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ACTION RESEARCH•

LA RECHERCHE-ACTION

LA RICERCA-INTERVENTO

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Abstract

After an historical overview on the reflection about the relationship between researcher and “research object” in action research, the paper proposes a typology, based on the different epistemological views, to interpret the different methodological proposals.

Keywords

Action Research, Methodology of Social Research, Organizational Action, Organizational Epistemology, Work Analysis.

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Action Research*

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Introduction

The term “action research” covers a variety of disparate approaches to investigation and methodology. Aside from the cases where it is nothing more than a convenient label, and all the rage for a certain period, action research has been the name applied to every attempt to find a method contemplating theory and practice as the twin elements of a recursive process, as opposed to the “traditional separation between research (which has its own methods) and the possible effects of the results of research on a given situation” (Capecchi, 2006: 1). An ambitious goal, which has often ended in substantial failure. The term is not exclusive to organizational research nor, for that matter, did it originate there. We find it in many other fields of empirical research: social, psychological and psychopedagogical. The underlying principle, consisting of the idea that we can truly know a situation only by modifying it, was systematically introduced for the first time in the Forties by Kurt Lewin and his associates at MIT’s Center for Group Dynamics. In a paper published in 1946, a year before his death, the German psychologist, who had become an American citizen in 1940, presented his action research methodology.

In sociology, a debate has been going on since its origins about the necessary but problematic link between knowledge objectives and change objectives. However, when we speak of action research, even in the broad sense as we intend to do here, we refer to practices to investigation and methodological proposals that regard this link as indissoluble, and thus deny

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the distinction between basic research and applied research. "As Kurt Lewin has noted: '[action research uses] a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the results of the action'. This type of research functions only if close collaboration between the different types of actors in the process of research and action takes place" (Capecchi, 2008: 20). Spreading in the economically more developed countries as a reaction to forms of social research that draw a sharp line between theoretical abstraction and intervention in the real world, action research has now struck root around the world, and has become particularly well established in Latin America in recent years, as the 2005 *International Journal of Action Research* monographic issue shows. Among social research methodologists, Johann Galtung has been a leading exponent of action research. In the late Sixties, after a rigorously quantitative background training with Paul F. Lazarsfeld's "language of variables", Galtung presented his program for "alternative sociology", which he was to develop in the following decade (1977). The cornerstones of this alternative sociology include research "with" people rather than "on" people, open communication between researchers and research "object" instead of the standardized questionnaire, and research goals focusing on the growth of democracy and political consciousness.

In Italy, the most systematic contribution of general sociology on the relationship between research and transformation of social reality has been that made by Gian Antonio Gilli. This Author outlines a methodological framework based on the following cornerstones: "a) a *cognitive activity* of analysis and reflection, b) which takes place *in practice*, c) addresses an *actual practical problem* and d) *precedes* a specific *intervention* in the real world" (Gilli, 1971: 14). This is a framework to which he assigns no particular label; Gilli's goal is in any case to offer a general methodology ("How to do research" is the ambitious title), in a radical break with the traditional view of research, taught in universities and which "often does not take place in social practice (point b), but in libraries and institutes; even more often, it does not address

a *real* problem (point c), and almost never has intervention in the real world as its actual objective (point d)" (Gilli, 1971: 14).

To remain in the area of social research methods, Vittorio Capecchi sees action research as a "methodological stream" whose distinctive feature lies in the fact that "it more clearly expresses the character of intervention that sociological research can have" (Capecchi, 1985: 145). He includes the studies of social movements carried out by Touraine and coworkers (1984) in this stream, as well as the "co-research" conducted by the *Quaderni Rossi* group and the "internal mobilization research" supported and performed by certain labor union groups with the help of politically engaged researchers and academics. These latter examples lead us directly to organizational studies, the area that concerns us more directly here.

Much attention has been devoted to the relationships between organizational theory, research and action in work organizations by the vast majority of the schools of thought and disciplines that deal with organization in any way. In this area, more than in others, there has always been a particular inclination towards applied research, whose main objective is thus what is useful, as opposed to basic research which is concerned primarily with the truth. This is demonstrated by the fact that it is precisely in the organizational arena that we find such a wealth of methodological approaches that attempt to bring theory, research and practice together: organizational research on the one hand, design, change and evaluation on the other.

In a stricter sense, the term action research chiefly designates the work begun towards the mid-Forties by a multidisciplinary group of British researchers who were later to found the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations in London. The birth of organizational action research in Great Britain is contemporary of Lewin's proposal. Unlike the latter, however, it is not rooted in social and experimental psychology, but in psychoanalysis and social psychiatry; later, its original biomedical background and interest in small groups dynamics was to be extended to the social and psychological

disciplines and to wider social systems (Susman, Evered, 1978: 587; Butera, 1980: 48).

In Italy, a large number of action research projects, including some differing in orientation from the Tavistock approach, were carried out in industry during the Seventies, largely in response to the bitter conflicts that arose in that period between employers and workers' unions. More or less at the same time, and in some cases even before, at the end of the Sixties, institutes and centers for action research came into being (Studio Staff, Rso, etc.). Some of these are still operating nowadays, mostly as consulting and training centers. Today's panorama is also made up of groups and foundations that were established later, but to some extent draw on the heritage of the experience gained in the Seventies.

In a broader sense, the locution "action research" tends to overlap with others that designate more or less contiguous approaches such as "the 'cooperative research' put forward by Lippitt and Lippitt (1978), Whyte's 'participatory action research' (1991) which follows the socio-technical model of humanization of work organizations, the 'action science' promoted by Argyris, Putnam and Smith (1985) as part of process consulting, the 'empowerment' discussed by Rappaport, Swift and Hess (1984) which aims at enhancing actors' individual capabilities, Touraine's (1984) '*intervention sociologique*', 'sociodrama', and so forth" (Gobo, 2001: 21). The list, which would not be complete without the "*analyse strategique*" developed by Crozier and Friedberg (1977), could be much longer; briefly browsing the web turns up an entire archipelago of centers, literatures and methods for which it is enormously difficult to provide an exhaustive and detailed picture (which is not the aim of this paper).

These brief and altogether incomplete notes on the history of organizational thought should be sufficient to show that we would not be justified in assigning an overly restricted meaning to the term "action research". On the other hand, setting a few limits on the concept's extension should help us avoid the risk of blurring any and all distinction between

action research and applied research (the latter term, moreover, applies to the overwhelming majority of organizational studies), or of confusing it with other ways of intervening in organizational processes from outside, and in particular the consulting activities of experts in a number of disciplines (management, psychology, ergonomics, etc.).

According to Grandori (1996: 8), action research, to be considered as such, must have at least the following three characteristics:

- a close link between theory and practice, such as to lead to an epistemology of knowing by transforming and vice versa.
- a participatory approach, in the sense that producing knowledge capable of actually impacting organizational practice calls for pursuing active cooperation on the part of the subjects (the research “objects”) in all stages of research, rather than attempting to minimize their influence on the research design.
- participation extended to all levels: to the “bottom” as well as the “top” of the organization; action must also touch on the overall design and the forms by which organizational processes are governed and regulated.

We can take these three general properties as our starting point for drawing the boundaries of action research. On the other side, they are not in themselves sufficient, as the link between theory and practice has historically been addressed from different epistemological stances. The very concept of “participation” can be defined in many ways (see Ceri, 1996), partly as a consequence of the underlying cognitive perspective. To shed light on the different views of action research, we must thus start from the theory of knowledge and the methodology of the social and human sciences. In particular, we must scrutinize the relationship between the research activity in all its stages and the investigated social/cultural system: in other words, with the lexicon widespread in the literature, between researcher and the “object” of research. This relationship has always been a central theme of methodological thinking in the social sciences and in the human sciences; this is easily understandable, as we are dealing here with entities that are

“cut from the same cloth”: the object has cognitive capacity, feels emotions, makes choices on the basis of his or her values, exactly like the researchers. This aspect can be seen as a source of noise, to be held in check, or, conversely, as an essential element to be made the most of.

In standard methodological texts, the relationship between researcher and object of research is traditionally discussed in terms of the debate that for over a century has pitted objectivists (or positivists, including neo- and post-positivism) against subjectivists (or interpretivists). Simplifying drastically, there are two traditional solutions to the problem of the researcher-object relationship: we can label them as the *naturalist* solution, stemming from the objectivist roots, and the *double hermeneutic* solution adopted by subjectivism. Diverse as they are, they have the “researcher-object” dualism in common.

Alongside these two ideal-types (in the Weberian sense of the term), we can identify a further two, less common in the methodological literature, but important for the understanding of action research, as they attempt to move past this dualism. The first, which we call the *synthetic recomposition*, is a solution still rooted in subjectivism, and is in a certain sense its “extreme consequence”. The second, which we call *analytical recomposition*, is conceivable only in opposition to the objectivism vs. subjectivism dichotomy, and thus treads the epistemological “third way”.

Dualist views of the researcher-object relationship

In the mid-nineteenth century, methodological thinking began to be applied to the cultural and social aspects of human conduct. The positivists, Comte and Spencer first and foremost, took the more developed sciences – physics, chemistry, biology – as models, in particular as regards their empirical methods and epistemological principles. Social phenomena are thus to be considered as objective facts, whose measurement and analysis, likewise objective, are tasks to be accomplished by a researcher located “outside” the situation being examined; the researcher, freed from the prejudices and categories of common sense, is then able to understand the

essential aspects of reality, both in descriptive terms and in terms of causal explanation, where science casts anchor. Individual motivations and reasons are not needed, except in purely ancillary fashion, to explain social facts. Durkheim (1897) applied this principle rigorously in his celebrated study of suicide: he stated that the subjectivity underlying this dramatic decision serves to the social research only in order to identify different types of suicide, which then must be explained with objective procedures of causal imputation, finding constraining social factors that are beyond the individual's will. The naturalist solution to the researcher-object relationship thus consists in that: the former's point of view prevail completely, at least at the moment of explanation, i.e. the moment that sets scientific research apart from other types of research or thinking about human doings.

Starting at the end of the nineteenth century, the naturalist solution was countered by what we have termed the double hermeneutic solution. This was part of a more general anti-positivist reaction, the contributions to which were in fact quite heterogeneous in nature; nevertheless they shared the following broad characteristics:

- the categorical rejection of the methodological monism advocated by the positivists;
- the idea that the aims of the cultural sciences are predominately idiographic, i.e., oriented towards the detailed reconstruction of individual cases, as opposed to the aims of the natural sciences, which are to formulate general laws;
- the strong emphasis given to the intentionality of social actors and the "internal" determinants of action (attitudes, values, beliefs, etc.): in short, to the *understanding* of historico-social phenomena.

Here, the separation between researcher and object becomes a particularly problematic issue. The actors, individual and collective, who are the object of research, are embedded in a system of contingent action, of which they have a vision peculiar to themselves, pre-reflexive and ingenuous (Sparti, 1995: 109). The first level interpretations, made by the participants in

the system, are distinct from the second level interpretations developed by those who approach the system from outside: this is especially true if the outsider is a researcher who adopts the specialized conceptual categories and linguistic expressions of a scientific community. The first level interpretations are constitutive of reality: while acting, the actor monitors his action, describes it and interprets it with his own cultural tools, modifying his action accordingly or, often unintentionally, changing the conditions of his action. At the time the researcher interacts with the object, with his alterity he also contributes to the “construction” of the empirical basis. The researcher adopts an outside viewpoint, thinking, speaking and writing accounts with a language that differs from that of the object: hence the double hermeneutic. If we prefer, we can also refer to this dualism with the distinction “emic/etic”, terms first used in linguistics and anthropology in the 1950s and that have now entered the lexicon of the other social sciences (a synthetic overview of the debate is in Nigris, 2001).

In brief, the “emic” (which derives from *phonemic*) perspective is rooted in interpretative categories that are meaningful to the insiders, the native members of a society who are the sole judges of their validity. The “etic” (from *phonetic*) perspective is based on assumptions, concepts and statements that are meaningful for a researcher and his scientific community. The interpretations that the researcher provides for the events, acts or cultural processes which he investigates must be “returned” and compared with the point of view of the insiders: in any case, the researcher must be able to maintain balance between being an outsider and familiarity with the object, between involvement and detachment; to cite Fred Davis’ metaphor, he must be both “Martian” and “Convert” at one and the same time, although there is no simple way to reconcile or resolve the contradictions of these two ontological polarities (Davis, 1973: 342).

After outlining the fundamental differences between these two solutions, it is worth considering a couple of their shared characteristics. The first is that the researcher and the object of research have clearly distinct

identities, roles, reference groups and conceptual and interpretative schemes. In both cases, there is a separation between the observer and the process observed, between the outsider's interpretation and that (or those) of the insiders. There can be no doubt that this separation has different implications in the two perspectives. In the naturalist solution, it is a problem only to the extent that the alterity of the researcher and his tools for observing and investigating reality rises significant perturbations of the observed reality. It is thus a problem that takes on importance in specific situations, and that can in principle be solved. Indeed, there is a plethora of studies and methodological solutions addressing the problem of data "truthfulness": once an objective reality is postulated, it is necessary to find appropriate techniques for neutralizing the many sources of distortion that can be activated, even unconsciously, when collecting data.

In the double hermeneutic solution, by contrast, the researcher-object dualism is a problem that is more than just technical and contingent, but a sort of ontological and epistemological paradox: on the one hand, it is precisely the subjective viewpoints of the object that are solicited by the researcher in order to reconstruct and comprehend the logic underpinning a given situation "from inside"; on the other hand, "the journey through the actors' inner experience is not enough. It is also necessary that the analyst be able to interpret the material and the accounts he collects" (Friedberg, 1993: 303).

How can we explain the meaning of the objects' actions, a meaning that is deeply embedded in everyday actions and constructed in the action, in order to transmit it to the researcher's scientific community or to others who are outside the reality that is being investigated? How can we reconcile the need to become familiar with the object's life-worlds and to grasp the authenticity of the social practices, the beliefs and the representations of the values and the symbols of the insiders' culture, with the fact that a researcher's intrusion in their everyday life undermines this authenticity? And again, starting from Gadamer's thesis, inspired by sociolinguistics, that

the use of a given language influences the perception and interpretation of reality: how can we reconcile the researcher's need to communicate with his scientific community, using its language, with the fact that the insiders' language is completely different? How can we translate the elements of the investigated culture into the language of research, without necessarily coming into conflict with the insiders' description and interpretation of reality? If observed reality is socially constructed, the language used for this construction is fundamental: the researcher's re-construction of reality is only one of the many possible re-constructions after the fact, not even the most authentic or the most adequate.

This problem could be examined in much greater depth, as could the various approaches to find a solution for it, but for our purposes it is sufficient to say that what we call the double hermeneutic solution is an invitation to focus on the researcher's intrinsic ambivalence towards the object, seeking to strike a balance between familiarity and outsidersness. The relationship between researcher and object is an unceasing interweaving of questions and responses, of descriptions and interpretations. The researcher who was *there* at a *given* moment, not only must obtain validation for his interpretations from his scientific community (or communities), but he must also solicit *backtalk* from the natives: their opinions of his interpretations. It is a (virtually) endless dialogue, where the truth is only a limit-concept, because, in its most genuine form, "the hermeneutic perspective favors the inexhaustibility of meanings, the limitless productivity of interpretations" (Montesperelli, 1998: 25).

The second characteristic shared by the two solutions, and which is closely linked to the first, is that the relationship between researcher and object is not one between peers: it is the researcher who for the most part sets the rules of the game, planning the research on the basis of his own scholarly interests or his interpretation of the knowledge needs of the sponsors on whose behalf the research is done. The object, for his part, can only choose between complete acceptance of the rules, or refusing to cooperate. Certainly,

the rules can be very different: they can provide a greater or lesser degree of discretion and room for manouvre by the players, and this does not depend only on whether the orientation is naturalist or hermeneutic, but on a host of other factors as well, including the type of questions the research seeks to answer, the tools that will be adopted for collecting and analyzing data, and the constraints and resources for research. In very general terms, research conducted according to these two orientations involves the following stages:

- research planning: sponsorship or self-sponsorship, specifying general goals, finding resources;
- research design: identifying theoretical and conceptual frameworks, units of analysis, tools for collecting and analyzing data, preparing the setting, etc.;
- fieldwork, collecting data, texts and information in general;
- organizing, analyzing, describing and interpreting data;
- editing the research report for the natives;
- defining the plan of action and the changes to be made to the examined activities;
- monitoring and evaluating the changes that were introduced.

The fact that the stages of the research process in the naturalist solution are strictly sequential, with little feedback (feedback is concentrated after analysis, when information has already been collected), and that, by contrast, the double hermeneutic solution involves ample feedback between all the stages (Cardano, 2003: 35), should not distract us from a far more substantial aspect that both solutions have in common: it is chiefly the researcher, someone outside the investigated system of action and meanings, who sets the goals, the rules, the times and places of the game, or, to put it in more technical terms, the research design.

Bridging the separation

As we mentioned earlier, a number of different proposals have been formulated regarding the relationship between researcher and object, though they are rarely addressed in standard methodological manuals. These

proposals vary widely, though they all at least in principle call into question the separation between researcher and object and the latter's subordination to the former in the cognitive process. Though their methods and outcomes are highly dissimilar, they aim to the bridging of the divide or, if we prefer, to go beyond the dualism, affirming that there is autonomy on the part of the object of research. Here again, we must simplify drastically, reducing an extensive methodological debate, and an even broader variety of research practices, to two ideal-types.

The first alternative to the classic solutions, which we can call *synthetic recomposition*, still stems from the anti-positivist reaction: it thus sees reality as a social construct, whose meaning must be decoded starting from the actors' subjectivity. But instead of considering the tension between alterity and familiarity as inevitable, it seeks a radical solution to the dualism. As can be logically expected, however, it does so in a very different manner from that of the naturalist solution: if the latter assigns priority to the etic and to a researcher outside the object, synthetic recomposition is predominantly based on self-analysis of the subjective experiences of the participants in a group, movement, organization, etc.

A second type, which we call *analytical recomposition*, rejects the concrete separation between the professional researcher and the object of research, but acknowledges the importance of the various forms of knowing: not only the coded forms, but also those that are tacit or produced in the course of the processes that are being analyzed. The epistemological framework underlying this approach is entirely different from those we have considered so far: a third way, less traveled than the objectivist and subjectivist paths, but nevertheless far from being a newcomer to social and philosophical thinking. To stay within the purview of the modern social sciences, this way of dealing denies the opposition between explanation and understanding, as it regards them as complementary parts of the same cognitive process. This perspective can also be found in the thinking of authors such as John Stuart Mill and Georg Simmel who are in general

considered as advocates of the other approaches. Above all, however, it is in Max Weber's ponderous methodology (*Methodenlehre*) that it shows its full dignity and independence from the other conceptions (Maggi, 1997; Sciolla, 2002). We will now look at the two approaches to recomposition in greater detail.

Synthetic recomposition springs from the rejection of the external researcher's ambivalence regarding the object, rather than making it a part of the process of interpretation. At most, understanding the object entails "being" like the object, identifying with it completely: either because the researcher has been like the object for some time, or because he has undergone a process of "conversion" to being a member of the community of insiders ("going native", as anthropologists say). Even without reaching these extremes, we can say that the researcher must at least be "on the side" of the object and adopt, at least for the duration of the research, the object's point of view, both in terms of values and from the cognitive standpoint. Here there is no problem of cultural mediation, of translating the language spoken by the natives into the language of a scientific community: the researcher acts as a facilitator for dialogue between the insiders, so that an authentic and adequate interpretation of the situation can emerge from their own exchanges. There is only one hermeneutic register: backtalk becomes a member validation test, inasmuch as it is the insiders who are the possessors of the knowledge that can provide valid interpretations. Likewise, the object must reject his submission to research institutions, becoming independent and self-sufficient in doing research on himself. Research is conducted in a new area of dialogue, facilitated by the researcher, which permits self-analysis of subjective experience and makes it possible to reflect collectively on the doings of the group and community. Research approaching this ideal-type can be found in anthropology and in social psychology, in studies of cultures and of religious movements, as well as those of employees' health at the workplace. We can also call this the recomposition of the researcher-activist, as what is at stake here are the relationships of domination and the

attempt to redefine them, or overturn them, through political action and social participation.

At the origin, the researcher thus has a function in revealing the object's passivity and subordination, his contradictions. The object, in order to become an object for himself, must acquire independence, avoid delegating powers to the research specialists. Once this awareness has been achieved, one's current situation and the possible changes must be analyzed without relying on academic and traditional schema; it is through an analysis of everyday experience that the system (work organization, community, etc.) takes shape. Recomposition between researcher and object coincides with the formation of a more authentic, less forced, viewpoint, a calling into question of the existing relationships of power and domination, usually in favor of a subordinate collective subject.

To give an idea, and with no claim to representativity, we will quote a brief passage from one of the major manuals in which the researcher is seen as a specialist who is called upon to take sides; to choose the progressist side: "Being objective does not, as is commonly believed, mean seeing things from a point of view that is neutral, and thus acceptable to everyone: being objective means considering reality from the point of view of the historically progressive class, the class that in that particular moment of history, is the most advanced part of the productive forces. Here lies the lack of objectivity, and hence the unscientific nature of current sociology: not in the fact that it takes the side of the dominant class [...] but in the fact that the class whose side it takes is no longer, and has long ceased to be, a progressive class" (Gilli, 1971: 29).

We now come to the other way of moving beyond the researcher-object dualism. In this case, the starting point is neither an objectivist view or a subjectivist view. Social reality, from this standpoint, is not made up of discrete "entities" of various kinds – institutions, individual actors, collective actors, actions, life-worlds and so forth; it is conceived in terms of acting, becoming, continuity, process, change. Consequently, social reality is not

known either through objective outside research practices that can be standardized in protocols, or by analyzing the subjective experiences of the individuals who are the object of the research. In this view, producing scientific knowledge about a given system of social relations (including, but not limiting to, an organized work situation) always entails building synergies between different forms of knowledge. Consequently, this approach does not deny the validity of knowledge organized in disciplines, or in a systematic corpus drawn from concrete processes of action. Nor is anyone required to “convert” or espouse ideologies, much less teleological views of the course of human history. To avoid terminological ambiguity, it is advisable in this case to abandon the concrete distinction between researcher and object of research, in favor of a analytical distinction between two processes that flow together into a single activity: research and the primary process on which research tries to shed light. Both are processes organized by bounded rationality, which at a certain point meet each other. From this perspective, action research is participated in, always and especially, by those who are involved in the process, and the latter’s boundaries are not fixed and preordered. Disciplinary knowledge, which is useful in decoding the surrounding situation, can even be acquired through self-training alone, and thus without the help of outside experts. In practice, this is a difficult route to take in the current social division of work, which is in turn the result of many conflicts of varying kinds: of gender, of class, political, ethnic, and so on. Here, researcher-object recomposition takes place primarily at the level of the knowledge and technical skills involved in carrying out the activities: knowledge organized systematically in disciplines, which can be transferred, and the skills produced and possessed by the subjects acting in the examined process, which are largely non-transferrable. These types of knowledge, in a relational conception of social reality, are complementary: they are not synthesized in, or reduced to, a single knowledge, and they can be reconciled only in a setting of dialogue, characterized by a method of analysis capable of breaking down actual social

processes into elements that are only analytically distinct. For analytic recomposition, in any case, it is not even necessary that those who exercise the profession of researcher relinquish their role. The fact that recomposition takes place at the level of various types of knowledge does not in concrete terms mean that the ways research is conducted are predetermined; in the research design, it is important to bear in mind that an important part of the competences needed to interpret the process are possessed by the subjects who participate in it, and cannot be in any way coded, extracted and transferred to other outside subjects. Each time, it will be necessary to identify the empirical solutions for coordinating and establishing dialogue between the various types of knowledge held by different subjects: task forces, staff members, self-training and research groups, etc.

Action research in organizational settings according to the various solutions

We will now return to the topic of action research, connecting it with the epistemological alternatives for studying organizational action, and specifically to the solutions we have just outlined for the researcher-object relationship.

This choice clearly entails rejecting the notion that action research involves opting for a specific, anti-positivist epistemological conception (Susman, Evered, 1978). Our approach enables us to consider a large variety of methodological stances which have paid close attention to the relationship between theory and practice, at the same time providing criteria for interpreting this variety and which can also be used in part to evaluate each single proposal.

Action research with the naturalist solution

In the naturalist solution, we see a researcher at work who looks at the organized system as an object which is to a large extent predetermined by its designer. In this case, action research is a special form of consulting,

provided to a client made up of a plurality of actors who in some way exercise a decision-making power in the organization and who expect the researcher to bring together different points of view under the aegis of scientific analysis. The researcher-consultant's first task is thus to define a shared value framework. Consequently, he takes the criteria and schema for describing and interpreting the situation under examination from his baggage of theoretical knowledge and field experience. By contrast with more "traditional" consulting, there is an attempt in this case to obtain as much cooperation as possible from the client (i.e., the plurality of actors) in all stages of the research, starting from the time data and information are collected. The diagnostic stage is followed by the stages of planning, executing and evaluating the action: all stages in which the researcher-consultant is fully involved, coordinating research activities and the synthesis of the findings. In action research with a naturalist orientation, the researcher-consultant thus solves problems, identifies alternative practical solutions and makes decisions about the change to be made, listening to input from the various parties involved (those in executive roles, management, union organizations, etc.) and keeping them informed at all times. If necessary, the researcher can leverage his reputation to offer himself as a negotiator between conflicting parties.

Preferably, the research design is experimental or quasi-experimental, with a "before" and an "after": between the two stages, the organizational variables are manipulated, with the researcher monitoring. The vantage point is still that of someone outside the process: to implement a before-after experimental design, or a surrogate thereof, it is necessary to have an objective knowledge of the "before", isolate one or more of its variables and manipulate them to produce the "after". In this solution, action research's aim is not only to solve the sponsor's problems, but also to produce findings, or in other words scientific propositions and laws that can be generalized and added to the earlier substantive theoretical frameworks of the social sciences, which thereby acquire the capacity to explain and predict.

Of the many initiatives with characteristics that approximate this ideal type, there can be no doubt that one of the most noteworthy is the action research conducted at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. The socio-technical approach has long been the dominant orientation of organizational action research, particularly in the English-speaking countries (see Marchiori, 2010). In Italy, a large number of studies inspired by this approach were conducted in the Seventies.

Action research with the double hermeneutic solution

In the double hermeneutic solution, the research is once again guided by a researcher who is “outside” the system being analyzed, even if he acts as a participant observer. The work situation is understood as a psychosocial reality, constructed by the games of the subjects involved in a myriad of everyday interactions. This reality is accessible through subjective experiences, made up more from stereotypes, emotions, and moral judgments than from cognitive rationality. Reconstructing the games between the actors and the rules, which is accomplished by observing and listening to those who are directly involved, must take into account with impartiality the various standpoints, the different versions. Subsequently, this reconstruction is “returned” to the observed subjects, who thus reread their everyday experience filtered through the researcher’s experience. This should provide the actors in the observed system with a greater understanding of the consequences of their conduct, while any shortcomings in the researcher’s reconstruction – details, omissions, overestimates, etc. – should thus be reported to him. Inasmuch as it is possible, the goal is to arrive at a reciprocal clarification of the investigated reality: even though, as we have said, the interpretations given by the researcher do not coincide with those of the actors participating regularly to the process, such a dialogue is considered useful anyway.

More specifically: “after he has immersed himself in the actors’ insiderness, the analyst must thus recover an outside point of view without

which he would be unable to arrive at an overall vision of the analyzed space of action (...) So as not to betray the spirit of his inductive and clinical process, however, he cannot base this outsidership on knowledge or data which are outside this space. It is only from the latter that he must draw the resources with which he can again find an external point of view" (Friedberg 1993: 303). Eschewing any form of generalization and classification, the researcher does not apply a systematic set of shared interpretative categories: strictly speaking, he does not in this case engage in a true "analysis" of the empirical material (Maggi, 2003: II, 3; III, 2). If adopted consistently, the double hermeneutic solution can only help the individual participant, or the small group, to reflect on what has already occurred, but cannot supply accurate elements for organizational design. The description is valuable *per se* because it increases the actors' awareness of the characteristics of the empirical system to which they unintentionally give life. We are far from the linearity of the naturalist solution's problem-setting / problem-solving / evaluation pattern; the system's rationality, if we can call it that, is a rationality recognizable only *ex post facto*.

Also in the double hermeneutic solution, as in naturalist one, action research can be a form of consulting (albeit with great difficulty: Czarniawska, 2001), which we can call "clinico-therapeutic". The researcher provides aid and/or support to the client, primarily an individual or group (generally small in size) of individuals who interact with each other. The researcher starts from the assumption that organizational change will be the logical outcome of the individuals' greater awareness of their own and others' problems, of a greater capacity for communication between the individuals who everyday interact.

Action research with the solution of synthetic recomposition

The synthetic recomposition solution rejects the separation of roles between those who do research, professionally, and those who are the object of research: what we have is not research *on* the organizational actors, but

with them. The researcher is not a participant observer, but rather, a “full member” of the social system he has decided to observe (Marzano, 2006: 60). At most, in an initial stage when the researcher is still “outside”, he can act as a catalyst: even if only through his otherness, he triggers reflexivity in the communities of practice. If he has the right skills, he can also play a pedagogical and/or political role: this, for example, is contemplated in the analysis of social movements through Touraine’s *intervention sociologique* (Touraine *et al.*, 1984). Here, the researcher must ensure that the group proceeds with self-analysis of its interactions with other social actors (and in particular with antagonists), avoiding stereotyped interpretations and gradually becoming aware of its nature as a social movement. In the final stage, the “outside” researchers share their interpretations with the “inside” researchers, or in other words, the movement’s actors. Melucci (1984), in emphasizing the importance of Touraine’s method, also indicates the limitations that he feels should be corrected: specifically, the researcher’s overly pedagogical-missionary orientation, and the lack of means for monitoring the relationship between researcher and actor. We urge the reader to devote particular attention to this point, even though it is not essential to organizational design. As we see it, it is an excellent example of an unavoidable contrast between two epistemological options that, though both rooted in subjectivism, are entirely distinct: what from the standpoint of the double hermeneutic is a limitation for research, is from the perspective of synthetic recomposition an innovative methodological choice, a resource for social change.

To return to the general features of synthetic recomposition, it should be added that within this approach in no way action research takes the form of an expert consulting. In some cases, training may be provided: the researchers translate, avoiding technical jargon, and supply the object with insights about the organizational processes and their consequences that they have developed in their own disciplines; grafting technico-scientific elements onto the actors’ subjectivity, which is and remains the central core for

interpreting the activities they perform, produces a greater awareness on the part of the operators of the process in which they are involved. To identify examples of action research conducted in these way, we can look first to the so-called “internal mobilization” studies that began to be promoted in the Seventies by certain labor union groups with the help of university researchers and research groups devoted to organized work. In internal mobilization research, as Capecchi and Pesce (1979) have indicated, “the worker becomes the subject of research not so much because he provides information directly, but because he is aware of the political purpose of the research involving him; because the topics were not primarily or entirely identified by the labor union apparatus, but result from a series of struggles, tensions, analyses which have already been very clearly expressed by the base; because he knows that his judgments will contribute to the union’s overall judgment; because he comes into direct contact with experts and researchers in a relationship that is no longer one of subordination but of comparing different approaches, cultural tools and attitudes”. From the Eighties onwards, these studies have continued, addressing other important issues – those regarding gender differences in particular – in addition to workers’ concerns (Capecchi, 2006: 11).

In certain significant respects, this ideal-type is approximated also by the research carried out by Ivar Oddone, Gastone Marri and several groups of unionized workers at *Farmitalia* and *Fiat* in the Sixties (Oddone, Re, Briante, 1977). In particular, we refer to the contention that only the workers’ subjectivity is able to identify a particular group of harmful elements, e.g. those that can be specifically attributed to the work organization. As it has been pointed out, while workers’ subjectivity was originally the exhaustive point of view covering the entire work situation, occupational medicine, with its heavily objectivist orientation, later incorporated it in a syncretic procedure where “descriptions, opinions and judgments are collected from workers, as data to be added to anamnestic data and data about the physical environment” (Maggi, 1994/2010).

Also worth mentioning is a French approach inspired in part by Oddone's works. The University of Aix-Marseille is home to the Département d'Ergologie founded by the philosopher Yves Schwartz. The latter has proposed a method for investigating organized work called DD3P: "*Dispositif Dynamique à Trois Pôles*" (Schwartz, 2000). The *démarche ergologique* requires mutual exchange between the pole of organized knowledge and the pole of knowledge held by the protagonists of organized activities: the third pole, which is that which furthers this "two-way Socratic process", is not theoretical and epistemological in nature, but is a determination to encourage intellectual and social encounter, an "activist philosophy that sets sail for no particular harbor" (Schwartz, 2000: 719).

Action research with the solution of analytic recomposition

In the solution of analytic recomposition, research must necessarily be both research and action at the same time: a process subject to analysis is necessarily subject to change. Research is a reflection about the process, on the choices that have currently been made, on their congruency, on the consequences for the subjects and on the alternative courses of action. As in every rational reflection about a complex system, however, we must be provided with tools for analysis, or in other words, key-concepts for interpreting the organizational action. The latter cannot be reduced either to "ethnomethods" (or the commonsense of the participants in the process) or to the models developed by external experts and organizational consultants; nor can they be borrowed from one of the many disciplines that deal with the technical actions and aims of formal organizations (in health care, education, organized labor, law, economics, etc.). What is needed is an interpretative schema that springs from an interdisciplinary field, as is organization theory, capable of promoting the exchange of knowledge. This type of knowledge, theoretical and methodological, is necessary in order to interpret an organized process, i.e., to compare it with action alternatives and thus evaluate it.

But this is not enough on its own. To interpret the process correctly, the competences that the subjects have developed in it are also needed. This type of knowledge, unlike the previous kind, cannot be transferred. Exchanges must thus be promoted between the pole of knowledge organized in disciplines and the pole of knowledge possessed (tacitly, for the most part) by the subjects who act. The participation of professional researchers is not indispensable. What is important is the methodologist, who may, though need not necessarily, be a professional researcher, and who helps the subjects in the organization to learn about the analysis tools (e.g., through appropriate training efforts), or who promotes self-reflection on the part of each participant and the exchanges between the process's subjects. The methodologist is not required to appear in any other guise than his own, much less mediate between conflicting parties or take one side as opposed to another. He can draw information from the research that can be used elsewhere, in other processes (for instance, as empirical material for assessing the adequacy of the organizational theory and the analysis method deriving from it). Concepts and models that are useful for interpreting organizational action can be taken from economics, biomedicine, law, the polytechnic disciplines, etc. Obviously, this is not knowledge possessed, except to a very minor extent, either by the methodologist or by those who work in the examined process.

Who, then, is part of the research group? Various subjects can participate in action research of this kind: researchers from universities and other institutions, physicians dealing with preventive medicine, engineers, labor unionists, and so forth. In any case, the subjects who are involved on a daily basis in the process being studied must necessarily be part of the research group / project / program. For there to be effective action, there must be participation by everyone who has the power to make decisions about the design of the organization as a whole, regardless of formally assigned authority and responsibilities.

We must not, however, think that what has just been said presupposes an idyllic vision of the organization: clearly, having criteria for analysis is not sufficient to change the current relationships of power and domination. But it is just as clear that whoever wishes to propose realistic changes in an empirical process must have an interpretative basis enabling him to identify the alternatives.

In action research conducted using this approach, the step following analysis consists of introducing changes which result from choices made, at least to some extent independently, by the subjects involved in the research. These changes will then be evaluated, a step which is nothing less than the beginning of a new analysis, and which will disclose new training requirements, the further disciplinary knowledge that is needed, and the additional stages and portions of the process that must be investigated. Training, analysis, action, monitoring and regulation are thus all aspects of a complex activity carried out primarily by those involved in the process, who may if necessary cooperate with outsiders (trainers, methodologists, labor unionists, health and prevention specialists, etc.), none of whom relinquishes his professional identity. In any case, for the entire duration of the action research, there is no distinction between researcher and object (or between consultant and client): the object is the analytical process, the researchers are all the concrete subjects who are in any way involved in the action research. Precisely because the approach is analytical, it creates confusion to speak of recomposition between researcher and object: what is necessary to recompose are different types of knowledge, transferrable and non-transferrable, tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge, different analytical frameworks for the organizational structuration, and the various knowledge resulting from specific organizational choices (economic, legal, biomedical, etc.).

An example close to the ideal-type we have just outlined is provided by the research and methodological work that has been carried on for the last thirty year through the Interdisciplinary Research Program "Organization

and Well-Being”, founded and coordinated by Bruno Maggi, and currently located at the University of Bologna. Underlying this Program is a conception of the organization as a process of decisions and actions based on bounded rationality, which can be found in several of the classic texts of sociology and organization theory (including Max Weber, Herbert Simon, James D. Thompson) and which has served as the foundation for a rich and systematic conceptualization which its proponent calls the “Theory of Organizational Action” (Maggi, 1984/1990; 2003; Maggi, Albano, 1996). From this epistemological-theoretical axis, Maggi has derived his “Method of Organizational Congruencies” (Maggi, 1984/1990). Hinging on the concept of “organizational constraint”, which in addition to the classic sources we have just mentioned also draws on the work of the founder of *sociologie du travail*, Georges Friedmann, the O.C. Method provides a meeting place for all of the disciplines that from various viewpoints investigate the complex relationship between organizational decisions and the agents’ well-being, regarding the latter as an essential aspect for evaluating an organizational process.

Another two important experiences, take an entirely different path towards the ideal-type of analytical recomposition. One is that of the Ergape team of the de Unité Mixte de Recherche Apprentissage, Didactique, Evaluation, Formation, at the University of Aix-Marseille, which studies teaching and learning activities in “problematic” classes, analyzing work situations with the “*Méthode d’Auto-Confrontation*”, method proposed by the linguist Daniel Faïta (1989) at the end of the 1980s. The method, which builds on the notions of “dialogue” and “dialogic relationship” advanced by the Bachtin Circle, consists in an examination (‘self-confrontation’) which a worker performs of his own activity recorded on video.

The second experience that should be mentioned is closely linked to the first: the “Clinic of activity”, a research group guided by Yves Clot, Professor of Work Psychology at CNAM in Paris. These approach starts from a sharp distinction between concrete activity and real activity: “what a

subject actually does or accomplishes in the course of his activity is a tiny portion of that activity (...) The action, the gesture, the choice that one would have wanted to make but could not or was not able to make (...), are moments of the activity (...) These “suspensions” remain in the subjective and collective action as possibilities waiting to be made real” (Scheller, 2006: 11).

Here again, the real activity is accessed using the *Méthode d'Auto-Confrontation*, but in the “*croisée*” version (Clot, Faïta, 2000), which further increases the potential for accessing the real activity: essentially, the worker’s analysis of his recorded activity is reviewed by another expert in the situation, for instance a coworker with the same level of experience. The addressee of the analysis is thus no longer the researcher: “the words of the subject are not directed only towards their object (the visible situation), but also towards the activity of those who listen to them” (Clot, 1999: 142).

Differences and complementarities between the Method of Organizational Congruencies and the *Méthode d'Auto-Confrontation* are showed in Faïta, Maggi, 2007.

Conclusions

We started from three basic characteristics of action research: the close link between theory and practice, the participatory nature of the approach, and its application to every decision-making level. These aspects are important for delimiting the scope of action research, though as we have seen, they can take widely divergent forms. On the basis of an extensive literature which originated in the 1950s, we can conclude that action research does not consist of a specific technique or procedure, and not even of a well defined theory of knowledge: it is more correct to acknowledge that different ways of viewing action research have been proposed, and attempt to develop a typology for interpreting the variability of these proposals. To this end, we have considered two dichotomies that generate the attribute space. The first regards “who” is responsible for defining research goals and methods: this

may be an observer outside the system of action, in general a professional researcher, or it may be the object who does research on itself (perhaps involving professional researchers, but always in a relationship between peers).

The second dichotomy, concerning the emic/etic distinction, differentiates between two basic interpretative perspectives: that which considers only one of these two poles to be appropriate and exhaustive, and that which seeks to combine the knowledge produced in the process with the disciplinary knowledge, the semantics of the action with the semantics of the action's intelligibility.

The intersection of these two dichotomies enables us to identify four ideal-types of the way in which epistemological reflection can be used to clarify the relationship between the researcher and the object, a central problem common to the various proposed methods for action research. The reader should use the examples provided for each type with considerable caution. Classifications of authors and their contributions are almost always reductive and debatable. Ideal-types are useful in order to keep track of the virtually limitless variety of methodological approaches: but just as Weber's ideal-type of bureaucracy is a concept having an empty extension, and which does not correspond to any concrete case (Weber, 1922), no theoretical approach and no actual application of action research can be clearly and exclusively placed in any one of the four solutions we have discussed. A detailed comparison of each concrete proposal with the ideal-types would be an interesting exercise, but would require a great deal of space. Here, we have limited ourselves to providing the reader with a compass so that he can begin to navigate the *mare magnum* of action research.

The most frequently used solutions are still those with closer links to the objectivist and subjectivist conceptions of social science: a relational approach to studying social systems in general (and not just organizations) is still far less common, through there is no dearth of proposed methodologies and significant work that take such a direction.

The typology proposed here serves only as a schematic illustration of the many routes that have and can be taken, and is thus not intended to be prescriptive. Deciding which route to take is not a matter of chance, or simply a question of personal preference for one way of doing research rather than another. It is a choice that depends on many important premises: how we conceive our own relationship with social reality, the resources available to us and the constraints within which we move, our awareness of alternative routes, and so forth. From a general methodological standpoint, those who do empirical research, whatever their relationship with the investigated process may be, are first and foremost required to make choices that are consistent with their basic orientation: at the end of the day, this also entails value decisions, without necessarily having to make “activist” choices. In addition, while the truth concept does not apply to views of the organization, which thus all have equal dignity, we can nevertheless apply the concept of adequacy as regards the questions on the table. In the concrete situation, the subjects involved in action research must carefully evaluate whether the views that are taken and the resulting methodological choices are adequate for the goals that are to be attained.

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