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A quandary in management practice: academic research or consulting?

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Abstract: This paper compares the practice of academic action research against management consulting. Consulting is founded upon a body of underpinning knowledge drawn from a different perspective than action research. Nevertheless, consulting and action research, in practice, draw from similar methods of investigation. The difficulty in distinguishing action research from consulting adds to unique ethical problems in practice. In this paper, an ethics quandary is identified, defined and explored with implications for research practice. An example of an action research project is presented to highlight the potential ethical dilemma and conflict of interest points of the investigation, whether as an academic or a consultant. The authors, by crystallising the boundaries of academic action research and consulting posit that, when designed and executed well, risk can be minimised to gather rich and deep insights into management practice.

Keywords: management; action research; consulting; qualitative; quantitative; quandary; phenomenology; ethnography.


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1 A better understanding of action research in the management discipline

The practice of management is manifest variously in organisational strategy and operations, management education, research projects, and in the field of management consulting. Research itself is founded upon epistemologies and ontologies that should ideally be matched with the management problems under investigation. Academic researchers and consultants are both able to put into practice similar research methods. Research into management generally aims towards a better understanding of management roles, functions and decisions. There are many possible qualitative and quantitative methods that could be selected to collect data. Action research is one method that very specifically aims for improvement, or the resolution of a particular problem. As part of their contribution to strategic knowledge, management consultants also aim to solve particular organisational problems and they may, indeed, elect to use an action research method, among any number of others (Coghlan, 2011). These various observations are not well explained in the literature and raise a legitimate question about whether there is any significant difference between action research and management consulting (Brown et al., 1988).

Previous studies (Bruyn, 1963; White et al., 1977; Gustavsen, 2003) conclude that action researchers can balance the pragmatic needs of clients with the professional needs of their academic communities. In another research (Kieser and Leiner, 2012), the opposite view has been posited that there is an unbridgeable gap between good academic research and the field of management practice, or consultancy. For instance, Brown et al. (1988, p.338) expressed concern about action researchers being labelled as ‘facilitators’ or ‘process consultants’. There have also been calls for a process-based reconceptualisation of the consulting profession (Hicks et al., 2009). There is, thus, a need for further analysis of the boundaries between action research and consulting for two reasons. First, because the increasing pace of change in the management of organisations (Nandita, 2013) requires pragmatic action research and consulting skills to stay relevant to markets, personnel and society. The second reason is due to the ongoing debate on the overlap and differences between the two areas, which seems to suggest an ethics quandary. This paper looks at different sides of the debate and questions whether there are distinctions in either theory or practice (or both) between action research and consulting.

Direct payment by an organisation for the research conducted into its activities can be classified as consulting. Pure academic researchers can feel uncomfortable with the possibility of bias suggested by alignment with the profit-seeking motive of consultancy (Eden and Huxham, 1996; Coghlan and Coghlan, 2002; Gregory et al., 2007). The design of an action research project, which is embedded within the phenomenological research paradigm (Anosike et al., 2012), has to carefully navigate the risks associated with researcher-vested interests. When a fee or a salary is sponsored by the same organisation...
that wants a positive return on investment from a research project, the potential for vested interests to sway the outcomes appears increased. It puts the onus back on research design and researchers to ensure avoidance of bias. Well-designed action research succeeds at navigating risk and contributes rich and deep insights into the management discipline (Bansal et al., 2012; Kamal, 2013). Well-designed consultancy, of course, also contributes new insights but suffers from a perception, at least, that direct payments for consultants in some way heighten the risk of bias in the reported results.

Action research has been described by McNiff and Whitehead (2006, p.7) as “a form of enquiry that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work”. Carr and Kemmis (1997, p.162) define action research as “a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out”. In action research, complexity, change and reflection coalesce (Davis, 2007). Lewin (1948) explains how the action research process involves identifying a general or initial idea, engaging in reconnaissance or fact finding, planning, taking a first action step, evaluating, amending the plan, and then spiralling upwards to take an adaptive second step.

Some advantages of action research in the management discipline include the richness of applied knowledge, practicality and helpfulness of the method enabling genuine improvements to professional practice, and the generation of innovation in processes and networks that can be of ongoing benefit to the organisation (Blichfeldt and Andersen, 2006; Eppinger and Vladova, 2013). Some disadvantages of action research in the management discipline are that it can be perceived as lacking objectivity, open to bias of results, too enmeshed with organisational politics, and impossible to repeat, verify or generalise in the classical scientific sense (Näslund et al., 2010; Bryman, 2012; Chevalier and Buckles, 2012).

From our view, consulting is a request by management for external evaluators to explore and identify organisational problems and/or identify potential improvement areas, and to generate practical solutions. In this sense, pure consulting involves the consultant paying heed to the aims of the organisation’s management (for a contractual fee) for identifying/solving particular problems. The consultant and the manager/s generally discuss and collaboratively agree upon the research problem, the resolution of which will benefit both parties. The resulting consulting brief outlines the chosen method for conducting the investigation. Action research is one possible method that could be deployed if the problem under investigation is so suited. Thorpe (cited in Somekh and Lewin, 2005) suggests action research starts with the imperative that change should occur as part of the emancipation from the organisational problem. In consulting, as in action research, a change management emphasis becomes central (Dick, 1999), because it is a method of solving a problem which naturally entails change. Whilst any well-designed research method that discovers something new may contribute towards change, only participatory action research puts the researcher in the midst of events and encourages subjective engagement as one of the means of helping to facilitate the change. Herein lies the main discomfort academics in the management discipline may feel whenever action research is being considered for a project (Saberwal, 2005; Mitra, 2010). It can be challenging for those with a pure science mindset to accept the role of a research procedure that immerses the researcher in the subject of study (Ulrich, 2006). Anthropologists may not have such concerns about it, and certainly not management
consultants (Mebratu and Ma, 2011). Nonetheless, in the quest for quality research in the management discipline, the roots of the doubt that action research as a method can improve rather than exacerbate a research problem are embedded in the translation of research theory into practice and benefits from further clarification. The next section explains conceptual and applied distinctions between academic research and consulting and details overlapping concerns, followed by an example of the application of an action research project within management education.

2 Academic research or consulting: conceptual factors

The focus of this paper regarding academic research is in the area of action research and how this overlaps in the consulting domain. In action research, the researcher (also called the participant observer) participates in a research process and interacts directly with the subjects of the observation while conducting and recording a conscious observation (Vidich, 1955; Bruyn, 1963). The process of a researcher interacting with research subjects is an acceptable part of research validity in some designs; otherwise, significant studies in the fields of anthropology and sociology could not have been undertaken (Babbie, 1995; Harrington, 2003). The richness of data gained from the researcher participating in social interaction is virtually unrivalled by other kinds of data gathering methods like surveys, experiments and literature reviews. When a researcher is intricately involved as part of the study, its effects and consequences, internal transformations of perception and understanding for the participating subjects and researchers naturally occur (Gill, 2012). When the participant observers in an action research project take those effects and analyse them, a powerful situational description and discourse ensues (Stephens, 2013).

Action research is a cyclical process and, as Heidegger and van Buren (1999) and Lewin (1946) remind us, unless the full hermeneutic process of interpreting participant observer experiences is properly completed, there remains a risk that the essential aim of improvement of understanding will not occur (Gallagher, 1992). As a result, there can be fallacies of interpretation (Omoyibo and Obaro, 2012). The onus is upon the investigator to properly analyse the data obtained through the methodology. Action research has the explicit aim of improving the situation, or emancipating people and systems from problems (Lewin, 1946). Central to the practice of action research is the role of participant observer (Gustavsen, 2003; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). The investigator, by adopting an observational role but also participating in the events that are being observed, is effectively part of the set of variables under investigation. In this context, objectivity extends only so far as the investigator is conscious of their own position in the field along with the consequences of their own interventions. Acknowledgement of bias is, therefore, pivotal and, in fact, encouraged in a way that a controlled experiment would not be able to entertain. The difficulty of addressing bias in this or any kind of applied research method is heightened when considering the uncertainty principle (Crotty, 1998; Anderson et al., 2012); that is, each observation a researcher makes, no matter how seemingly arms-length, is still an environment-changing event. The problems of the uncertainty principle are theoretically presented and have been the subject of other articles (Olmedo, 2012), explored in popular science fiction (Wells, 2004), and expounded in mainstream science press (von Baeyer, 2013).
A consultant in organisational settings, when adopting action research method, is a participant observer. Many consultants are paid to mingle with staff and managers and actively contribute to strategic or operational activities with the aim of assisting the organisation to achieve its objectives. On the other hand, consultants have the parallel aim of delivering results valuable enough to warrant payment in the commercial relationship. There is a modernist, commercial mindset that motivates a consultant in the beginning, even if subsequent actions and interest may lead to selection of action research method. Consultants have a full toolkit of methods at their disposal. For example, it is common to find management consultants conducting surveys and reporting statistical discoveries. Consultants can also be identified running change management programmes based upon models of constructionism or symbolic-interpretivism, and maybe even postmodernism (Zubizarreta, 2013). Thus, in order to distinguish the concept of consulting from that of academic action research, one needs to remember the underpinning theories of knowledge starting with the epistemologies (Cook and Brown, 1999; Burford et al., 2012). In essence we contend that action research has knowledge underpinnings that are conceptually different from the roots of consultancy. Since the role of a participant observer involves elements of both subjective (e.g. data immersion and interpretive analysis) and objective (e.g. positivist surveys and experiments to collect and analyse data) techniques, the first step is to distil the practice of action research and consultancy in comparison with their underlying constructs (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1** The conceptual positions of action research and consulting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action Research</th>
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<tr>
<td>In theory..</td>
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<td>interpretive of knowledge, subjective, borne of critical theory.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consulting</th>
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<tr>
<td>In theory..</td>
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<tr>
<td>controlling of knowledge, objective, borne of modernism.</td>
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**Forces affecting the ethics quandary:**
- Ethical codes and guidelines
- Research group culture
- Individual ethics
- Direct versus third party funding

*Source: Authors*
Figure 1 shows that action research and consulting are able to overlap in practice but the two derive from different theoretical bases. For instance, some of the larger action research projects in management have parallel seams of longitudinal data from which pseudo-positivist findings combine with other data to construct new knowledge (Kock et al., 1997; Azhar et al., 2010). Alternately, Anosike et al. (2012) point out that descriptive phenomenological research praxis (see Giorgi, 1994; Giorgi, 2006) can be utilised alongside quantitative investigations of management phenomena.

The ethics quandary is embedded in the field of practice and emerges where the need to earn money directly from an investigation becomes the main driving force. An ethical approach to research investigation by either an academic researcher or a consultant is determined in large part by the circumstances of the field of practice. Among the countervailing forces in the field of practice may be a code of ethics in relation to professional body status for the consultant or ethics protocols for academic researchers. Despite having a direct commercial relationship with their client, a member consultant, or any researcher, in principle, should not simply deliver a desired answer. The ideal requirement is to ensure investigators deliver, as far as possible, the truth. If this does not occur, the subsequent business decisions that are undertaken could result in financial (or other) loss, and possible compensation claims may be the outcome. The ethics quandary, of course, has pressures in the opposite direction. Commercially agreeable findings (which may not necessarily be the truth) can be of benefit to client organisations, individual contracting managers, and consultants at different levels. The ethics of the individual and the research organisation as a whole are key countervailing factors in such situations. For instance, universities normally have stringent research ethics committees and procedures to follow to ensure compliance, and individuals conducting research must proceed responsibly. Figure 2 indicates that the source and influence of the pay transactions for research or consulting are issues that may lead to biased results.

**Figure 2** Summary of transactional relationships in research projects

![Diagram showing transactional relationships in research projects](Source: Authors)

Figure 2 reveals the direct exchange of pay by the client organisation for the work completed by a consultant. Action research is one of the available tools that the client organisation pays a consultant to deploy. Pay is a less direct exchange when an independent researcher employed by a university conducts research into a third party client organisation. Sometimes in-kind funds or exchange of resources occurs. However, the guidelines of a research services department in a university more readily enable the researcher in that relationship to remain somewhat independent from the commercial pressures of the contract. In essence, direct pay for services distinguishes a consultant
from an independent researcher and presents the clearest ethical quandary which requires
the awareness and careful management indicated throughout the discussion in this
paper. Misunderstanding the underpinning constructs of investigation methods and
subsequently failing to navigate through the ethics quandary, whether as a consultant or
an independent researcher, will ensure poor quality action research results. In this light,
the differentials between action research and consulting are subtle yet significant.

3 Applied factors in academic research and consulting

The practices of action research and consulting can be difficult to separate until the
theoretical difference is considered. The idea of a researcher actually changing the
subjects of their research is somewhat different to the founding mindset of consultancy
which essentially aims to separate variables and control them as the primary means of
establishing a commercial relationship with clients. For example, if there is a conflict in
the workplace and a consultant is called, it would seem reasonable for the consultant to
isolate and separate the combatants until an objective assessment can be made and
solutions considered. However, conflict management can be very successfully achieved
through immersion of the change agent (manager, consultant or action researcher) into
the conflict and having them bring about a subjective, adaptable, constructive resolution.

Action research, as depicted in Figure 1, emerges largely from within the subjective
traditions of organisational learning, critical theory, individual emancipation and
improvement of understanding (Chevalier and Buckles, 2012; Basten, 2012). Action
research is a product of the variants of critical theory coming out of the Frankfurt School
(Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Gustavsen, 2003). Consulting is epistemologically different
in that its foundations are directly commercial and more inclined to positivism (Bracker,
1980; Knights, 1992). The imperative for continuous improvement of an organisation, for
instance, has its origins in Taylorism and scientific management where the aim is for
organisational improvement (Taylor, 1911; Deming, 1982; Anderson et al., 1994). In the
modernist tradition, benefits for individuals are sometimes considered but mainly at the
periphery of the overarching objective of organisational advancement.

Action research is sometimes completed under the guise of consulting, for example,
when a change management consultant is commissioned over an extended period to work
with staff to help to implement and document a new system or change process. Careful
design around the consulting brief and good governance of procedures during the project
can make consulting into enriching subjective research. Action research bridges into
consulting through the participant observer role. This partly explains the desire of Brown
et al.’s (1988) to ensure separation of the work of process consultants from that of pure
action researchers. Ethnography, narrative and the full range of symbolic interpretive
methods may be drawn upon in action research projects, as well as applied by process
consultants. So, from our perspective, academic research is sometimes the same as
consulting, but not all the time, because consulting by its nature draws from different
epistemological and ontological bases.

When language is deployed in the writing up of action research that alludes to mainly
quantitative methods of data gathering, there can be some confusion. One sign of well-
designed action research is when positivist data is analysed and written up by embedding
it within the lived experiences and ongoing bricolage of the whole project. In other
words, all kinds of data collection are potentially useful in action research; the quality of research findings rest very much in the skills and language of the researcher who plays the primary participative and interpretive role. The researcher is first, therefore, a participant and an observer alongside the fact. Modernist notions and language are useful in establishing aims and reporting about action research, especially when the investigator is a consultant, but there is no escape from the subjectivist foundations of action research methods and processes.

Figure 1 portrays the conceptual similarities and differences in theory and practice and cautions that it is the field of practice that creates many moments of ethical concern (Husserl, 1960; Brandt, 1972; Hegel, 1977; Gill, 2012). This conceptual portrayal tends to support the view of McTaggart (1996) that consulting is mainly a method, or a set of methods, whereas action research is a set of principles for conducting social enquiry. Knowing that consulting emerges from modernist, positivist principles, whereas action research is embedded in principles of social enquiry in addition to being a set of methods available to consultants, leads to the pragmatic realisation that the ethical conduct of the methods is, at all times, very important.

4 The ethics quandary in practice

A lack of objectivity and generalisable outcomes are often-quoted weaknesses of action research but they come with the pragmatic and emancipatory outcomes of being of benefit to humanity generally (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Lykkeslet and Gjengedal, 2006), as well as for the management profession and the particular management problems under investigation (Hidegh and Csillag, 2013). We therefore notice the quandary in management practice. Since the foci of research are the change-generating activities of the participant observers themselves, there can be no claim for complete independence from subject matter, and this stance needs to be made clear in submissions for approval to ethics committees. It is useful to note the warning from McTaggart (1996, p.248) that action research may be wrongly denoted as a method and should instead be seen as “a series of commitments to observe and problematise through practice a series of principles for conducting social enquiry”. This is not to deny the relevance of an action research approach, but to be realistic about the differences between interpretive practice and more traditional empirical research. The warning also portends some of the differences between consulting (mainly a method, or a set of methods) and action research (principles for conducting social enquiry). In response to the critique of action research, Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p.223) describe action research as “a perspective that people take toward objects and activities”. As long as action researchers (whether consultants or academic researchers) are being systematic in their data collection, and its interpretations and analysis follow appropriate rigour in relation to truth claims, then much of the critique dissolves.

The emphasis, therefore, moves to ethical problems in the field of practice and how to go about action research to avoid the quandary that has been overviewed in Figure 1. Consultants are guided by the customer relationship and associated ethical, contractual and legislative requirements about privacy, commercial in confidence, and other principles of good governance. Independently-funded university researchers are bound
by similar concerns which are often mediated through a delegated ethics committee. The practical things most ethics committees will want to be sure about (Creed, 2009) before approving action research are whether:

- Physical, social, financial or psychological harm could be inflicted on subjects or researchers,
- The changes that are made by participant observers in the course of action research implementation are managed properly in order to minimise the likelihood of harm to subjects or researchers,
- Engagement with the subject adheres to laws related to privacy, security, equity, criminal activity, property ownership, and so on,
- The outcomes of the research will add constructively to the body of knowledge in the discipline, and
- The institution has a higher risk of being involved in legal proceedings as a result of approving the research.

The above-mentioned considerations are equally significant for universities that oversee the activities of their action researchers as for consultants who seek contractual clarity in their brief from clients. Codes of conduct for consultants and their professional associations are useful moderators in the field of practice.

5 An example of academic action research in management practice

One of the authors was employed as a teaching assistant and an adjunct Associate Professor, respectively, between 2002 and 2010 in the Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme at a University in Maryland. Six consecutive years of this period coincided with an action research project by Creed et al. (2006) and Creed (2006, 2009). The action research as part of the doctoral degree was aimed at understanding the influences and processes of continuously improving management education in an environment rich in online learning technologies. It targeted the activities of a teaching team in one unit of the MBA. With the author being immersed in the lived experiences of the project, it was certain that biases or prejudices would emerge. A strategy for dealing with this was to maintain constant dialogue with the action research team and the relevant stakeholders in the process. The core action research team, including the author as primary participant observer, was composed of seven academic personnel engaged in the teaching course that was the subject of the research. The stakeholders in the project were noted to be the:

- Students, teachers and administrators who might benefit from any improved understanding about the teaching of the course,
- The university itself,
- The separate university that was supervising the research process of its higher degree by research student, and
- The advocates and regulators of online management education.
The research process was multi-layered with nine different communication media yielding 3986 separate communication events (meetings, interviews, phone and email transcripts, web conferences, and course documents) with 302,199 raw words, ultimately, being filtered for analysis and repeated cycles of reflection. Adopting a suitable observer style was noted as being just as important as being a participant in the processes being observed. Acknowledging and even embracing biases became a useful reporting technique that enhanced the analysis and understanding of the complexity of the situation. With income being provided to the author by the institution, the project involved one of the forces (see Figure 1) potentially contributing to an ethics quandary. It was acknowledged that an unfavourable conclusion from the action research could have ramifications for the reputation and viability of the institution. There was a risk regarding ongoing employment of the author at the school in the event of research findings being received negatively by stakeholders. Ongoing dialogue with the main stakeholders was undertaken to ensure full awareness of the consequences of the release of results. It should be noted that the author’s payments from the university were not the sole source of income, which was one of the mechanisms by which limitations to possible conflict of interest were noted and addressed.

The genesis of the action research was a confluence of events and circumstances which can be analysed for alignment with the defining variables of action research. The various project reports highlight how the primary participant observer’s aim was to participate and learn more about the processes occurring in the teaching team as part of a PhD project. This was combined with the course coordinator’s desire to champion continuous improvement of the teaching practices of the course team. The other team members were driven by their performance objectives and general agreement with principles of work quality enhancement. The process was emergent from the team, self-motivated, and was not commissioned separately from senior management of the university. There was no brief or budget, in other words, which might have delineated this as a consulting project. It was through ongoing dialogue and action by the course team that refinement of the design and additional research activities was undertaken in repeated cycles.

The motivation and design of the research and the ethics of the research team are among the indicators of whether the above-mentioned process was best defined as action research. Investigators were employed to study work practices and generate solutions, improvements and evaluations aimed at continuously improving professional practice (Senge, 1990). Through the specific research aim and questions, and the emergent nature of research objectives from within the team rather than from management, the method of investigation was first suggested as action research. In practice, adherence to procedures overseen by third party thesis supervisors at another university helped ensure the project could successfully traverse the ethics quandary. Conscious attention to the countervailing forces of group culture, individual ethics, university ethics guidelines and awareness of funding arrangements through the project structure and process enabled ultimate success (Creed, 2009).

6 Consultancy and action research: same difference or different all the same?

If, as researchers, we could all be paid for by a benefactor and our inquiries into research subjects were free to follow pure knowledge exploration rather than considerations of
where to get dinner, pay debts and support dependants, then consultancy, and probably commerce itself, would cease to be important. The closest things we have to this ideal are the few remaining state-funded university-employed academics engaged in full-time research. Fewer ongoing academic positions, mixed private and public funding models in academia; and policy-contingent government funding are increasingly changing research agendas for academics (Ladyshewsky and Flavell, 2012). The drive to attain industry grants for research is also gaining momentum in academia and finds its form in university-based performance management systems. The ideal knowledge-generation model is less attainable now than ever. The ethics quandary is getting larger (Leavitt, 2007).

McNiff and Whitehead (2006) point out the change imperatives of action research and the resistance to change that will naturally occur as people move to protect positions in an organisation (see also Waddell et al., 2013; Lewin, 1948). One of the inhibitors of change is lack of clarity. The management discipline has, understandably, grappled with distinguishing between consulting and action research. Economic imperatives have made consulting services an attractive and growing sector for knowledge workers. It is a mixed labour force with many tenured academics also undertaking consulting, and many retrenched or retired academics having to make a living out of consultancy. Where there are organisational problems, there are action researchers who are interested in finding ways to improve the situation. The noted challenges of designing consultancy to be proper action research are expanded by the growing role of consultancy in the work of researchers.

The ethics quandary requires consciousness on the part of academic researchers, respect on the part of consultants, and understanding on the part of organisational managers who commission research projects. Based upon our review and drawing from the boundary spanning concepts in Figure 1, the following summations in Table 1 distinguish further between action research and consultancy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action research only</th>
<th>Consulting only</th>
<th>Both Action Research and Consulting</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ensure the aim of the action research is clear and true to the principle of improved understanding and emancipation from repeated mistaken understanding, as per fallacies of interpretation.</td>
<td>Understand that a management consultant may legitimately deploy action research techniques being mindful that vested interests should not overwhelm the reported results.</td>
<td>Adhere to the reasonable research ethics guidelines and legislation in place for research projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow for action research to be time-consuming in its reflective cycles of interpretation of usually voluminous data.</td>
<td>Balance the limitations of time in a consulting project with the need for an action research method for the given brief.</td>
<td>Insist that stakeholders are thoroughly identified and informed about the aims, effects and reportable aspects of the research project.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1  Is your project action research, consulting or both? (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action research only</th>
<th>Consulting only</th>
<th>Both Action Research and Consulting</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do not be unduly concerned if payment is being received by the researcher who is conducting action research by the commissioning organisation. Do be concerned about ensuring the researcher is not overly reliant for their daily wages on the payment being received.</td>
<td>Payment for the research is one of the central principles that make the transaction viable.</td>
<td>Ensure that payment for research conducted does not lead to bias in the reporting of results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In design, analysis and reporting of results, embrace the subjectivity of the method by noting limitations and maximising opportunities to develop rich and deep insights about the complex interactions of the project.</td>
<td>The brief will determine the extent to which processes leading to rich and deep insights can be funded.</td>
<td>Underpinning budgets affect both consulting and independent action research activities.</td>
</tr>
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Source: Authors

Is action research into management really the same as consulting? We can answer that action research is a legitimate subjective research methodology that can be utilised by consultants, but each has epistemological and ontological foundations that are different. With careful attention to research design, a consulting relationship can yield appropriately rigorous results from applied action research. There is often a connection between good quality of research design and a good bottom line for a consulting business (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Juran, 2004); however, the ethics quandary means that a slippery slope of potentially biased methods and results can exist. The ethics quandary space is where methods are most likely to be challengeable, data skewed, findings biased and money wasted. Our focus has been to explore the ethics quandary, identify and briefly explain it for future studies, whilst reinforcing the overlaps in the consulting area where genuinely appropriate management research methods, especially action research, can be applied.

In conclusion, well-designed action research succeeds at navigating risk and contributing rich and deep insights into the management discipline. Consulting is a vocation that can draw from quantitative methods of investigation as well as from qualitative methods, including the action research field. There is an ethics quandary linked with the transactional role arrangements of action research and/or consulting. It is by identifying the epistemological and practical differences and paying close attention to the legal and ethical compliance factors in action research that the main problems can be avoided. Accordingly, action research can continue to come into its own for continuously improving the theory and practice of management.
A quandary in management practice

References


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