing of responsibility throughout the whole process
- be open to changing how you think about things
- report progress to all people interested in the project, not just those directly involved
- set aside time to write up the work
- be explicit about what you achieved
- continually question whether the work is actually providing useful outcomes

Recommended reading: Opie, C. (Ed.). (2004). *Doing educational research: A guide for first-time researchers*. London: Sage.

References

- Opie, C. (Ed.). (2004). *Doing educational research: A guide for first-time researchers*. London: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.