

## **ACTION RESEARCH IN ROMANIA: HISTORY AND PROSPECTS**

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*Abstract: Although its beginnings action research was presented as a viable methodological alternative, even now it has not emerged as a common practice.*

*This paper reviews the research-action beginnings as a distinct method of research in Romania and how it is currently used in the social sciences, by review the contributions of the founders of this method (in interwar period) and those who practice this way of research today.*

*Keywords: community, action research, methodology, positivism, social change.*

### **History of action research**

Action research has begun to establish itself as a distinct type of research in the social sciences after 1946, following the Kurt Lewin's publication of the article "Action Research and Minority Problems". The American psychosociologist (of German origin) Kurt Lewin is considered the "father" of action-research (especially since he is considered to have created the term, although John Collier had used in a similar manner a year before Lewin \*) and the specific delineation of this type of research is one of his major contributions to the development of psycho-sociology.

A number of authors (Kock. .. 1997; Baskerville, 1999 etc.) showed that, in parallel with the work of Kurt Lewin at the University of Michigan. Research Center for Group Dynamics, at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London was also (independently) developed a related research on disorders suffered by the soldiers who fought in the Second World War. There were identified a number of similar research (Collier, 1945) conducted after the one made by Lewin or by the Tavistock group and links the emergence of the new type of research by the movement "science in education" - active in the United States at the border between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, and also, a number of re-conceptualization of education in the same cultural space, especially those made by John Dewey (eg, description of the problem solving process)

Kurt Lewin's contribution is regarded as fundamental because he is the first author who conducted a systematic methodological reflection on the specifics and method to accomplish action research. In addition to the article from 1946, Kurt Lewin developed the concept of "action research" in two articles published in 1947. Though he made the first theoretical approach and described the first cycle of action research, Kurt Lewin has not succeeded (due to his death at the age of 57) to further articulate his ideas of this kind of empirical research.

### **Begginnings of action-research in Romania**

Regarding Romania, action research has been used rarely; and within a review on a paper published in 2004 (Lambriu and Mărginean) this approach was noted as "one of the first examples of action research in our country" (Chiţu, 2006, 206). However, action research is not new in our literature: Pantelimon Golu (1974, 202-205) presented the

contribution of Kurt Lewin, and Henri H. Stahl (1975, 109) who described "the focusing on" action " as the common platform for all particular social disciplines. "

Henri H. Stahl (1981, 273) noted that in the concept of Dimitrie Gusti (1880-1955) "otherwise exposed since his first university lectures [...] these two ideas," research "and" action ", apparently contradictory, however, are organically linked; as otherwise stated by the very title of the journal Archives for science and social reform, and also, by one of his books, Knowledge and action in the service of the nation. "

Recalling his time in the Gusti sociological school, Henri H. Stahl devotes an entire chapter entitled "Moving from" research" to "action" '(Stahl, 1981, 273-278) to the description of the work of Professor Dimitrie Gusti as general manager of the Foundation Royal Cultural "Prince Charles" (1934-1939) "in the Foundation, the focus would shift from" research "to" action ", switching therefore, as opposed to previous 'monographic' campaigns " (Stahl, 1981 273). This trend , however, was not embraced by a number of prominent members of his school (including Herseni and Traian Mircea Vulcănescu) because it was seen as a real betrayal of the idea of monography "getting immediate practical results was categorised as" politicking ",and many blamed their teacher for letting himself absorbed, first by the ministry and then by the Foundation "(Stahl,1981, 276). It resulted thus a division of monographysts in two camps: "researchers" and "practitioners". Referring to the same period in the evolution of Dimitrie Gusti's sociological school, Zoltan Rostas (2005, 40) noted that "the new strategy of the Foundation did not mean the total abandonment of the monography, nor did it mean turning Romanian Social Institute into an effective citadel of science to assist the reform. "Significantly, the same author entitles his chapter in which he describes the functioning of the Foundation, as "Research and / or action" (Rostas, 2005, 35). Henri H. Stahl (considered by Iancu Filipescu (2006, 2) as "the" undisputed master "of the school" in terms of methods and techniques of sociological investigation) subsequently showed that the transposition of Dimitrie Gusti 's concept of the organic link between research and action in the practice of the Royal Cultural Foundation "Prince Charles" was not done, as well as other projects in the same period (such as the establishment of research institutions besides Romanian Village Museum) and because of the socio-political context: "it was not possible to do. It was a period of social crisis, so he was not able to accomplish such high cultural foundations or research centers" (Rostas, 2000, 160).

Dimitrie Gusti's conception of the "organic" relationship between research and action is similar to that of Kurt Lewin and his sociological school work corresponds largely to the research-action principles described above. However, I can not say that Gusti's sociological school steps can be considered as examples of action research, at least because they lack a prominent feature of this type of research: the iterative character. In addition, as already mentioned, the intention of Dimitrie Gusti resulted not in the convergence of research and practice, but in its opposite, by the division of the monographic school.

### **Methodological principles**

Sixty years after the publication of the article "Action Research and Minority Problems", David Barge (2006, 378-383) assumed the task of formulating the principles of action research, by extracting them from the three articles written by Kurt Lewin:

- 1) Action research combines the - sometimes experimental - systematic study of a social problem, with its solving efforts. In contrast to the traditional scientific model, where the main task of the researcher was to understand the issue in question, in action research the issue is studied, but there are also given opportunities for intervention to resolve it. Applying this principle requires a very good knowledge of the theories concerning the social problem under investigation, starting with the adage "There is not a more practical thing such as a good theory" (Lewin, 1943/1951, 169).
- 2) Action research includes a process of spiral data collection for establishing the scope, actions to achieve it and an assessment of the outcomes of the intervention. Lewin conceived action research as a process of problem solving that takes place in a constantly changing environment. Therefore, in principle, there is no end of an intervention, because problems to be solved will permanently occur. For each problem-solving process, the following stages will have to be completed: data collection to determine the purpose of the intervention; achieving the goal (through interventions within individual groups, organizations or communities) and evaluating the intervention undertaken.
- 3) Action research requires feedback from all the parties involved in its realization. Feedback can reveal deviations from the purpose of the intervention (alterations of the original plan) and may exhibit discontinuities in the intervention process, that are thus correctable in real time. This principle emphasizes the active role of all parties involved in the research project, including the customers (who are usually excluded, with no access to the information available to those conducting the research).
- 4) Action research involves a continuous cooperation between researchers and practitioners. If in what concerns the conventional model of scientific research, the researcher has exclusive control (as he is the only one familiar with the research hypothesis, the procedures for the selection of participants, etc.), in the case of action research, both the researcher and the other persons who apply the research are equal partners in the decision making. This cooperation is based on the recognition of the fact that the participants should be responsible for the decisions that affect their existence and need to understand the reasons underlying the intervention. Because they are equal partners with the researcher in the intervention project and know the content and the reasons for the decisions that have been made, the participants can keep their motivation at a high level.
- 5) The small group plays a central role in decision making and changing individuals. For Kurt Lewin the small group is the most important vehicle of democratic decision making and the process of individuals through it covers three phases: a) defrosting (reducing the forces that push to preserve the existing situation, by presenting a problem or a challenging event, with the goal to persuade the members of the organization to recognize the need for change and seek new solutions); b) actual change (behavior modification of the group members by developing new behaviors, values and attitudes); c) freezing (by setting up new systems and procedures to support and maintain the changes made).
- 6) Action research takes into account the values, goals and aspirations of power of the parties involved. Because each party involved in the action research process has its own set of priorities and values, the only way designed to ensure the success of the research is addressing the conflicts that occur, openly. Again, we observe the contrast with the classical

manner to approach the research in which only the person leading the research has the power to make decisions and resolve conflicts unilaterally.

7) Action research serves the knowledge creation, formulation of intervention principles and evaluation. Regarding knowledge, it generates both collected data and processed in a manner similar to other types of research and also, "action knowledge" (important for achieving intervention and to improve the functioning of the group, organization or community, in time). Also, the measuring instruments used in the action research can be useful for the group, long after the completion of the intervention, as assessment tools.

8) In action research the focus is on recruiting, developing and supporting the agents of change – the trainers. Because action research seeks social change, these investments made in trainers (agents of change) can be considered essential because they are the principal means of achieving the aimed social change.

### **Inhibitors in the development of action research**

In relation to the everscence registered in the mid-twentieth century, during which several authors may be credited with outstanding contributions in defining the action research, the further development of this distinct type of research has been slow (Baskerville, 1999, 3). Bob Dick (1999) characterized this trend as being caused by a "strange neglect" of this type of research, especially given that this approach succeeds in linking the results of the research to the actions desired by practitioners of various social fields. As far as I am concerned, I have systematized the factors that have slowed down the affirmation of the new paradigm (described in the covered literature in a disparate way) as the following categories:

a) The existence of a permanent controversy about the interpretation of Kurt Lewin's contribution to the definition of action research as a distinct type of research. As the "father" of this paradigm did not live to complete his work, the methods of interpretation of his contribution (by extracting the fundamental assumptions or principles) are relatively diverse and numerous. As a result, even the theoretical basis of the new methodological approach seems shaky, despite the American psychosociologist was a strong supporter of it.

b) The "opposition" to positivism. Nereu F. Kock, Robert J. McQueen and John L. Scott (1997) noted that since the beginning, the action research was "evangelized" by its practitioners and heavily criticized by those who defended the positivist approach. As the practitioners of the new type of research were presenting it as an alternative method meant to overcome the limitations imposed by positivism, they created the impression that the action research and the positivism are research guidance that are mutually exclusive. The opposition created is presently unrealistic, since positivism is an epistemology that guides the mainstream (mainstream science) and action research regarded in relation to positivism can not be more than a particular way of approaching the research (which occurred as a need for an intervention to solve a social problem, which is accompanied by a careful theoretical study and analysis of the results).

Based on this observation, there are attempts at "reconciliation" based on the description of classic studies of action research (including those by Kurt Lewin) in positivist terms as a particular form of the field experiment, carried out with little control of variables (Kock, McQueen and Scott, 1997, 5). Moreover, we must not forget that the "father" of action research remained in history as one of the psychosociologists with most remarkable

experimental results and did not depart in any moment from positivism. Several authors suggest that the stated opposition could become a real one by developing an epistemology based on the action research paradigm, that present some real differences from the mainstream science.

c) The financing way of social and human sciences in the postwar period, based mainly on public funds and that especially encouraged quantitative research, to the detriment of qualitative research. Action research, as a predominant type of qualitative research, was one of the "victims" of this funding mechanism (Baskerville, 1999, 5). Perhaps this is the source of a series of statements that minimize action research, labeled as "science of amateurs" or "poor science" (Kemmis, 1993, 3).

d) Social activism (sometimes of a radical type) adopted by some of the followers of action research, was not appreciated by either the positivists or by governments (the main funders of research programs). Among the best known examples we find the approaches made by Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda in South America. Due to the social activism, action research was seen as a less desirable type of research and continued to be under-funded.

e) The attempts to "corrupt" action research (to distance it from the essence of Kurt Lewin's conception) derived both from those who practice it and from those who try to increase its rigor by experimental type designs – we find here a detachment of theory from reality that produces largely irrelevant research results (Argyris, Putnam and Smith, 1985). Because of these attempts, the action research was "distorted" to the way it was originally designed (Kemmis, 1993, 4).

f) Strong affirmation in a limited number of fields of study (such as the development of schools or health care organizations) and the discrete presence in most areas. This trend has as potential causes, the assertion of the experiment as the favorite method in psychosociology and the fact that higher education has a certain tendency towards conservatorism in terms of teaching and learning of research methodology (Baskerville, 1999, 4).

Due to these factors, action research did not have a spectacular evolution, except for some well-defined sectors and some scientific communities dedicated to practicing this type of research. Despite the fact that it has over six decades of existence, action research can be still considered a global emerging paradigm (Bunning, 1994).

In an article which suggested a review of the literature on action research, Bob Dick (2004) listed a number of areas of psychosocial intervention on which there are many publications including community development; medical services; education and applications in different types of organizations. The same author identifies a number of trends in the current literature: the increasing volume of articles using action research methodology; increased concern for the community of researchers and increased attention to practical details that can obtain the agreement to participate and engage participants.

### **Actual approaches in the Romanian environment**

The rather shy use of action research in Romania can not be explained by the absence of some current local information sources, as there are many authors who have presented action research in their work referring to the methodology of the research,

community development or psychosocial intervention. Therefore, I will present three definitions of action research from some of the books published in the last decade:

- 1) "An attempt to associate social and human sciences to the action which a power can develop in different areas of public life (political, educational, administrative, economic). It is a new type of applied research, a new general methodology of the issues of the action, a praxeology of administration, difficult to dissociate from a pedagogical intervention "(Necula, 2001, 9).
- 2) "A process of diagnosing the problems, planning and implementation of actions to reduce or eliminate failures while monitoring the induced social changes" (Chelcea, 2004/2007, 201);
- 3) "it is an iterative process that involves a series of activities including the diagnosis of social problems, social intervention, analysis of intervention results, adjusting the strategy of social intervention" (Precupețu, 2007, 105).

The attempts to delimit the action research features are numerous and relatively diverse in terms of content, being made in different socio-cultural contexts. In this section I will briefly present the characteristics presented in the Romanian literature, also adding the presentation of three prominent features: the dual nature (research and social action); the predominantly use of qualitative methods and the iterative approach.

The current characteristics of action research outlined in the recently published literature sources in Romania (from where I also extracted the definitions above) are grouped in the following table:

Table 1. Characteristics of action research

The author of the classification and the identified characteristics		
Robert B. Burns (1990 / 2000):	Ortrun Zuber – Skeritt (1992):	Iuliana Precupețu (2007):
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It is situational, as it refers to the diagnose of a problem in its specific context and seeks to address it in context;</li> <li>2. It involves the researcher's collaboration with the social actors in diagnosing the problems;</li> <li>3. It involves the direct participation of social actors in the conduct of research;</li> <li>4. It is self-evaluative, all those involved in the research, continuously evaluate the results of</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It has a rather practical outcome than a theoretical one</li> <li>2. It is participative and involves the researcher's collaboration with the population studied;</li> <li>3. Is the "emancipatory" : it frees the interviewees of the status of "subjects" of research;</li> <li>4. It is interpretive, giving importance to the points of view of all research participants, without considering that only the</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.It is vased upon de experience lived by the social actors and it addresses it;</li> <li>2. Includes many ways of knowing intuitive, experimental and conceptual and tried to connect them with theory;</li> <li>3. It develops in partnership, it is explicitly and actively participative</li> <li>4. It concentrates on the issues with practical significance;</li> <li>5. It works with (rather than</li> </ol>

changes.	experts position is "correct"; 5. It has a critic orientation and its goal is to change the situation of the researched persons, groups and communities	studies) people, it develops new ways of seeing and perceiving the world (creating a theory based upon experience); 6. It has as a goal, the construction of a durable ability to solve problems for those involved.
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Note. For compiling Table 15 I used the following bibliographic sources: S. Chelcea (2004/2007, 201-202) for the first two columns and I. Precupetu (2007, 107-108) for the third column.

As its name suggests, action research has two categories of targets: the one concerning the research and the one concerning the social action. Referring to the two sides, Bob Dick (1993) noted that, the research aims to improve knowledge for the researcher and / or client (and often for a wider community), while the actional aspect relates to the production of a change in a community, organization or intervention program. Due to the dual side, action research presents itself today as a continuum, with applications rather oriented towards action (where the research is viewed as a "marginal benefit" and the orientation towards practice is explicitly stated (O. Zuber-Skerritt 1992 16) and others located in contrast, focused on the research side (where the focus is on design and data collection, rather than on the organization of the intervention).

Whichever side is accentuated, action research comprises two distinct sets of methodology: of intervention (designed to ensure the achievement of the changes pursued and include - as a mandatory element - involving those who will be most affected by the change) and of research (designed to generate valid, in a way that captures the functioning of the group or organization and / or the action research process). If the two sets of methodologies are judiciously combined, action research presents for the participants the appearance of a "natural way" to do research and action at the same time (Dick, 2002, 7).

The current action research is rather qualitative or uses a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, a feature that is associated to the fact that the application of quantitative methods in the context of action research is often difficult and time consuming , while the intervention is expected with some emergency by a particular group or by an organization (Dick , 1993 , 4) .

Since the views of social actors dominate the field of research and the requirement of self-evaluation of action research manifests (the requirement of reflexivity ), the action research is a type of longitudinal research, often conducted in a qualitative paradigm .

This feature is closely related to the "opposition " to the positivism and the criticism related to action research , usually made by followers of the quantitative methods. Significantly, the articles on action research appear almost exclusively in magazines dedicated to this topic and sometimes in literature for qualitative approaches .

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