

Change Research Or Action Research:
A Promising Methodological Tool that Combines Applied Sociology with
Empirical Research in Organizations. *

By Judith Buber Agassi

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ABSTRACT

Change research-or action research-is a special kind of sociological activity, neither simply empirical research nor only social technology: it is the application of sociological theory to social practice. In change research social scientists attempt to advance sociological knowledge through planned social change projects, in which they participate as change agents.

Advantages of change research over other forms of empirical sociological research & over conventional applied sociology are delineated: they constitute genuine social experiments; they are not manipulative; the research objects are treated as learning and developing persons; their participation in the design of ameliorative & organizational change is recruited from the start; & the recording of the process permits critical evaluation of the outcomes & their practical and theoretical significance.

Change Research Or Action Research

Change Research -- or Action Research -- is a special kind of sociological activity. It is not simply empirical sociological research, neither is it only social technology, i.e., the application of sociological theory to social practice. In Change Research social scientists attempt to advance sociological knowledge through planned social change projects, in which they participate as change agents, though for some of its practitioners the success of the change is more important than its possible contribution to theory.

Most of empirical social research does not aim at changing social reality, and most of the practitioners of applied sociology have no possibility to use their experience in order to further sociological knowledge. Change research is part of applied sociology, yet its methods permit contributions to the growth of sociological theory, that are usually absent in the uncritical application of sociological or social-psychological theories by social workers, educators, personnel managers, therapists and consultants, whose job it is to deal with pressing social problems on a daily basis. These so-called semi-professionals are usually denied any chance of feeding-back their observations and their experience, in order to correct and improve those sociological theories, that are supposed to guide their work. The reasons for this blatant waste of experience and intelligence are complex. First, most of these practitioners of applied sociology have been taught a rather eclectic mixture of information and theories from sociology, as well as information and theories from other academic disciplines or technologies, such as social work, education, public administration, law, medicine, social psychology, psychotherapy, economics and business administration. Their training rarely prepares them to critically examine theories, and it rarely includes any research skills. Second, the denial of access to theory to the predominantly female rank and file practitioners is a common and entrenched feature of the hierarchical gender power structures of the so-called semi-professions. The formulation of theory, as well as that of policy, and the wielding of power in their respective professional organizations, have traditionally been considered prerogatives of the predominantly male upper ranks of most semi-professions (Etzioni, 1969).

A serious obstacle to the growth of sociological knowledge is the

widespread disappointment in, and objection to, empirical sociological research. The disappointment is often justified, especially in cases of superficial quantification or quantification for its own sake. In addition, the disappointment supports a philosophical objection to empirical sociological research. The objection rests on the claim that truth is inaccessible, so that there is no possibility of objectivity in the social sciences, so that there is no need to try to be objective.

This and other objections to empirical sociological research are often rooted in a fuzzy grand theory, worded in terminology employing fuzzy concepts. Being too fuzzy, the theory cannot be tested before it is reformulated in clearer language. The grand theory which is widespread today, divides society into two main interest groups or social classes, capitalists-imperialists and the rest, the exploited; this grand theory declares their interests to be in unsurmountable conflict. It is also taken as understood that only capitalists and institutions that defend their interests are capable of regularly employing sociological researchers for the purpose of performing surveys, experiments or even change projects. The grand theory suggests that the resultant research cannot be objective, and that the change it effects will most likely serve the interests of the class of the employers only, and it will probably go against the interests of the other class.

One should not, of course, confuse -- in the social sciences as well as elsewhere -- the distinction between the theoretical and the empirical with the distinction between the pure and the applied: the pure includes both theory and its empirical tests, and the applied involves both theories and empirical information:

Pure theory(Pure) empirical tests

Applied theory Applied empirical information.

Thus the holders of the grand theory in question are (mistaken but) consistent when they suggest that genuine, objective empirical tests of theories are unlikely to take place, while recognizing the possibility of applied sociology (which they deem usually biased). Their demand that sociological research should also be conducted by researchers not employed or funded by private business is reasonable. (They prefer research conducted under the aegis of working-class organizations, rather than neutral institutions, as they erroneously consider neutrality to be utterly impossible.) Their bias, however, is clearly in one direction: they favour empirical research as long as it agrees with their grand theory but not when it might possibly disagree with it. They are prejudiced against change research because it conflicts with their grand theory in the following ways:

Most change or action researchers to date have implicitly subscribed to the possibility of planned social amelioration, developing and applying new forms of social technology, forms that are objectively better suited to changing conditions, and that facilitate the adaptation of new physical technology to human needs. They imply the existence of an important area of common interests between social groups that may well have conflicting interests as well. Although recognizing the importance of protecting the autonomy of the researchers/practitioners, they implicitly assume the possibility of sufficiently unbiased applied sociology, as well as their empirical results serving as valid tests for relevant sociological theories.

Change research differs from traditional kinds of empirical research in several ways. There are minimum initial conditions for the success of any scientific change research project. Change researchers enter organizations

as consultants and researchers; they attempt a change process; they define the broader goals of their project; they fully inform all members of the organization that may be affected by the change project of the project's broader goals, and they seek their understanding and tentative consent.

Further conditions have turned out to be very important. Most change research projects to date were carried out in work organizations, in industry, in the service sector, or in merchant marines. Most of these organizations are open to outside influences--often conflicting ones-- from private employers' federations, from the political institutions that control public sector organizations, and from labor unions and union federations. These also have to be informed of the general goals of the project and, at least in the case of the unions that represent workers and employees of the organization, minimum conditions to which management and union representatives formally agree, have to be drawn up in advance.

Within any complex organization there exist different groups with divergent conditions and specific short-term interests; experience has taught, that it is essential for the success of change projects, that from each of these groups, at least some persons are sharing the basic values on which the goal of the change project is based, and are ready to serve on a central project committee.

In order to properly evaluate the outcomes of a project, relevant conditions and attitudes before its start must be surveyed; ideally, there should be additional surveys and measurements, not only at the point when the consultants terminate their involvement, but also at different stages of the project. Ideally these data should permit comparison with similar change projects, as well with comparable organizations with no planned change

program.

Can change research be considered as proper means for the testing of sociological theories? At least of the more limited theories of applied sociology and not of pure theories? One has to answer both questions in the affirmative: there exist already examples of change research that constitute tests, and even refutations of pure theories, that have already engendered reformulation of the refuted theories -- theories on conflict, on organizations, on the efficiency of the division of labor, on attitudes to work, on group dynamics and more. These refutations and reformulations are of great practical importance. The demarcation between pure and applied theories, anyway, is not exclusive: one and the same theory is often enough to be found both in pure and in applied science (any science), and the difference is often more a matter of concern than of ideas.

Experiments in the natural sciences are easier to perform in one respect: it is permissible to waste or manipulate experimental material in the natural sciences but not in the social sciences (or even in the life sciences). It may well be claimed that change research offers a better setting for genuine social experiments that do not violate ethical standards, than do most laboratory social-psychological or group dynamics experiments. Laboratory experiments are usually very different from those of change research: the tasks which subjects are asked to perform in most laboratory experiments are very different from the activities which the tested theory is intended to explain or predict. The change research experiments are more reliable than the laboratory experiments, as the artificiality of many laboratory situations may induce the subjects to behave in quite misleading ways.

In change research persons are studied in their usual, everyday setting. As it is considered necessary to inform all potentially affected individuals as fully as possible of the purpose of the changes, change research subjects are never viewed as passive recipients of stimuli; their possible responses, which may range from distrust and hostility to enthusiastic cooperation, form part of the research; these responses have to be fully recorded. Consequently, there is no fear of a "Hawthorne Effect". In the Hawthorne experiments workers' fluctuating and allegedly irrelevant short-term reactions to different changes introduced into their working conditions, were considered problematic and potentially misleading the researchers and spoiling the research results. The fear of the "Hawthorne Effect" is present only when subjects of research are kept in the dark, and are not supposed to be themselves changing and developing individuals.

So much for the minimal initial prerequisites and for the further conditions that have transpired in the development of change research techniques. In one advanced form of change research, in addition to full information and prior basic consent to the overall goals by all persons likely to be affected by the change process, change researchers seek their maximal participation in the design of the methods of change, and even of the specifics of the goals themselves -- up to and including the possible redefinition of these goals. Thus a great reservoir of human experience, imagination and energy can be tapped, the store of information can be greatly increased, and the quality of the social change can be improved.

Change research is much superior to most laboratory research in that it addresses genuine social problem-situations. There are several additional methodological advantages to change research over other forms of empirical

sociological research. Change researchers share in the advantage of participative observers of being able to become well acquainted with the organizational "culture", without having to hide their professional identity (as was demanded of the classical anthropologist in the field). They are not committed to studying either attitudes or behaviour exclusively, or to using either quantitative or qualitative methods exclusively, but can improvise in accordance with what is needed. They can honestly tell their interviewees that their answers will result not just in another internal report or academic paper, but in immediate attention to their problems.

This does not mean that all change or action researchers have always used all these advantages fully. Some considered that by neglecting empirical research activities, they would be able to concentrate their time and energy on advancing the organizational change process. Some considered all attitude studies a waste of time or even a fraud, judging on the basis of so many shoddy work satisfaction and instrumental attitude studies.

There are many problems concerning the autonomy of the change research "practitioners". In any organization, whether private or public, change projects have to be authorized by management, and the time the outside consultants/researchers are permitted to spend within the organization will be limited. Usually management initially defines the problems most needing attention. Management has to be sufficiently interested to cover at least a considerable part of the expense of the project, but the project should nevertheless not be "owned" by management, especially where analysis, evaluation, publication, and diffusion of information are concerned. It is therefore most desirable for practitioners to have an independent power-base in the form of a research institute,

organization, or academic department. To that end departments of sociology and research institutes should be committed to the idea of change research as a legitimate sociological activity; graduate students should be encouraged to participate in change research teams as part of their training, and to plan their dissertation projects within this field.

Is change research necessarily limited to work organizations only? Certainly the overwhelming majority of change or action research projects to-date have been performed in work organizations. Nevertheless it has been successfully applied also in hospitals, in schools, in municipal government, and even in entire small-town communities hit by the decline of manufacturing industries, where boundaries were considerably less distinct, and problems more varied. Its concentration on the organizational reform of work organizations, and especially of industrial firms, is explicable by its history. The origins of change research were in the socio-technical systems-analysis school which developed in the Tavistock Institute of London in the immediate post-World War II period. It further developed in the sixties and seventies within the Scandinavian Industrial Democracy movement and in the seventies and eighties within the international Quality of Working Life network.

The potential range of use of sociological change research is very wide. It could well be used in a variety of organizations, groups of organizations, and even in small and medium sized communities or neighbourhoods; the range of problems that could be tackled by organizational change is also very wide. Much has still to be done to improve the measuring, recording and diffusion methods of change practitioners, to improve the chances for analysis, evaluation and

comparison for themselves and for others. This would greatly improve the research value of change research for sociology; it would also greatly facilitate the successful application and adaptation of the achievements of one project to other settings.

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