Action research as a methodology for theory development

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English
The aim of this article is to provide some insight into ways in which action research can contribute to the development of theory about the process of health care delivery. It focuses on a variety of action research that is a methodology for carrying out research into management and organisations, which can lead to deep conceptualisations about what can happen in practice and the reasons for this. The article aims to highlight the considerations that influence the recording of data; raise some issues about the nature of action research intervention settings and their implications for theory building; provide an example method for deriving emergent theory from the data collected; and provide an example of the type of theory that can be generated.

Français
Cet article se propose de donner un aperçu de quelles façons la recherche dans l’action peut contribuer au développement de la théorie du processus de livraison de services médicaux. Il cible une recherche d’action spécifique qui est une méthodologie pour effectuer une recherche au niveau gestion et organisations, qui peut mener à une conceptualisation en profondeur de ce qui peut arriver en pratique et des raisons qui y mènent. Cet article cherche à mettre en lumière les considérations qui influencent l’enregistrement de données. Il pose certaines questions quant à la nature des cadres d’intervention de la recherche d’action et leurs implications dans l’élaboration de théories. Il offre un exemple de méthode pour dériver une théorie émergeante à partir des données recueillies. Il fournit un exemple du type de théorie qui peut être généré.

Español
El objetivo de este artículo es el de ofrecer alguna percepción en vías en las que la acción de investigación pueda contribuir al desarrollo de teorías sobre el proceso de entrega de la asistencia médica. Se centra en una variedad de la acción de investigación que es una metodología para llevar a cabo investigación de dirección y organizaciones, que puedan conducir a profundas conceptualizaciones sobre lo que pueda pasar en la práctica y las razones por esto. El artículo tiene como objetivo el destacar las consideraciones que influencian la grabación de datos; plantear algunos temas sobre la naturaleza de los marcos de intervención de la acción de investigación y sus implicaciones en la construcción de teorías; ofrecer un método como ejemplo para obtener teoría emergente de los datos recogidos; ofrecer un ejemplo de los tipos de teorías que se puedan generar.

Key words: action research • research methods • phenomenology • energy efficient
Introduction

The aim of this article is to provide some insight into ways in which action research can contribute to the development of theory about the process of health care delivery. The origins of action research are generally attributed to Kurt Lewin who argued that research for social practice should be concerned with the study of general laws and the ‘diagnosis’ of a specific situation (Lewin, 1946, 1947). Its long history of use in clinical and social applied research relating to health care has been well summarised by Hart and Bond (1995). Many forms of action research have been used in the context of health care (see, for example, Winter and Munn Goddings, 2001), so it is important to begin by saying what is meant by the term here. For readers who have encountered action research before, I emphasise that I am not concerned here with varieties that are principally forms of self-development or organisational development such as those propounded by Whyte (1991), Elden and Chisholm (1993), Stringer (1996) and Reason and Bradbury (2000). The promotion of ideological positions about participation and empowerment that is intrinsic to many of the latter approaches is also not an essential aspect of the approach to be described.

The focus instead is on a variety of action research that has been explicated in some detail by Eden and Huxham (1996). It is a methodology for carrying out research into management and organisations. While some such forms of action research stress explicit setting and testing of hypotheses (Alderfer, 1993), the Eden and Huxham approach is firmly set within the phenomenological paradigm. As, for example, with ethnographic research, this form of action research derives theoretical insights from naturally occurring data rather than through interviews or questionnaires (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). Its distinctive feature as a research methodology is its requirement that the researcher actually intervenes in the organisations studied, working with organisational members on matters of genuine concern to them. In these circumstances, rich data can be collected about what people do and say – and what theories are used and usable – when they are faced with a genuine need to take action. The data are ‘timely’ in the sense that they are collected at the point of happening, rather than through post hoc recollection and rationalisation. Such data have the potential to provide both new and unexpected insights, so theory development processes are inductive – leading to emergent theory (Eisenhardt, 1989) – in order to encourage this.

Action research can complement other approaches to understanding health delivery. It is particularly appropriate for investigating issues of process because it can lead to deep conceptualisations about what can happen in practice and the reasons for this. It is well placed in its potential for developing theory that will be of relevance to practice because each intervention provides an opportunity for the researcher to revisit theory in order to design the intervention, and to develop it further as a result (Diesing, 1972).

Ensuring research rigour when intervention settings form the research sites involves paying serious attention to “… systematic method and orderliness … in reflecting about, and holding onto, the research data” (Eden and Huxham, 1996: 534). This implies that the researcher must be clear about the nature of the intervention, the ways in which data are collected and the processes through which the resulting theory is developed. This article uses a case study to explore and illustrate some aspects of rigorous action research.

The case concerns a research project about leadership in partnership settings. I will discuss the research context in which the project was set, the intervention settings in which data were collected, the theory development process and (in brief summary) the theory that resulted, bringing in commentary about action research on the way. The purpose of this article is methodological so it is the process of action research in the case, rather than the content of the research, that is the intended focus. The case is described from this perspective, emphasising intervention and research considerations, particularly as they relate to issues of rigour. The research output from this has already been published (Huxham and Vangen, 2000) and it is not the purpose of this article to discuss that in any detail beyond that which is helpful for explanation and illustration of the methodological points.
Since we shall be journeying only through a single project, we shall be highlighting a particular instance of action research. The way action research is carried out is contingent upon the research aims, the intervention contexts and the researcher’s intervention style and analytical preferences. The methodology, as well as the theoretical output, is almost always emergent because the researcher cannot know in advance what intervention opportunities will arise, or what past interventions may suddenly seem relevant for re-review. In addition, the researcher cannot know in advance exactly what analysis process will be used, because the development of emergent theory requires the researcher to ‘play’ with and ‘massage’ the data, sometimes in many different ways over prolonged periods of time in order to “reframe (the data) into something new” (Thomas, 1993: 43). Nevertheless, by looking in some detail at one project I aim to highlight possibilities and issues that are relevant to other situations.

**Case study: researching leadership in partnership**

**Background and methodological considerations**

The ‘leadership in partnership project’ has been carried out jointly with my colleague, Siv Vangen. Further developments of the theory have been created (Vangen and Huxham, 2003), but the aspects of it described here were a first phase of the project. The context of the project was significant to the way the process of action research was carried out in this case, so a brief overview is given here.

The project forms an element of a programme of research that has so far spanned more than 12 years, which aims to develop practice-oriented theory about convening, designing, managing, participating in and facilitating collaboration between organisations. The object is to create theory that will be of value to practitioners (Huxham and Vangen, 2001) as well as meeting the criteria for rigorous research (Eden and Huxham, 1996). Our work on leadership was unusual for us in that it did not arise out of our own research agenda, generated by our previous understanding of collaborative partnerships, but was stimulated by colleagues in the policy analysis field whose perspective led them to argue for its importance in informing policy makers.

The imposed nature of this topic landed us with a dilemma that can often arise in action research: it was unclear how we would recognise the subject we were studying. Action research of this sort demands that the theory is derived emergently from the data (Eden and Huxham, 1996). This means that, so far as is reasonable, predefined conceptualisations should not be used to guide data collection. So far as is practical, the aim is to suppress pre-understanding (Gummesson, 1991) in order to promote the emergence of new and creative insights. Our previous research indicated that practitioners rarely refer explicitly to leadership, so deciding how we would recognise it during an intervention became a major methodological issue. It clearly was not feasible to collect data in a way that was totally consistent with the ‘emergent’ philosophy. We needed some ‘rules’ to help us identify data on leadership among the mass of potentially collectable data. However, in the spirit of the action research philosophy, we felt it important that the methodology should open up – rather than close down – possible theoretical perspectives, so we could not be guided by a single predefined framework.

Although action research emphasises an open attitude to data collection and theory building, there is clearly a tension to address when researching an area where there is extensive pre-existing theory. On the one hand, too much reliance on predefined theory can act to blinker researchers, inhibiting their ability to think or see beyond the theory. On the other hand, predefined theory can be an eye opener, directing attention to aspects of a situation that might otherwise be missed. It is therefore important to create an appropriate balance between using such theory and suppressing it.

In this case, we were clear from the start that the theoretical understanding of the demands of collaborative environments captured in our previous research would be central in directing our attention to aspects of the situations that appeared to lead the partnership forward. However, in order to increase the chances that we would not miss other possibilities, we tried to broaden our perspective through conversations with oth-
er researchers from a range of backgrounds about what leadership in partnership might mean. We also made a deliberately cursory review of an assortment of apparently relevant literature with the aim of using the variety among the theoretical perspectives as a trigger for data collection. This included the mainstream theories of leadership (Brymen, 1996) emphasising leadership traits, styles and so on; research on leadership in collaborative settings emphasising leadership tasks, skills and behaviours (eg Bryson and Crosby, 1992; Feyerherm, 1994); and references to leadership in research on collaboration.

The methodology that we eventually used was the result of much discussion between ourselves and with other researchers. In order to maintain the desired open theoretical perspective, we decided that we would record anything that we observed or heard during action research interventions that might be argued to have something to do with ‘leadership’. At the data collection stage it would not be essential that the argument could be sustained; it was important only to ensure that possibilities were recorded.

**Data sources and data gathering**

In contrast to those forms of action research that are concerned with individual and self-development, this kind of action research is not restricted to a single intervention setting. It can be helpful to locate theory generation in multiple settings, since this both broadens the possibilities for data collection and makes it easier to draw out the generic significance of the output.

Action research does not specify the amount of time that minimally or maximally must be spent with practitioners in order for an intervention to generate legitimate research data. Data from both short- and long-term interventions have value. However, while data from long-term interventions may be used in isolation to generate theory, data from short-term ones must necessarily be used in combination with other data as a contribution to theory building. Each intervention adds new slants or insights to the developing theory.

However, a characteristic of using action research in the context of public sector settings is that, if carried out over prolonged periods, the intervention settings often interrelate. We have rarely actively sought out interventions and have, instead, generally reacted to opportunities, often in the form of requests from practitioners. Consequently, we have found ourselves enmeshed in a web of collaborative settings and are often surprised to discover ‘small world’ links between one and another. Individual practitioners often reappear in new settings, bringing with them their history from the previous ones.

This means that data collected in previous settings may provide important context for interpretation of later events or comments. It often also means that data collected in later settings can provide confirmations about, or new insights into, the interpretation of data collected on earlier occasions. For example, the role an individual or organisation plays in a later partnership may help to explain their role in an earlier one, or vice versa. While such data may arise out of the formal aspects of the intervention, chance comments made by people reflecting with hindsight on their earlier involvements with us are also often very enlightening. In action research, important data often come when least expected, so the researcher has to be continually alert to ensure that they are recorded and integrated into the theory development process. Over years, the theoretical insights generated gradually become refined and enriched and confidence in their robustness and their range of applicability increases. This mode of operation thus has some characteristics of longitudinal research (Pettigrew, 1990), even though individual research settings may be short term.

The means of actually collecting the data within these many settings is usually a matter of choice. In some respects, the ideal situation is when an intervention tool can double as a means of recording data. For example, computer-stored cause maps that capture the varied views and perspectives of the practitioners involved can be used as a facilitation tool in strategic thinking workshops (Eden and Ackermann, 1998). These provide a rich data source, already captured in a form that is amenable to analysis. However, only certain types of data can be captured in this way, and research aims often demand the recording of additional data. There are many options available to the action researcher, ranging from overt methods such as video recording or supplementary interviews through to discrete note taking.
The choice of data collection design clearly has implications for the interpretation of the results; this has been discussed in detail elsewhere (Huxham and Vangen, 1998).

The interventions that informed the leadership in partnership project were extremely varied in all of the above respects. Four interrelated partnerships, each concerned in some way with health promotion, were central data sources for the project. Data from work with a number of other partnerships were used to support and enrich this. These included a European Commission-funded partnership of three environmental organisations, a rural regeneration partnership and a small town community regeneration partnership within the area covered by the rural partnership in which health participants acted as partners, as well as a miscellany of work with individuals concerned with promoting partnership activity. Each provided additional insights.

By way of example, one of these will be briefly described here. The longest intervention was with a city-based health promotion partnership that was recognised by the World Health Organisation. Our introduction into this partnership was through one of the policy analysis colleagues who had connections with it through previous work and, unusually for us, the legitimacy for entry was founded on the basis of the funding for the research. The partnership manager appeared to see potential value in linking up with us as experts in partnership practice.

The main chunk of data that was used from this partnership was derived from work with a project concerned with developing and running a series of workshops for representatives from the partnership’s working groups. Our intervention consisted of several planning meetings with the partnership manager and the partnership administrator, the one workshop that was actually held and some follow-up meetings. One of us chaired the workshop and we both acted as facilitators during a small-group session. The main data scanned during subsequent analysis were notes that we made during and after the meetings and the workshop, including some that were part process of designing the workshop, some that were commentary (for research purposes) on what was happening and some that were direct quotations from the practitioners. Other forms of data used included the formal partnership documentation such as a development plan, the flip chart notes created by participants at the workshop and the follow-up report produced by the partnership administrator.

There were subsequent discussions about other possible lines of work in which we might be involved and notes of these were also made. One of the authors was invited to become a member of one of the management committees of the partnership and so the committee paperwork as well as notes made during the meetings and phone calls and other interactions in connection with the partnership business were also available as data, although most of this occurred after the analysis referred to in this article had taken place.

**From intervention to conceptualisation**

Finding a way to turn the data collected into theoretical conceptualisation is probably the most challenging aspect of action research and, as was mentioned earlier, there can be no predefined methodology for doing this. Writing in the context of critical ethnography, Thomas richly captures the essence of the challenge:

Interpretation of data is the defamiliarization process in which we revise what we have seen and translate it into something new, distancing ourselves from the taken-for-granted aspect of what we see … We take the collection of observations, anecdotes, impressions, documents and other symbolic representations that seem depressingly mundane and common and reframe them into something new. (1993: 43)

In the leadership in partnership project, analysing the data captured involved us in extensive discussions concerned with sense making, data massaging and finding representations and linkages. Clearly, there are benefits in having more than one researcher involved in an action research project since this allows this process of ‘playing’ with the data to be more creative, more rigorous and more fun.

With hindsight, we were able to identify several stages that the analysis had passed through.
The specifics of these have been described in detail in Huxham and Vangen (2000). Here we provide an overview of the stages in order to give an indication of one approach to theory building.

First, we each independently reviewed the recorded data from the health promotion partnerships, identifying any items for which it was now felt that a sustainable argument could be made for relevance to leadership. As before, this process was partially informed by – but not limited by – the range of perspectives on what leadership could mean that was discussed earlier. Some data items, such as “how can members be mobilised to contribute actively to the collaboration?”, or “Jane’s creation of a health framework as a basis (in the first instance) for getting partners to get started”, were direct quotations or descriptions of what happened during an intervention. Others, such as “design/use documents/frameworks as effective leadership tools” or “what processes can be designed that will help representatives to bring in the resources of their organisation?” were interpretations or generalisations drawn from the specific examples.

The second stage then involved lengthy negotiations between ourselves about whether and how each data item should be included in the analysis. These debates – which were essential to ensuring ‘theoretical sensitivity’ (Glaser, 1992; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) – involved clarification of:

- the meaning of the item;
- the wording of the description of the original comments, actions or events and the reasons why these could be interpreted as relevant to leadership; and
- the linkages between each new data item and those previously accepted.

Gradually clusters of data and interpretations began to emerge. We also added in concepts deriving from the literature. On this occasion we used the mapping software, Decision Explorer, which is designed to assist with the analysis of qualitative data, to store and organise the data clusters (Banxia, 1996; Eden and Ackermann, 1998). Decision Explorer is a convenient tool because it allows large volumes of data to be handled flexibly. However, any means of recording data in a way that allows it to be ‘played with’ can be used. On other occasions, for example, we have recorded data items on post-it notes.

As we built each cluster, one of the interpretation concepts was chosen through further discussion and negotiation, as its designated label. These labels are similar to the axial codes of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Both the cluster boundaries and the labels sometimes changed as further data were considered.

The third stage of the analysis – which was similar in purpose, although not in form, to the ‘selective coding’ of grounded theory – involved reviewing the clusters and the linkages between them, with a view to creating a conceptual framework. As with stages 1 and 2, we first carried out individual reviews that were then discussed and debated. At this stage some clusters were excluded on the grounds that they contained too little data. Others, which had been subdivided because they contained too much data to handle in one cluster, were considered jointly from the point of view of the framework. One cluster was reluctantly excluded on the grounds that space constraints in the article we were writing precluded its inclusion at this stage. Five clusters eventually formed the basis of the framework. These were labelled ‘leadership processes’, ‘leadership structures’, ‘the leader’, ‘leadership tasks’ and ‘shaping the partnership’s agenda’.

The fourth stage involved reviewing data collected in the other interventions mentioned earlier, taking the emerging framework as an additional – and important – guide to interpreting its relevance to leadership. This helped to put additional flesh on the framework and provided a loose test of its robustness in the light of other partnerships than those around which it had been created. The process did not preclude the possibility of new clusters emerging. That none did at this stage, confirmed the solidification of the clusters (Marshall and Rossman, 1989).

Finally, in order to build the clusters into a coherent framework – stage 5 – we drafted and redrafted the theoretical arguments, circulating these for comment, presenting the arguments in academic conferences and using them with practitioners in further action research interventions.
The cluster concerned with ‘shaping the partnership’s agenda’ eventually became the backdrop for the whole framework. The clusters on ‘leadership processes’, ‘leadership structures’ and ‘the leader’ were drawn together and conceptualised as ‘leadership media’. We eventually decided that the label ‘leadership activities’ would better represent the issues captured in the final cluster than its original label of ‘leadership tasks’.

The theoretical arguments that were eventually presented in the leadership article (Huxham and Vangen, 2000) were thus subjected to wide-ranging scrutiny and refined accordingly. Nevertheless, we view them as an interim statement in a developing story.

The emerging conceptual framework

Readers who are interested in the theoretical outcomes of the leadership in partnership project must refer to that article. However, it seems worth summarising here the main thrusts of the conceptualisation in order to give an indication of the type of theory that can emerge from action research and a sense of why, in the case, the theory emerged in this way.

At the start of the project we had no expectations for the kind of output that we would produce. Nevertheless, the perspective on leadership that emerged from the above processes surprised us. In generic terms, the emergent theory could be considered to have five elements.

The first theoretical element is definitional; a delineation of the phenomenon under study (in this case, of leadership in partnership) defining the perspective of the theory. In this case, although we had deliberately sought data that would bring as many perspectives as possible onto the notion of ‘leadership’ in collaborative settings, it is clear with hindsight that it was our focus on the development of practice-orientated theory that led us to concentrate on a conception of leadership as being connected with ‘making things happen’ in the partnership. In formal terms, we defined this perspective as being concerned with the mechanisms that lead a partnership’s policy and activity agenda in one direction rather than another. These definitional statements critically influenced the way in which the other elements emerged.

The second theoretical element is conceptual: a framework and some concepts to describe the phenomenon under study. In this case a conceptual framework with two separately identifiable parts emerged. Our data demonstrated clearly that much of what does happen in partnerships is influenced by factors other than just the participants in the system. We were thus led to a conceptualisation of collaborative leadership that viewed it as being not only enacted by key participants, but also by the structures and communication processes embedded within the partnership. The first part of the conceptual framework therefore identified three leadership ‘media’, structures, processes and participants. The data also demonstrated that three media are often, to a large extent, outside the immediate conscious control of the members of the partnership. Together, the three leadership media were grouped as contextual leadership, affecting the outcomes of individual leadership initiatives. The second part of the framework focused on the latter. The data showed individuals becoming involved in informal leadership activities that are intended to take the partnership forward.

The third theoretical element is elaborating; an expansion of the detail underlying the conceptual framework. In the case of the second part of the framework, just three categories of activity were explored as exemplars in the original paper: managing power and controlling the agenda, representing and mobilising member organisations and enthusing and empowering those who can deliver partnership aims (although our later work focused on further data scanning to uncover and elaborate on more of these; Vangen and Huxham, 2003). In each example, the issues underlying, and different perspectives on, the activity were explored and described and examples were identified of ways in which individuals had tried to address the leadership challenges.

The fourth element is concluding; drawing generalities from the detail. In the case, a general conclusion that emerged from the exploration of individuals’ attempts to lead a partnership forward was that, while their activities clearly affect the outcomes from the partnership, they
are frequently thwarted by dilemmas and difficulties so that the outcomes are not as they intend. Wherever the data showed ‘leaders’ achieving the outcomes they wished for, it also showed them devoting very significant personal attention to championing the cause. This highlighted the paradox that the single-mindedness of ‘leaders’ appears to be central to collaborative success.

The fifth theoretical element was practical; highlighting the way in which the theory might provide handles to practitioners. In this case, at the most general level, the practical implication that we drew from the conceptualisation is that leading any one of the ‘leadership activities’ through to completion requires a very large amount of resource in the form of energy, commitment, skill and continual nurturing on the part of the ‘leader’. Leading across the full range of activities and processual concerns that need to be addressed to drive forward a partnership holistically is thus likely to require high resource levels. This general conclusion was consistent with conclusions from other aspects of our research programme on partnership. However, this conceptualisation highlighted a new range of generic activities that participants in partnerships find themselves grappling with, and clarified further the nature of the practical constraints that limit the potential to conclude them successfully.

These five theoretical elements – definitional, conceptual, elaborating, concluding and practical – were specific to this particular research and would not necessarily emerge in quite the same way in other contexts even if a similar analysis method were used. However, they do highlight some of the possible types of theoretical output.

**Concluding comments**

The aim of this article was to use the leadership in partnership project as a case study to demonstrate how action research can generate theory that can highlight the practical issues facing individuals who have to implement policy drives on the ground. In describing the case, I have aimed to:

- highlight the kinds of considerations that influence the recording of data;
- raise some issues about the nature of action research intervention settings and their implications for theory building;
- provide an example of a method for deriving emergent theory from the data collected; and
- provide an example of the kind of theory that can be generated.

Action research could not replace other forms of health research, but can usefully complement it, providing new insights that can contribute to a holistic overall picture. Obviously the data collected in action research are serendipitous to the extent that they can only be collected where interventions take place; what is possible is generally bounded by the needs of the intervention rather than needs of research, so other forms of theory development will always be needed to tackle aspects of the wider picture that are not researchable in this way.

The strength of this kind of action research, however, is that data collected in these intervention circumstances lead to generation of descriptive theory that captures the experienced world. Because the researcher is immersed in the intervention situations, it often happens that data are collected that the participants themselves are unaware of or have not objectified (Berger and Luckmann, 1967), or that the researchers have not actively sought. In this respect the approach is close to ethnography (Tedlock, 2000), although because the researcher is involved in the action, it is also possible to get insight about the relationship between intention and outcome.

For this reason, therefore, the insights produced have the chance of being closer to genuine experiences than to policy rhetoric or to the espoused, post hoc and rationalised explanations (Argyris and Schon, 1974), which practitioners might give in an interview. As Alvesson (2003: forthcoming) carefully argues, interviews are influenced by social, cognitive, identity, cultural, self-esteem, motivational, representational and discourse issues, which affect the data given by the interviewee and the way it is interpreted by the researcher.

In the leadership in partnership project, for example, it is unlikely that those involved in the partnerships we worked with would have conceptualised the effect that imposed structures
were having on them, or articulated the extent to which their endeavours to move the partnership forward were being thwarted by factors inherent in the partnership situation. Clearly they might in an interview situation, in principle, have articulated experiences that would have led to the kind of theory that we developed, but since we had no expectation of arriving at this theory, it is hard to imagine how we could have set up the interview in a way that would have drawn out the particular insights that informed it. It is therefore less likely that these aspects, that are so central to the theory developed, would have emerged from interview-based research.

In addition, although the concepts may not have been acknowledged in advance, because the theory derives so closely from practice it can be encapsulated in a way that is instantly recognisable to practitioners, even though they have not been part of the researched situation. In this respect, the theory produced may be in contrast to theories that are couched in more abstract terms or which are formed through a priori reasoning. Although the aim is to produce theory that can influence practice, descriptive theory of this sort does not directly prescribe courses of action. Instead, it can provide practitioners with a means to make sense of their situations and a platform from which to make considered choices about action. It has clear potential for informing policy decisions.

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Notes

1 This article was published in a special edition of the Academy of Management Journal dedicated to Managing in the New Millennium. It subsequently received the award for the best article published in the year 2000 from the Public and Non Profit Division of the Academy of Management.

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