

Ethical dilemmas in Action Research

Abstract

Action research aims at doing a change in practice at the same time as research is performed. In the article of Rasmussen [3] it is described as a research paradigm opposing the positivistic paradigm. That Action research has links to a more political view of the world can be seen in the following quote that also gives a definition:

“... action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.” [4]

What is perhaps most distinguishing with Action research compared to other research frameworks is that it has two goals as described by McKay and Marshall [2], i.e. one research interest and one problem solving interest for the organization in which the research is performed. This unique feature of having two goals makes the research framework suitable for research on situations that is changing rapidly, and where it perhaps is not ethical to only observe and let things happen. Instead the researcher with her knowledge and perspective, together with the practitioner with her knowledge and perspective, can change the course of events at hand.

This paper aims at investigating what ethical dilemmas are linked to Action Research. Since there are ethical dilemmas linked to all kinds of research, this paper will not describe all sets of ethical dilemmas possible, but rather focus on finding those ethical dilemmas that could be unique for or more frequent in Action Research. Furthermore this paper aims at finding strategies of avoiding those ethical dilemmas.

In order to find ethical dilemmas, it is interesting to see what is perhaps unique about Action Research. The methods that could be used in action research are not specified generally, so it is difficult to deduce anything from these, however there are some features of action research that are relatively unique. One feature that stands in stark contrast to the others is the dual aim of Action research [2] and this feature could lead to some problems of ethical nature. For example, the researcher, who is engaged both in the research part of the research, as well as the practical part, can easily be absorbed too much in either part and therefore lose focus in the other part. This dilemma, called subjectivity threat, is described by Kock [1], who also presents antidotes to this dilemma.

Perhaps the dilemmas that are found, is not unique to Action research, but rather is something that is common of all research frameworks belonging to the same paradigm. But I believe that some ethical dilemmas must be more prominent in Action research compared to other research frameworks.

References

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