

**ACTION RESEARCH IN  
MANAGEMENT - ETHICAL  
CONSIDERATIONS**

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the application of the guiding ethical principles for the conduct of research involving human subjects in an action research project in a membership based community psychiatric disability organisation. Action research is a collaborative process of critical inquiry between the researcher and the people in the situation, in this case the management executive. The ethical issues related to manager participants as participant-researchers, participant selection, consent, anonymity and confidentiality, and the process of conflict resolution in action research are identified and strategies implemented to address them are discussed.

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# **ACTION RESEARCH IN MANAGEMENT - ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the application of the guiding ethical principles for the conduct of research involving human subjects to an action research project. The need for the paper was influenced by a perception, based on previous experiences of one author, that the application of ethical principles within the context of management research was inadequate due to the nature of the theories and strategies underpinning the action research methodology (Wells 1994). Issues relating to the dual responsibilities of the participants as insider co-inquirers and the researcher as an outsider researcher collaborating in action research give rise to other issues relating to selection, consent, anonymity and confidentiality. The paper considers the choices made by the researcher with involvement of the participants in light of current ethical principles essentially developed for traditional research paradigms.

The research is located in a membership based non-profit community psychiatric disability service organisation. The research involves the participation of executive and contract services managers in research processes employed for the implementation and monitoring of strategic change. Of importance to the managers is the continued and active involvement of stakeholders, particularly members, during and beyond the change transition.

The methodological framework for this study draws on the action inquiry and systems theory literature. Action research is an action inquiry strategy that includes those methodologies described as action science, action learning and participatory action research (Ellis and Kiely 2000). The systems framework for this study draws on the work of Flood (Flood 1990; Flood and Jackson 1991a; Flood and Jackson 1991b; Flood and Carson 1993; Flood 1995; Flood 1999; Flood 2001) and the use of Total Systems Intervention. This is an example of methodological complementarity (Flood 2001, p.140), and as a meta-methodology, employs a range of systems approaches to encourage managers to think creatively about the issues that confront them and guide problem solving (Flood 1991, p. 46).

The common elements to all these strategies is the notion of collaboration between the researcher and the participants in the situation, a process of critical inquiry, a focus on social practice and a deliberate process of reflective learning (Argyris, Putman et al. 1985; Checkland 1991). The challenge is to conduct the action research project within the social context of organisational change to create the environment in which managers learn to solve situational problems and achieve organisational efficiency and effectiveness (Ellis and Kiely 2000) in a fair and honest way (Plane 2000). The role of the action researcher is one who "is at one with the system (p. 406)" (Marshak 1993) and who is centrally linked and interdependent in the underlying objective of the research, sequence of events and ethics of the research process.

## **GUIDING ETHICAL PRINCIPLES**

The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans (Australia 1999) provides the ethical principles and guidelines for research involving and impacting on humans in a range of disciplinary fields. There are three basic ethical principles that are highly valued when considering and undertaking research. These include respect for persons and their autonomy, beneficence and justice in terms of the benefits and burdens of the research (Sieber 1992; Australia 1999). These principles provide direction to the norms and codes of behaviour that govern the design and conduct of research (Sieber 1992; Wells 1994). Lincoln (2001) suggests however, that such protocols and principles are inadequate and do not do enough to meet the ethical needs of the researcher or participants involved in the face-to-face, close, democratic work of action research. She further suggests that codes are revised on a daily basis by action researchers and the participants to meet the issues that arise and that this is done with little ethical guidance and is based on trust and caring. The action researcher can also be guided in decision making by the views of Churchman (1982) who considers ethics to be universal and applicable in all times and places as a conversation on the meaning of right and wrong conduct, policies, management and planning.

There is literature that indicates an awareness of the ethical challenges for the researcher in social and community research (Reason and Bradbury 2001). There is a limited account, however, of how these challenges have been addressed in practice with the ethical frameworks used in the applied social research often only communicated implicitly (Payne 2000). Ethical issues in business and management research also appear to have been neglected (Churchman 1982; Wells 1994; Flood 1999; Plane 2000). It is suggested that this may be due to the difficulty managers have with reconciling ethical or moral imperatives with the practical reality of management (Wells 1994) and a concentration on making decisions concerning concrete issues (Plane 2000).

## **ISSUES IN PRACTICE**

### **Manager Participants as Research-Participants**

A partnership has been established with the participant group to meet desired outcomes and the researcher is an active member of the group, through the use of interventions aimed at seeking to promote learning within the management group. The researcher has the role of creating the context and conditions by providing facilitation of the group processes and using system methodologies. The participants are responsible for implementing the agreed actions and participating in the reflective cycles of the action research.

The ethics approval process within the University highlighted the tensions between traditional research processes and the involvement of humans and action research. The committee identified further questions to be considered that involved consideration of how the research project and staff-as-research-participants were to be separated from the change project and staff-as-change-agents. In action research within the social context of organizations, participant input on the local knowledge on the problem context, involvement in implementing changes and reflection on the outcome of the action are essential to the quality of the research inquiry. An expected outcome of the action research inquiry is change and nature of the change will depend on the quality of the iterative action reflection cycles of the research process. Hence there is no distinction.

### **Participant Selection**

There are, according to Flood (1999) two central issues for systemic thinking that are relevant to the action research environment. The first, is the task of bounding thought to produce "a viewpoint that is both relevant and on a manageable scale (p. 70)." The second is related to whose viewpoint is relevant in making decisions on boundary setting. Both these points lead to dilemmas of ethical practice with boundary judgements also impacting on the purpose of the study, the issue being considered and who is included or excluded (p. 92, 93) as participants.

The question: 'Who should be involved in the action research process?' had ethical implications as decisions about the "should" (Churchman 1982, p. 132) raised questions about inclusion, exclusion and the degree of involvement of those included in the research. The exclusion of other stakeholders, particularly members, reduce the opportunity for the researcher to validate perceptions that relate to the membership and staff and could potentially alienated these groups. Members are those who pay an annual subscription and who have rights, privileges and responsibilities and when elected, form the governing body of the organisation.

In the process of negotiating entry to the organisation with the Chief Executive (CE) it was agreed that the primary participant group to be involved in the reflective practice arena would be the existing management executive. The executive comprised of the executive, functional and program manager representatives. Those managers who were to be included would be provided the opportunity and the benefit of reflection on decisions and subsequent actions that would not be available to all managers. Following discussion between the researcher and the existing management executive, the group was subsequently expanded to include a greater representation, but not all, of the contact service program managers. When a manager has been reallocated to a different role for a short period of time a replacement manager participant representing the interests of that program has participated in the action research process. This raised an interesting point,

does ethical participation have an element of 'representation' in it or is this simply good management practice?

Representative managers have the responsibility for communicating the decisions for action that have arisen from the ongoing research action-reflection to the non-participating managers. This arrangement has the potential to create a power relationship between the participant and non-participant manager and also biased reporting. These possible consequences have not been observed by the researcher but to address communication concerns other communication strategies were implemented. These included a second weekly newsletter from the CE and the opportunity to discuss proposals for change as an agenda item at the Program Manager's Meeting.

### **The Process of Obtaining Consent**

A limitation to consent in any action research is the provision of consent when the expected outcome of the research is stated but the actual outcome is not known and will emerge over time. An opportunity to discuss the research proposal and consent was provided to the managers before final organisational approval was granted to the researcher. At this meeting it was agreed that participation of staff executive and program managers in the action research could provide mutual benefits, such as breaking down barriers between programs, and offered managers the 'rare opportunity' to engage in reflection on managerial practice, individually and as a group (Group 2000b). However, without predictable outcomes the ultimate ethical burden is the responsibility of the researcher (Schein 2001).

A dilemma arose by the need for managers to take part in change processes as a manager and a participant in action research – where are the boundaries? This potential problem was identified and discussed between the managers and the researcher. It was agreed that each alternate Executive Staff Managers Meeting would be designated to the research process with the other meeting designated to operational management issues. Agreement was also reached that would form the basis of the rules that would govern the functioning of the action research group and for the Explanatory Statement (Walker 2000) that was developed for subsequent additions to the research group.

The conditions and rules for the conduct of the meetings between the manager participants and the researcher covered frequency, note taking and participation. There have been some minor modifications to these initial conditions as the need has arisen. One example is where the initial agreement for audio taping the action reflection sessions was for the tapes only be used for the researcher to complete notes of the sessions and then be cleaned. The audio tapes are now retained for the duration of the research and agreement was reached that these could be transcribed to a floppy disc by a third party if required.

The researcher negotiating the entry into the organisation began the consent process. The CE and the General Manager (GM) gave initial organizational consent and following discussion with the management group a recommendation was made to the Board of Management. Individual signed consent was not obtained from participating managers, however was obtained at the group level by way of verbal consent, which was considered to be sufficient (Cooper and Emory 1995) by the group. The process of group consent could have posed a problem in that the management team as a captive population could have agreed to participating in the research considering agreement was in line with "doing the right thing" (Sieber 1992). Although the researcher noted some tension within the group at the first meeting (Group 2000b) the open questioning and frank discussion did not indicate that any manager was agreeing without considering the proposal and its implications for them. The recognition that anxieties, such as need for additional activity outside normal workloads, were present was raised at a subsequent meeting and consent was confirmed after discussion of individual issues (Group 2000a).

Consent is an integral component in action research and is evidenced by the ongoing behaviour of individuals within the group. The practice of reflection on action and in the action reflection forums provided openness in communication and provided the opportunity of a group context to discuss participation. Consent has been renegotiated when changes to the composition of the staff and executive management group has occurred as a result of staff turnover or redeployment and appointment of new managers. The explanatory statement including the agreed conditions of participation was made available to

the new manager and discussion on the conditions then took place with the individual and the group. There has been ongoing commitment to the research by those managers remaining with the organisation. There has not been any indication of 'invisible coercion' and one manager, who has reduced from full time to part time, has continued to attend the research sessions on a non-work day.

### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

It is not possible to ensure anonymity of the manager participants when they are located within the problem context and that context is the implementation of the strategic directions of the organisation and the manager participants must own the change that results from the action research deliberations. The values underpinning the functions of the organisation are documented as honesty, acceptance, equity, flexibility, commitment and participation (SFV 2000) and also support the action research process. These values have been a reference point for considering anonymity and confidentiality on the deliberations and outcomes of the action reflection meetings. Other issues included the recording and location of data and the use of the data collected. The data collection includes tape recordings of the action reflection sessions, individual notes and reflections on the process and outcomes of the sessions as well as organisation record of the session outcomes. The researcher was aware that there could be conflicting and different needs (Spradley 1980) and has ensured that potential conflicts have been raised for discussion. An example was the use of audiotape to capture the content of the action reflection sessions, the initial conditions for the use of audiotaping was incorporated into explanatory statement and their subsequent modification.

### **The Process of Conflict Resolution**

The process of action research highlights different perspectives and assumptions on the problems being addressed. As Churchman (1982) says "... once you dig for facts or coins, you change a lot of other things as well, and these changes may not be the ones you want (p. 2)". As a consequence of surfacing assumptions and views on issues there is the probability that conflicts will arise that will require resolution. The researcher considered the possibility of degrees of conflict and unexpected responses in the participants and has ensured an opportunity is made within the participant group for resolution of emotional responses to the process or outcomes of the research. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that no participant is harmed as a result of the research process or failure to resolve issues should they arise. An alternative outside source can be identified should concerns or issues not directly related to the research purpose be identified.

Throughout the action research process questions such as 'Who will be affected?' and 'How will they be affected?' maintained a continued awareness of the ethical principles when making decisions (Stringer 1996). These questions were useful tools for engaging the manager participants' focus on the responsibility and possible consequence of their actions.

### **DATA INTERPRETATION**

The ethical issues of data interpretation, writing and publication are yet to be fully confronted however the subjectivity and fluidity of interpretation and the implications (Nakkula and Ravitch 1998) will need to be considered. Throughout the action research there is analysis of the research process and data by both the researcher and the managers involved. This is being facilitated through reflection on implementation of actions and meaningful participation in discussion. Although this joint involvement could be considered contamination of the research process and data it is necessary as a form of validation as it ensures that there is sufficient knowledge of the problem to allow the best action to be taken to obtain the intended result (Schein 2001). When reporting the research objectives and outcomes, attention will need to be given to safeguarding the rights, interests and sensitivities of the participants and the organisation in which the research is being undertaken (Spradley 1980) without interfering with the integrity of the data.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Action research is a dynamic process of interaction between action, learning and reflection. It is also primarily a process of exploration. Traditional ethical structures provide a framework for conducting the research rather than a clear-cut prescription. The active involvement of participants, normally called subjects, creates a need for different and more comprehensive ethical frameworks. It has been obvious in this project that ethical dilemmas arise unexpectedly. This is not to say they can't be dealt with but it does imply a need for ongoing attention to the ethical framework of action research during the research process. With increased attention to this aspect of action research it may be possible to establish general ethical frameworks. It is a responsibility of researchers working in this area to involve themselves in the continuing debate and discussion of what the framework should be. It is an ethical requirement of action researchers to use the tools that they use in the field - action, learning and reflection, to maintain the debate about the ethics of action research within the community of practitioners.

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