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ABSTRACT
        Action research combines the development of
competence with community action. It provides a means of organizing
large numbers of people around well-defined, short-term jobs; engages
people face to face with a problem; and translates research into
politics by building a base of mass support for a given problem. The
basic components of any action research program involve creating
legitimacy, defining problems on a human scale, dealing with
conflict, recognizing that knowledge is power, developing the power
of collectivity, and creating a mode of natural and manageable human
organization. The major program stages of an action research program
are defining the problem, developing research instruments, and
collecting and analyzing data. The basic procedures and special
problems of some specific action research techniques are identified.
(Author/MLF)

ACTION RESEARCH:

A New Style of Politics in Education

by Parker Palmer and Elden Jacobsen

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PREFACE

This is the first of a new series of publications of the Institute for Responsive Education -- IRE REPORTS: Citizen Participation in Education. The need for the series grow. out of the daily work of the Institute in studying and trying to assist citizen participation in education. We are often asked by parents, citizens, community groups, government agencies, college students, and faculty for up-to-date material on decentralization, community control, school councils, parent-initiated alternative schools, student rights, and other related topics. We respond to these inquiries through our own publications and by reference to readily accessible published works. However, we want to provide a more useful service to our varied constituency. IRE REPORTS is an inexpensive way to reproduce and distribute worthwhile manuscripts which are sent to us or which we solicit. The papers are distributed at a price as close to cost as possible.

ACTION-RESEARCH: A New Style of Politics in Education is a particularly appropriate and significant first publication for this series. It will be of interest both to parents and citizens who are organizing to influence the schools and to people with an interest in community research. It can be used as a manual by citizens' organizations interested in energizing local people to solve school and community problems. It can be used by school districts committed to encouraging citizen action for school improvement.

We appreciate the cooperation of the authors, Parker Palmer and Elden Jacobsen, in allowing us to adapt a manuscript which they prepared in 1971 for the National Council of Churches.

IRE will be happy to have your responses and reactions to this report, and to be kept informed of ways in which the publication proves useful.

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ACTION-RESEARCH: A NEW STYLE OF POLITICS AND EDUCATION

"What can I do?" The age-old question is being asked with increasing frequency and mounting urgency in our day. More and more people are becoming sensitive to the troubles that permeate American society. At the same time the American system seems to be growing more complex and confusing. Many people, lacking the competence to cut through the knotted web of social ills, are discovering that sensitivity alone is not so much a solution as part of the problem. Without competence, sensitivity plus complexity equals frustration.

Action-research is one way of dealing with these problems. Action-research is an approach which combines the development of competence with community action. In such a collective undertaking, people empower one another. And with the research method, people are equipped with facts and skills of analysis. The disciplines of research are employed to cut overwhelming social problems down to human scale and to reduce the stultifying level of rhetoric which usually accompanies our efforts to solve them.

But what has research to do with action? Is it not true that a great deal of research, viewed from the activist's point of view, ends up "gathering dust?"

Research becomes a form of action when it is done not by the experts but by people who themselves must act-- a group of parents concerned about the impact of a school on their children; a cluster of people within a congregation who want to initiate a low-cost housing project; a group of high school students who want to start a youth center. Any group can use the tools of action-research--not for academic purposes, but to act out their own urgent sense of concern.

It is not so much that action-research leads to action, though that is certainly true. Action-research is a form of action. It provides a means of organizing large numbers of people around well-defined, short-term jobs. It engages people face to face with the problem. It builds a base of mass support for a given problem--and in so doing translates research into politics. Action-research provides a path into politics for politically reticent people. It is a way of thinking clearly, getting the facts, and acting collectively on almost any problem.

These propositions have not been developed out of thin air. They have been tested in actual field situations with various groups. Working with the Youth-Adult Task Force of the Metropolitan Ecumenical Training Center in Springfield, Virginia, we helped a church-based group of parents and high school students develop a program aimed at assessing and improving their high school. Their work went so well that they are now incorporated as the Springfield Action-Research Committee, a permanent citizens' organization. In Washington, D.C., we have tested action-research programs aimed at giving clergymen a better understanding of, and some first-hand experience with, the structure of power in the city. In Silver Spring, Maryland, working with the Silver Spring Group Ministry, we have helped launch an action-research process which will involve several hundred laymen from local churches and lead toward some form of community organization and/or community ministry.

What we maintain has been well tested, but certainly demands further testing under a variety of field conditions. We are persuaded however, that the basic design is now worthy of attention.

An action-research program is one in which numbers of people can be organized to define problems and gather facts so that research becomes a form of empowerment and action. In what sense does such a program qualify as

an intersection of the school and urban society? We have hinted at one answer--action-research is a form of collective citizen power. And since "power" is the conceptual hub of our interest, action-research deserves our attention. But there are other reasons. In spelling them out perhaps we can better establish the context in which action-research makes sense.

The city, for many people, is a place where total complexity and utter confusion lurk just beyond one's own niche of sanity. We speak often of the urbanite's sense of powerlessness. Its basic elements are complexity and confusion. The city is a "black box;" its inner workings are a mystery to us. But even worse, one side of that black box has warped slightly and we have glimpsed the incredible labyrinth of convoluted "wiring" inside.

It is into this maze that voluntary associations have been urging their members to plunge. Is it any wonder that only a few have really become involved, that so little has been done, that the results of this exhortation seem to be so minimal? We have pushed people into a jungle of frustration without supplying machetes to hack through.

More recently, we have increased this frustration through the widespread use of "sensitivity training." With this vehicle many people who were never aware of how tough things are now "know," and they are virtually quivering with new-found feelings. But they lack competence to do anything about these feelings. Nor does the sensitivity movement promise to develop any such competence among its participants. And we all know what happens to any structure, even a human frame, which is subjected to unabated quivering.

With the complexity of the city and the incompetence of the people who feel compelled to do something, one natural reaction is to call in the experts. The scholars surely are the ones who have pierced the mysteries of the black box and can tell us what to do and how to do it.

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Alas, such is not the case. What do we do when three, or five, or ten experts appear before us with many different opinions? (There is not yet an academic specialty in "arbitrating among the experts," so we cannot call on yet another expert.) What shall we think when we discover that "what to do and how to do it" is not even the question most on the minds of academics, for it is not a question demanded by their work of research and publication and scholarly debate?

The parent and citizen will not find experts who have immediate answers to the problems of action in an urban context. The experts have their own agenda, not likely to be identical to that of the lay group. (Even if it is, the lay group will have a very hard time developing a sense of "ownership" about it, and this difficulty alone can undercut any chance of group action.) Thus, in addition to dealing with the city and their own incompetence, the lay group must now deal with the experts' agenda.

Action-research can help weed through the tangles of urban affairs. It can develop competence within a lay group, and it can permit that group to take advantage of expertise without being smothered by the experts' agenda. We state these claims boldly because we have seen it work.

It should be clear by now that in action-research, normal standards of research are not as important as standards of action. What are the conditions of action? How does the normal approach meet those conditions, if at all?

The conditions under which people act is not a topic one could cover in less than a lifetime of exacting observation and analysis. But the following list of conditions is validated by simple daily experience:

1. People act when they have some sort of _self-interest_ at stake.

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2. People act when they have <u>a clear and compelling diagnosis</u> of the situation.

3. People act when they have <u>a meaningful prescription</u>, i.e., one which responds to the diagnosis.

4. People act when they have <u>a sense of power</u> to enforce the prescription.

Compare this list with the conditions that normally exist as we try to initiate citizen action. In place of self-interest, we depend heavily on a sense of altruism: "We ought to act because those people need our action." Instead of a clear and compelling diagnosis, we tend to depend on rhetoric. Few have mastered the art of rhetoric, so we are normally just bored. But even a master of the art can only get us energized to move. We still have no sense of where we want to go. If leaders would spend half the time on diagnosis that they do on exhortatory proclamations, much more lay action would result.

Furthermore, instead of having a sense of power to act, people by and large feel powerless. Our world has become a cloud of verbal mist against which no amount of pushing and shoving yields that firm response that lets us know we are in contact with something real. Even more important perhaps, is the fact that powerlessness comes from failure to define the world for ourselves--and the failure of organizational leadership to provide a vehicle for us to do so. Leaders who want to promote citizen action generally seem to feel they must assume command posts or nothing gets done. Can we now admit the fallacy of that approach in light of the general failure of citizen action? Perhaps now we can see that unless the need to act, a plan for action, and the resources to execute it are "owned" by the people in question, little action will result.

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Action-research can meet many of these needs. It is a process whereby people can develop their own diagnosis and prescription, thereby acting out their self-interest and gaining a sense of power.

BASIC COMPONENTS OF ACTION-RESEARCH

What are the key elements of action-research? We will give specific programmatic answers to this question later. For the moment we might do well to orient the reader by listing six basic components of any action-research program.

The first is "legitimacy." Unlike "politics," research is legitimate, and many people who would never think of entering a political fray will enter a research process. Action-research has high potential for becoming political, but by the time it does its participants have developed such competence that politics no longer seems frightening. This is worth pondering particularly with regard to the politically reticent middle class. The suburbs, where there is a desperate need for "public life," may not be able to develop such a life through political practice. Action-research is one alternative.

There is another kind of "legitimacy" afforded by action-research, and that is the legitimacy of facts. It is sometimes easy to believe that the political estate of this country is so low that facts no longer avail. And certainly information and accuracy are not the sum total of political power. But anyone who has ever watched an unprepared citizens' group get chewed up by a hostile city council has some respect for the potency of facts.

Second, action-research is capable of defining problems on a "human scale." In other publications we have expanded on the notion that many Americans have been politically incapacitated by the magnitude with which "political

problems" are defined. Militarism, racism, cynicism and the apocalypse:
"go and do something about it," is the command. There is no better way to
undermine the confidence and capacity of a people than to put all public
problems far beyond their reach.

Research is always a process of scaling down, until one arrives at
something definable and manageable. The constant discipline of research
is one of specification--what do you mean by X?--and operationalization--
what does X look like in the real world? This process, this discipline, is
badly needed as a part of the development of political confidence and com-
petence. For those qualities will return only as we define political
problems in human dimensions.

Third, action-research provides some interesting ways of dealing with
conflict. Again this is pertinent to the political reticence of the middle
class, for whom conflict is to be avoided at all costs.

One way in which action-research deals with conflict is by casting
differences of opinion or belief in terms of hypotheses to be tested. More
than once, when two members of an action-research group were at each other's
throats, we were able to suggest that both viewpoints could be honored and
the debate resolved if we took them as hypotheses to be tested in the
research. From this process come some of the most penetrating hypotheses.
But even more important, the resolution comes not by fiat but by fact.

Action-research can also deal with conflict on a larger scale. In one
area where we were invited but unable to work, a youth program of the city
government was under fire and the council was calling for an "objective eval-
uation." We suggested that the critics of this program would never believe
anyone's "objective assessment" since ideological concerns were at stake.

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Instead, we recommended that these critics form an action-research program under expert guidance to discover for themselves the facts of the case. Should they refuse to do so, their disregard for evidence might weaken their case in the public eye. Should they agree, the facts would be out for the public to see.

Fourth, action-research is a way of giving life to that old maxim "knowledge is power." Action-research moves beyond the Platonic assumptions of the statement. It recognizes that knowledge is power depending on its human context, on who has the knowledge, how it is obtained, and by what criteria it is tested. The modern world has come to regard knowledge as equal with facts. But real knowledge is more. Among other things, it is the competence which comes from participating in the fact finding process. And it is gearing that process and its factual outcomes to the needs of the people. We have already suggested the ways in which action-research is so geared. Any further demonstration of this point lies in usage.

Fifth, action-research can help develop another form of power: the power of collectivity. We do not exclude its use by individuals, but the action-research program described here is built on the premise that numbers of people will be involved. As anyone who works in voluntary associations knows, the development of competent, sustained, and committed groups is no easy task in this society. Life has been so thoroughly privatized that the classic American strength which lay in vital "intermediary" groups is waning fast. Action-research is one way of tapping that strength. It does so not only because many action-research tasks demand a division of labor, but also because there is power in the mutual support and interaction of a group.

This sounds trivial, perhaps, until we recognize that the prime polit-

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ical style of recent years has been the charismatic individual or the educational "Lone Ranger." Unfortunately, there are many more jobs to be done than there are individuals with a "gift of grace." Most of us have to draw more on the power of organization than on our own charisma, and the tools for helping us are few. Action-research is such a tool.

Sixth, action-research is a mode of natural and manageable human organization. The research task has clear and understandable elements; around these elements a sensible and workable division of labor can be developed. There is room in an action-research program not only for the committed core group, but also for various levels of hangers-on. Action-research seems well suited to the requirements of most voluntary associations.

It may be helpful, finally, to suggest some things that action-research is not. The term "action-research" has sometimes been used in radical rhetoric meaning research aimed at points of potential political action, a type of research not likely to be done in the universities. But here the similarities in our approach end, for in radical usage "action-research" continues to be an elite activity, confined to those who are committed members of the political core group. On the contrary, what excites us about action-research is its potential as an educational and motivational device for those who are not part of the inner core. Elitism in politics and community action is one of the banes of this society. Action-research in our usage is a way of broadening the base.

Action-research must also be distinguished from the "action-reflection" technique that has been popular recently. In this approach, people are made to take some "plunge" into action and then are given an opportunity, under trained leadership, to reflect. We have no question about the educational

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merits of this approach. But it is a vehicle for individual training rather

than for community organization and action. Furthermore, action-research

reverses the sequence of events, on the simple assumption that engaging in

"reflection" (research) before or as part of the action will lead to more

significant consequences.

A PROGRAM OF ACTION-RESEARCH

What is the actual shape of an action-research program? What are its

major stages and components? What do people actually do? We have identi-

fied three major program stages, sketched out below. Later we will describe

a series of research techniques which can be used in the context of this

three-stage design.

Stage I: Defining the Problem

The first stage in an action-research program involves problems in

definition. The first of these is defining the central issue. Sometimes

this issue will come ready-made; either it will be clear to everyone that

"something must be done about X," or a core group of leaders will make it

clear and want to bring others along. At other times however, there will

be a much more general malaise. People will know something is wrong but

there will be no clarity, let alone consensus, about what is wrong. The

central issue must then be hammered out.

With rare exceptions, community leadership is faced with the initial

task of "bringing people along," both in terms of their perceptions of prob-

lems and their willingness to do something about them. The first stage of

an action-research program offers some excellent opportunities for bringing

people along. One might try to define the problem by holding neighborhood

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"hearings" to discover what issues are on people's minds, hosting a series of living room discussions throughout the community, or running a series in the local newspaper inviting response.

There are many devices available for collectively defining an issue, and the point we wish to make is simple. While most research begins with a focus in the mind of the researcher, action-research begins by developing that focus out of the larger community. It is important to do so even when the leader thinks he or she knows what's on people's minds, for it is critical that an action-research program be "owned" by the community from the very outset.

The next step in Stage I is to turn the central issue into a researchable question. This is not an easy step but a critical one, for it dictates the shape and probably the success of the research.

Suppose, for example, that "the lack of adequate citizen participation in educational decision making" had emerged as the central issue. Phrased that way, we have an area of concern but no focus for research. Given this central issue, there are a number of researchable questions that could be framed, and each of them points in a different research direction:

    Do citizens adequately participate in educational decision-making?
    Why don't citizens adequately participate in educational decision-
        making?
    How can our citizens become more involved in educational decision-
        making?

It may be that the project should pursue all these questions are more, or perhaps take on only one of them. The point is that you must state the central issue(s) as a question which has a research answer. The question, "Should citizens be more involved in educational decision-making?" is a moral question, not a researchable one.

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It is very important when taking this step to look for key words or concepts which need clarification. For example, in the illustration the term "adequate" is still undefined. Yet it is a crucial term, on which the whole issue hinges. This problem becomes acute when we are dealing with issues like "the maldistribution of power" in the community. The term "power" demands specification; and it will be much more difficult to handle than the term "adequate." We cannot avoid defining terms.

It should be noted that the task of defining a researchable question is best done by one or two people and not by a large group. The larger group can be helpful in developing a broad understanding of the meaning of a term (through "brainstorming" for example), but the final analysis and decision cannot be made by committee.

The next step in Stage I involves generating some tentative answers to the researchable question. In the language of research, these answers are called hypotheses. Perhaps it seems backward to answer the question before the research is done; is it not the purpose of the research to answer the question? The problem is that any question has a very large number of potential answers. The researcher must decide on the kind of answer he or she wants to test out, since it will be impossible to test all possible solutions. That is the function of the hypothesis.

Suppose, for example, that our central issue is political apathy, and that our research question is, "Why do so few people in the community belong to the two existing political action groups?" Among the answers one might give to that question are:

    Because the organizations meet at inconvenient times.
    Because people in our community are too timid, or feel inadequate to
        participate in groups.
    Because most people in our community don't see anything that needs
        to be changed.

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Because most people in our community are so overwhelmed with the
    need for change they see no chance of doing anything.
Because most people in our community work at jobs far distant
    from home with long hours.
Because the agenda of the groups don't match the agenda of the people.

Obviously, the list of tentative answers or hypotheses is endless.
The researcher must make some informed guess as to which hypotheses are most
pertinent and build research around them. Clearly, this is a critical guess.
Suppose that the political participation is low simply because the organiza-
tions meet at inconvenient times, but suppose the researcher had thought
that this was a trivial hypothesis and not worth pursuing. Obviously, the
key information would not be obtained, with the research ending up in a
series of non-answers to the problem.

Generating a list of hypotheses is another point in action-research where
larger numbers of people can and should be involved. A "brainstorming" session
in which a group formulates as many hypotheses as possible can be a great
deal of fun. It also taps a reservoir of intuitive knowledge about the com-
munity. Once again, however, the final analysis and selection of hypotheses
to be tested is probably a one-person job. It is impossible for committees
to do this kind of work.

Certain criteria are applied in the selection of final hypotheses.
One, of course, is salience: does the hypothesis seem to have a reasonable
relation to the problem? Another equally important criterion is accessibility
and leverage: does the hypothesis point to factors about which an action
group can take action? It is not useful to prove that problem "X" is inti-
mately related to the age and sex structure of your community, when there is
likely little your group can do about that fact. It may be that problem "X"
is also related to other factors which are within reach of the action group.
Hypotheses which point toward such factors should be favored.

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Two additional hints may be helpful for the critical task of selecting hypotheses. First use the library, especially a good university library. Scholarly books and journals are filled with studies on every problem under the sun, and some of these studies may help you decide which hypotheses are worth pursuing and which are not. (However, as noted above, scholarly research tends to be done for different purposes than action-research. Do not, therefore, get discouraged if the scholars seem to have ignored your problem or pushed it aside due to little interest. Remember, their interests are different from yours.) Second, keeping in mind these same caveats, employ the services of university experts themselves. Third, conduct a small exploratory study to help weed out the good hypotheses from the bad. Even a handful of interviews on the problem of adequate health facilities may greatly sharpen your understanding of what should be tested on a larger scale.

Finally, a reminder of the "group dynamics" function hypotheses may serve. Frequently action oriented groups get hung up on simple differences of perception or opinion that keep people from moving ahead with the job. When the group is working within the context of "action," pure and simple, these differences often reach great rhetorical heights and become insurmountable hurdles. Within the context of action-research however, we have an opportunity to cast differences in the form of hypotheses to be tested. This way all points of view can be honored and all energies engaged--without compromising the direction and integrity of the program. And once the research returns are in, we will have empirical answers to our differences of opinion and a consensus will be more easily established.

Stage II: Developing Research Instruments

The first stage of an action-research program is the most critical,
for in it one makes decisions which will irrevocably shape the entire project.
During Stage II the main task is to construct those research tools or in-
struments which will enable you to test the hypotheses developed during
Stage I. These instruments often take the form of questionnaires, interview
guides, or other data formats, and are used in a wide variety of research
techniques (which will be detailed later in this paper).

In designing research instruments, one is actually moving from abstract
concepts to specific "indicators" of those concepts in the real world.
For example, suppose our central problem is that of people's attitudes
toward education. Our research question is, "Why are so few people in this
community committed to educational equality?" In Stage I we would specify
that concept somewhat; we would decide whether equality referred to socio-
economic standing, IQ, achievement scores, etc. Now we must decide what
particular indicators of behavior or attitude will suffice to measure our
concept.

For example, if we decide that socio-economic standing is the essential
meaning of educational equality as far as we are concerned, we now have
to decide how to measure socio-economic standing. Perhaps family income
and occupation will do it. Or perhaps we want to combine several such ele-
ments into a complex measure. It goes without saying that this is a crit-
ical point in the research design, for it determines what particular evid-
ence we will collect and in turn determines the extent to which we will be
able to answer our central question.

At this point there are again opportunities for the meaningful involve-
ment of groups of people. For example, we might form several small work

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groups to draft initial versions of the research instrument. There is much

to be gained from such an experience beyond the production of a research tool,

for this is the point at which common concepts or words must be given final

clarification. Thus, as people debate what they really mean by educational

equality some vital learning may well come about.

During Stage II we must also make decisions about the kind of vehicle

in which the data will be collected. Once educational equality is defined

in terms of specific indicators, we must decide how and where those indicators

will be sought.

For action-research, as a general rule, choose the methodology that

will involve the largest number of people. In the case cited above, person-

to-person interviews would probably be preferable to the other techniques.

There are limits on this rule of course; you may not have sufficient people,

or the numbers to be studied may be so large that you have to adopt a more

"efficient" way of gaining data. But when possible, choose a method which

involves people meeting people, for this is the prime source of human motiva-

tion and action. If an action-researcher has rubbed shoulders with the

human data of some human problem, the depth of his insight is likely to

be greater than if he had received the data second- or third-hand.

Too often research has functioned to keep people apart and distant

from problems. Action-research turns those tables and uses the research

process itself as a vehicle for human interaction and exposure. Research

techniques should be chosen accordingly.

Finally, in Stage II it may be well to do a small "pilot study" before

plunging into Stage III. Such a pilot study will enable us to give our

research instruments a rough test. Frequently mistakes that would be disas-

trous when made on a large scale can be spotted and corrected in a small-

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scale trial run. Furthermore the pilot test, if conducted on the action-research group itself, enables the group to take stock and come to a point of collective reflection on what it has done before moving its work into a larger arena.

Stage III: Data Collection and Analysis

There is nothing particularly imaginative about Stage III, for it has been thoroughly shaped by decisions made in Stages I and II. In Stage III the research instruments are employed, the facts are gathered and analyzed, and conclusions are reached. Some of the particular techniques we might use are described later. Here we shall limit ourselves to more general comments.

Stage III presents some important opportunities for the involvement of numbers of people. For example, if you are conducting a neighborhood survey it might be well to do your interviewing on a Saturday morning, and reassemble in the afternoon over a late lunch to discuss your experiences. For many of the participants the day will have given some new and even startling insights into the community. Capitalize on that fact and what it might mean for building a community of concern.

During the course of the interviewing, if that is the approach you choose, you have a chance not only to collect data but also to inform any additional people of the concerns and objectives of your group. You might leave a postcard with people interviewed, asking them to return it if the, are interested in attending a meeting at which you will discuss the results of the research. In this way you build a mailing list, and more and more people become involved in the life of the action-research group.

It is in this stage that the maxim "knowledge is power" begins to

come to life. If you have done your work well you will probably possess the most reliable, up-to-date body of knowledge available on problem "X." This is true even when you are dealing in realms of professionalism like the public schools. One of our experimental groups was told that it had better information on what was going on at a particular high school than either the high school administration or the county school board!

Capitalize on this as various institutions and publics begin to seek the fruits of your labors. Establish requirements for access to your information--e.g., willingness to engage in a series of educational meetings and to express one's self with regard to solutions. Using your hard-won knowledge in this and other ways you can gain genuine leverage on a given problem.

If you are now saying, "OK, we've done the research; where is the action?" you have missed the point. For the very process of this style of research, with its involvement of people, is a form of action. Suppose your focus is a public school, as in several of our experimental groups. By this time you will have created a series of conversations between parents, students, teachers and administrators that could have happened no other way. Although what ostensibly occurs is "research," the real function of these conversations is the airing of complaints, the testing of opinions, the winning of allies (and discovery of enemies)--all "political" functions. This itself is action, and by this stage in an action-research program you are likely to have all the action, or potential action, you desire.

It is not a matter of taking dead facts and translating them into action programs. The action is already there. The research process, properly understood and executed, has seen to that. Thus we do not have a "Stage IV" in an action-research program labelled "From Data to Action." For this

process has been going on throughout the first three stages.

By way of summary, the following seem minimal in constructing an action-research program:

Stage I: Identify central issue through community process.
Define issue as researchable question.
Develop hypotheses regarding research question.

Stage II: Locate indicators for concepts.
Construct research instruments and design.
Pilot test.

Stage III: Collect data.
Analyze data and draw conclusions.

All Stages: Maximize ways of involving people in research process.

SOME ACTION-RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

We turn now to some specific research techniques which might be designed into Stage II and used in Stage III. For each of them we shall try to outline the basic procedure and point to one or two special problems. Full competence in any one of these methods would require instruction far beyond the bounds of this paper. Before listing specific techniques, it is important to note that any one of them can be used to different research ends. It is important to be clear from the beginning what end one has in view.

One research goal is simply to describe what a particular phenomenon or population looks like. How many residents in the city support the administration's school bussing policy? Another research goal is to explain why a particular descriptive finding is true. Why for example, do so many people in the city support the school bussing policy; is it related to socio-economic status?

Yet another research goal, compatible with both descriptive and explanatory studies, is comparison. How do residents of your city compare with

those of the outlying suburbs on support for the school busing policy?

Once the researcher is clear on the general goal, he or she must choose among a variety of specific methods. Frequently he or she chooses not simply one, but two or more, a blend of several. In this paper we shall discuss eight such possibilities: participant-observation, survey research, depth interviewing, projective techniques, sociometry, the use of public records, content analysis of various media, and a category of methods known as "unobtrusive measures." In describing each one, we shall also have occasion to refer to general problems of research common to all of them.

Participant-observation is at once the most natural and most unnatural, the simplest and the most difficult of research methods. All of us are participants every day--in grocery lines, in work situations, in crowds on buses, and so forth. Sometimes we even observe. But observing in some systematic, reliable way--and observing the "right" things--while at the same time participating with some of the naturalness of everyday life, is a real trick.

Suppose you were interested in an overview mechanism for citizen participation in education. Quick data could be obtained by sending two-person teams to participate and observe at all the meetings of groups such as Title I, the PTA, etc. But observe what? The possibilities are endless: one could observe total numbers of participants, style and content of reports, rate of interaction after the meetings, proportion of men, young, non-white, etc., in attendance. The research group must sit down well in advance and decide what they want to look for, and perhaps make a couple of "dry runs" to make sure that they have not overlooked anything important.

Remember that members of the action-research group can do valuable

participant-observation where they work each day. You could do a decent

study of radio-listening habits by having the auto mechanics in your group

keep tabs on the settings of radio dials in the cars they work on. Again

the possibilities are endless, limited only by imagination.

The second type of research, _survey_ research, is the one most people are

familiar with. Typically, this mode of research revolves around a question-

naire administered by mail or by interviewers from the action-research group.

As we have already suggested, this mode maximizes human interaction and

exposure, prime aims of the action-research process.

Technically there are two pivotal problems with survey research:

defining the target population sample, and constructing the questionnaire.

The first step is to define the population or universe you want to

learn something about. Is it all citizens in your community? All property

owners? All parents? All barbers? The decision is yours. It must be made

self-consciously and with care.

Typically the population of interest to you is too large to permit in-

terviewing every member of it, so the researcher must take a "sample"

(i.e., a small group which adequately represents the larger population).

The easiest way to draw a sample is from a complete list of the total pop-

ulation. To some extent, the question of what population to study is answered

by the question, "For what population are complete lists available?" One

could obtain fairly accurate lists of all parent members (from the schools),

of all barbers (from the phone book), of all property owners (from the

tax rolls), etc. But complete lists of other groups--for example, all teen-

agers--would be much harder to come by.

Furthermore one has to be careful not to accept biased lists, for

one then gets biased results. It may look like a telephone book comprises

a total listing of community residents. In fact, it may exclude those not wealthy enough to have a phone.

Assuming that a reliable list is available, the researcher then picks every "nth" name, depending on the size of the sample he or she wants to work with and the size of the total population. Those chosen in this random procedure then become recipients of the questionnaire.

The second aspect of survey research, questionnaire construction, is a difficult art and there is room for only a few words about it here. The questionnaire represents the researcher's best guesses as to what factors are relevant to the phenomenon he or she has chosen to study. If he or she misses some key factors, there is no way to recoup them after the survey is complete. So the questionnaire must be built comprehensively--and yet not be so huge that few of the people sampled will trouble to wade through it.

There are several small but important details to be observed in developing a questionnaire. The first questions asked should be the most innocuous and non-threatening on the list; ask the "difficult" questions only after you have gotten a person well along in the instrument. Write, rewrite, and edit all questions with an eye to ambiguity and other sources of bias; if a word means one thing to one person and something else to another, the responses to that item are worthless. The larger the sample, the greater the necessity for "closed-ended" questions; i.e., those with multiple choice answers. Otherwise the amount of data becomes utterly unmanageable. In constructing answer options for such questions, be sure that the categories are exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Suppose the question involves the extent of a person's education. The answer categories "(8-9 years), (10-11 years)" are not exhaustive. Suppose the person had 9 1/2 years of schooling. The answer categories "(8-9 years), (9-10 years)" are not mutually exclusive.

Finally, a questionnaire should in every respect guarantee the anonymity of the respondent. Not only should the obvious means of identification be lacking, but no questions so specific as to make identification possible should be asked.

With a mail-out questionnaire, every effort should be made to make the survey legitimate for its recipients. A full statement of the nature of the action-research group and its purpose should be made. (Publicity in a local newspaper is an excellent source of legitimacy; refer to it in the cover letter--or give interviewers copies of the clipping for door-to-door polls). The cover letter and questionnaire should be neatly and attractively printed. Include a self-addressed postage-paid return envelope. And be prepared to send follow-up letters to those who do not respond. As a rule of thumb, expect one-third of the sample to respond after the initial mailings; one-third after a first follow-up; and then dribbles in responses to further follow-ups. Any mail survey which gains returns of over 70-75% is doing well. Obviously, for the sake of accuracy the higher the return rate, the better.

A third type of research is often used before or after the survey method. This is depth interviewing, or the case study. The depth interview does not allow the researcher to cover as broad a range of people and topics as the survey does. But it does permit him or her to explore, probe, and discover unexpected outcomes in ways the pre-formed survey questionnaire prohibits. When you are dealing with subtle and tricky topics like educational values, the depth interview may be an essential preliminary to constructing a good questionnaire. It may be the only usable method.

As with participant-observation the depth interviewer must have some prior notion of the general questions he wishes to ask during a one or two

hour conversation. He may have a list of quite specific queries to get good comparative data from several cases. But the strength of the depth interview is in the researcher's ability to discover and explore matters he had not even considered before. Above all, the depth interview must remain flexible and adaptable.

Many of the rules of questionnaire construction also apply to constructing depth interview schedules. One way to reduce the threat inherent in some questions is to put those questions on cards and hand them to the interviewee rather than asking questions aloud. A person may be less reluctant to give you the number that corresponds to his income category on a typed card than to state his income orally. This is simply another illustration of the flexibility of the depth interview situation; it should be emphasized.

A fourth research technique, <u>projective testing</u>, is often used in depth interviewing. The projective test is simply a non-verbal stimulant presented to an interviewee in hopes of getting meaningful response. The theory is that these responses may be even more meaningful than usual because the stimulant has more richness and depth than mere words. While asking a person his or her opinions on race relations may elicit a stereotyped response, presenting that same person with photos or works of art which relate to race relations may yield much more interesting data.

While photos and paintings are the most frequently used projective devices, any non-verbal means of communication qualifies. One could use pieces of sculpture or music. It may sometimes be possible, especially in classroom situations, to get data by having the respondent create his own non-verbal message. A great deal might be learned from having someone build a collage on topic "X" from magazine clippings.

A fifth research technique, <u>sociometry</u>, can be incorporated into the

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methods described above or used on its own. The word itself is a barbarism

which refers to the charting of relationships between people based on data

gathered from those people and/or from external sources. Our interest in it

stems from the simple observation that actual human relationships generally

have more to do with the way things work than do organization charts or formal

statements of authority. Sociometry is used in analyses of community power:

"who knows whom" may be more important in the distribution of power than the

popular votes cast for mayor.

The mass media, especially the social pages, are a source of information

which can be treated sociometrically. On this level sociometry is little more

than a sophisticated version of the old gossip column teasers. But simple

information of this sort may help explain public and private decisions which

are otherwise incomprehensible.

Sociometric analysis can also employ data from interviews. By asking

questions on who people relate to--as authorities, as friends, as enemies,

etc., we can eventually construct a pictorial web of relationships which may

go far toward explaining why certain things happen the way they do.

A sixth type of research utilizes various public and quasi-public

records. For example, every jurisdiction issues an annual report and state-

ment of budget. There are a variety of legislative documents; e.g., the

massive Congressional Record. There are county codes, transcripts of hearing,

birth, death and marriage records. The list is long and complex. The trick

is to become familiar with agencies and people whose business it is to know

what records are available.

Perhaps the main-limitation on the use of public records is the

researcher's imagination. Most of us would not be particularly interested

in the fact that reports are available on the revenue derived from downtown

parking meters. But one researcher used such information to measure the impact of a strike on downtown shopping, a study which could have profound action implications. Less profound but still basic was a study which correlated changes in a city's water pressure with the timing of events on TV. In Chicago a 1963 study showed that at the end of that year's tense Rose Bowl game, the water pressure plummeted precipitously.

A seventh research technique is called <u>content analysis</u> and is particularly useful in the study of mass media. Here the researcher analyzes the content of news stories, for example, with some predetermined hypothesis. The researcher may be interested in how a suburban paper differs from a city paper in its treatment of a given issue. He or she might make a rough assessment and let it go at that. But using content analysis, she or he might count the numbers and kinds of adjectives used in stories about this issue in the two papers. The ability to demonstrate that paper "X" uses more negative adjectives than paper "Y" helps build a more solid case than simple generalizations.

A researcher once did a piece of content analysis to determine the validity of former Vice President Agnew's accusations of biased news coverage. In analyzing the commentary after a major Presidential address on Vietnam, the researcher concluded that the bulk of the commentary was neutral, and that of the remainder the favorable somewhat outweighed the unfavorable. This kind of careful analysis can sometimes advance a debate further than another round of rhetoric.

An eighth and final research technique has been labelled <u>unobtrusive measures</u>. Sometimes we need to study problems in which the "intrusions" of the researcher makes the problem impossible to study. For example, suppose we want to discover the extent of drinking in a town which has officially

"gone dry." Clearly, we are not likely to get much from door-to-door inter-
views: people will be reluctant to say anything except that they follow the
law. In the face of such difficulty one researcher invented an imaginative
unobtrusive measure. He went up and down alleys counting the number of
discarded liquor bottles. Messy, but it worked.

We have already mentioned some techniques which might be considered
"unobtrusive;" e.g., the use of public records. But it is worthwhile to
study this separate category of research techniques if for no other reason
than to remind us that imagination is critical to good research. Consider
the following. In Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, the rate at
which floor tiles around exhibits wear out is used as a measure of the relative
popularity of exhibits. Library withdrawals (quantity and kind) have been
used to measure the impact of TV on a community. The size of fictional
families in popular magazines has been used to track changes in conceptions
of the "ideal family" through American history. With imagination one will
find a wide variety of research applications in the materials and experience
of everyday life.

ORGANIZING A PROGRAM OF ACTION-RESEARCH

In our experience, we have found action-research useful in at least
three kinds of organizational settings. The first situation is one in which
you try to create something from nothing. You and a few others know that a
problem exists. But there is no existing organization to deal with it--or
the groups working on it are doing a poor job.

We tackled a situation like this using the tools of action-research.
Here, the goal was to create a spin-off group from a number of churches in
the community. This groups was to research the need for community organiza-

tion, involving enough parishioners to create a core of competent and supportive laymen.

Action-research proved to be a more than adequate "come-on" to get a group of people committed to a project whose boundaries were very fuzzy, and which might uncover some very grave facts. We tried to counter the vagueness by putting a strict time limit on the commitment: the group was to meet weekly for no longer than four months. By using the stages of action-research (spelled out in Stage III), we were able to schedule that time in a reassuring way, though the substance and outcomes of the process remained as undefined as ever.

A second situation is even more familiar to us in our experiments with action-research. Here, a small ad hoc group with a common concern had been meeting for some weeks. They defined and redefined their concern; they shared anecdotes about how the problem affected their lives; their feeling of inadequacy grew proportionally to their sense of the magnitude of the problem.

We have encountered several such groups in a state of frustration. One critical variable is the length of time a group flounders in frustration. It is possible for a group to reach a point where they cannot disband but have no energy for a new departure. But assuming the group is not at that point, action-research can rescue it by spelling out some clear and simple steps toward analyzing and specifying the problem.

Finally there is the standing, well-organized association whose normal mode of operation does not seem adequate to a new challenge. An organization always develops a style which reflects its ideology. The demand to adopt a new style may seem to challenge the underlying philosophy. But action-research reflects the common norms of efficiency and rationality, and is

seldom perceived as a threat by organizations (even if they should be
threatened!).

Another dimension to a good program of action-research is letting
others "buy into" the process begun by the core group. Only in this way
does action-research result in political support and momentum. The best
action-research designs are those with room for involvement of large num-
bers of people. The use of survey research, where many people are needed
to interview, is preferable to a design which depends on the contributions
of a handful. Given a good design by the action-research steering committee,
several hundred interviewers can be gathered, instructed, and set loose to
complete a door-to-door survey in a single day. In this way a broad base
of involvement, concern, and first-hand exposure to the problem is built.

One of the groups we worked with doing a before-and-after study of
the impact of a single semester on students at the high school divided its
labor in the following way:

1. Co-chairmen of the Steering Committee. Will coordinate tasks
    and chair meetings. Will depend heavily on other areas of work.

2. Public Relations Chairman. Will have heaviest responsibility at
    times of community hearings (to develop issues and gain visibility)
    and for research reports (in public forums). Continuous respon-
    sibility for dealing with local news media, publicity for commu-
    nity events, and regular newsletter to a mailing list of
    interested people.

3. Five Worker Recruiters. Will recruit one hundred interviewers
    from community groups, churches, and from searches for unaffiliated
    people. Will hold living-room "brainstorming" sessions with these
    recruits to develop ideas for questionnaire (thus giving inter-

viewers a sense of involvement in the final questionnaire).

4. Events Manager. Will schedule and coordinate community events, secure speakers, arrange meeting places, etc. Will develop morale-building events for workers (e.g., showing of films).

5. Four Questionnaire-Preparation and Field Interviewer Supervisors. Will work with Worker Recruiters at living-room "brainstorming" sessions; then work with consultant to put the questionnaire together in a technically valid form. Will get lists of names from the school, draw random samples, and make interview assignments. Will set up training sessions for interviewers, supervise interviewing process, and be available for problems that arise during the course of interviews.

6. Two Data Analysis Supervisors. Will receive completed questionnaires, collate and do basic correlations, put data in form for presentation in newsletter, community forums, etc.

This division of labor was accompanied by a schedule with dates and times for task completion, and an overall outline showing how each task related to the others and to the goal. With this clear and concise organizational format, the group was able to execute a major project whose impact continues to be felt long after the compilation of the data. The group has incorporated as a permanent non-profit community organization and intends to use action-research as a basic approach to community problems in the future.

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