

Action Research

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Abstract Action research is applied, problem-based research, which usually involves the researcher as an active participant in an interactive, collaborative, and iterative process. The action research process is usually designed not only to *generate* knowledge, but also to *employ* that knowledge. In this context, the knowledge that is generated through the research process would be applied to design, adapt, re-design or improve social marketing initiatives. Action research is one of the formative research methods that tends to require and demonstrate one of the highest levels of researcher involvement. Thus, this chapter will include a consideration of the role of the researcher involved in formative action research, along with a consideration of the uses of this method in social marketing settings. The case study included in this chapter will highlight a real-world action research project that was used to design and deliver changes to a UK-based program offering supported housing to homeless street drinkers. Other examples provided in this chapter will be drawn from real-world social marketing experiences across a range of health, fitness, and social care settings.

Action Research and the Work of Kurt Lewin

The term ‘action research’ was coined by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s. Lewin, often referred to as ‘the father of social psychology’ (Coghlan and Brannick 2003), is also credited as devising ‘field theory’ which considers the various driving forces in decision making processes, and made significant contributions to other now well-known and well-established concepts in the area of organisational behaviour (Adelman 1993), particularly as they relate to group behaviour, group psychology, group decision-making, and group relations. The dominant paradigm at that time was that of ‘scientific management’ as expounded by Frederick Winslow Taylor.

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Critics perceive that scientific management pursuits aiming for economic efficiency are underpinned by inherent inequalities of power and control between various inter-organisational groups, and that such ‘non-behavioural institutional economics approaches organisational behaviour as conflict laden interaction processes’ (Wagner-Tsukamoto 2007, p. 105). Indeed, Taylor himself was summoned to appear before US Congress to answer for the implementation problems of the widespread scientific management that, at least when perceived on solely ‘institutional economic grounds... ran into implementation problems in 1911, which led to strikes’ (Wagner-Tsukamoto 2007, p. 105). Lewin’s aim was therefore to consider alternative approaches to organisational and group behaviour that would be more equitable for all members of the organisation. In contrast to Taylor’s ‘scientific management’, the action research paradigm proposed by Lewin is participatory, and those who participate not only generate, but also action the knowledge gained through the research process. Action research is therefore also considered a democratic process, and thus can also help democratise those involved in its implementation not only as proposed by Lewin in the workplace, but indeed as a means of basically renewing society (Hansen et al. 2016).

Lewin based his ideas about action research on a range of practical experiences where he could be seen to be using quasi-experimental methods. He was also a very firm believer in applied rather than pure research, and also that decision making should be underpinned with appropriate research. Hence, in Lewin’s perception, there should be ‘no action without research’ and ‘no research without action’ (Adelman 1993, p. 8).

Before considering more contemporary approaches to action research, it is worth going back to one of Lewin’s first successful action research projects to better understand not only the way action is used in the research process, but also the way experimentation can be enacted towards addressing social issues in natural settings away from the laboratory. That this action research project was based not only on a quasi-experimental approach, but also used a control group, helps explain some of the underpinnings of Lewin’s approach that are consistent with a positivist paradigm. This early experiment of Lewin’s focused on the real-world organisational problem of the low productivity of trainee factory workers compared with skilled workers, which could also be seen as a social issue involving industrial relations. His action research project in this factory focused on a training program for these new unskilled workers. One group (the control group) was subjected to traditional didactic training methods.

The second group was encouraged to discuss and decide on the division of tasks and comment on the training that was given. Over several months the productivity of the second group was consistently higher than that of the first. The staff of the second group learnt the tasks faster and their morale remained high, whereas in the first group morale remained low (Adelman 1993, pp. 8–9).

Despite this seeming to present Lewin as a positivist, it has rather been claimed that he should be considered a ‘scientific pragmatist’, with his work to best be

considered interpretive and inductive, even though he based his research on the formulation of hypotheses (Adelman 1993), and his scientific approach of systematic enquiry stressing the need for any action research process to identify ‘objective standards of achievement’:

if we cannot judge whether an action has led forward or backward, if we have no criteria for evaluating the relation between effort and achievement, there is nothing to prevent us from making the wrong conclusions and to encourage the wrong work habits (Lewin 1946, p. 35).

Although some of Lewin’s ideas behind the use of action research were first outlined in the mid-1930s (Adelman 1993), his first paper based on the action research paradigm was published in 1946 and focused on the way minority ethnic groups could raise their levels of self-esteem, and achieve higher levels of independence and equality. The focus of this work was therefore to consider inter-group relations in order to tackle ‘economic and social discrimination’ (Lewin 1946, p. 34). In this paper, Lewin defines action research as ‘a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action’, because, in his firmly held belief, when it comes to alleviating social problems, pure research, i.e. ‘research that produces nothing but books will not suffice’ (Lewin 1946, p. 35).

Contemporary Approaches to Action Research

In her ‘History of Action Research’ Masters (1995) outlines a categorisation of three different types of action research (see Table 1, based on the works of Grundy 1982; Holter and Schwartz-Barcott 1993; McKernan 1991).

With Type 1 action research, the problem may be so complex that it may often require an outside ‘expert’ to facilitate the process, and in this type of action research the driving force is the power of the idea at the heart of the process; Type 2 action research may involve a facilitator, but would be undertaken by ‘a group of equal participants, but the emphasis is upon individual power for action’, whereas with Type 3 action research all ‘power... resides wholly within the group, not with the facilitator and not with the individuals within the group’ (Grundy 1982, p. 363). Regardless of the categorisation, all types of action research are seen to be

Table 1 Three different types of action research

Type 1	Technical (Grundy 1982); Technical Collaborative (Holter and Schwartz-Barcott 1993); Scientific-Technical (McKernan 1991)
Type 2	Practical (Grundy 1982); Mutual Collaborative (Holter and Schwartz-Barcott 1993); Practical-deliberative (McKernan 1991)
Type 3	Emancipatory (Grundy 1982); Enhancement (Holter and Schwartz-Barcott 1993); Critical emancipatory (McKernan 1991)

underpinned by ‘four basic themes: empowerment of participants; collaboration through participation; acquisition of knowledge; and social change’ (Masters 1995).

By involving those affected by the problem, either as service users, service deliverers or service managers, more workable solutions can often be found that are suitable for all parties concerned – which, to some extent evidences a parallel between action research and notions of customer co-creation which we have seen arise in the service marketing literature since Vargo and Lusch (2004) outlined their ideas on a move towards a more service-dominant logic for all marketing. As many social marketing initiatives tend to involve the provision of services, it may be useful for those involved in leading action research initiatives to also read some of this body of literature before embarking on their projects. Indeed, when considering the issue of co-creation of social marketing solutions, Lefebvre (2012, pp. 119–120) believes that new answers to programs aimed at changing behaviours can be better established ‘if we focused on what our customers or users of social marketing want, rather than what we as social marketers produce’. He also identified that all those affected by these social issues need to be engaged when considering a co-creation approach and ‘that our focus should not just be about people we might call customers or participants, but also stakeholders and partners (people critical to success) with whom we must also actively engage with in developing customised, competitively compelling value propositions’ (Lefebvre 2012, p. 123)—thus leading to the co-created generation of knowledge from all parties involved in the social problem or in implementing its solutions.

The application of knowledge that is both gained through the action research process and which is a part of the action research process is also something that remains central to definitions of contemporary action research, as is its status as a quasi-experimental research method, and one that is often employed in mixed methods approaches to pragmatic research (Mukherjee and Kamarulzaman 2016). For example, Gill and Johnson (2010, p. 17) describe action research as a research approach that borrows ‘the logic of experimentation but this methodology applies that logic to natural settings outside the laboratory... the solution of the problem... is both an outcome of the research and a part of the research process.’ However, these authors also note that while action research may have originally been rooted in ‘positivism and experimental logic’ (p. 17), contemporary approaches to action research perceive it to be a much more qualitative method, that has therefore become distanced both methodologically and philosophically from its origins. It is worth noting that Lewin himself categorised four different types of action research, not all of which rely upon experimentation or the use of control groups (Marrow 1969):

- *Diagnostic Action Research*: To diagnose a problem and help generate proposed solutions that would be acceptable to those involved in an existing problem situation. Those involved in the diagnostic action research may not themselves be directly affected by the problem.
- *Participant Action Research*: In which those affected by a problem are involved from the outset in finding a solution. This type of action research, however, tends to have only limited local application and limited generalisability.

- *Empirical Action Research*: No test controls would be employed in this type of action research. Instead, empirical action research involves accumulating and recording day-to-day lived experiences within groups. In order to build generalisable knowledge, it is better to undertake this research with a succession of different (but similar) groups.
- *Experimental Action Research*: Using controls to test hypotheses in quasi-experimental conditions. Not only is this the most complex form of action research, it is the most difficult to undertake.

More recent scholarly debate suggests parallels between action research and the concept of ‘praxis’ as found in Marxist theory, with the ensuing proposal that action researchers revisit even further back to Marxian praxis ‘particularly in a context where problems associated with the capitalist political economy continue to profoundly affect people’s lives’ (Cunningham 2016), as may be found in many action research projects that may underpin social marketing initiatives designed to effect social change.

However, as well as looking back to its theoretical underpinnings, action research is also very relevant to a technologically enabled future, and has been proposed as being a suitable method to research aspects of citizen engagement mediated through technology in smart cities (Foth and Brynskov 2016).

There has also been a recent call for the entire service research community to use action research to improve our understanding of the billions of people at the base of the economic pyramid. Thus in this respect it would be ‘community action research’ that would be used to help underpin research agendas that will be able to make a real difference

by 2020, to help improve the lives of the world’s impoverished people in an unrelenting, collaborative, and caring effort by applying our resources (intellectual, financial, and time), social networks (globally via the Internet and locally via physical presence), and professional infrastructures (universities, organizations, and conferences) and become a role model for how an academic research community can make a difference in the world (Fisk et al. 2016).

Ethical Issues in Action Research

One definition of action research explicitly includes an ethical dimension: ‘action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework’ (Rapoport 1970, p. 499). The key features of action research as a participatory and democratising process of gaining and applying knowledge for positive social change can therefore translate into a set of basic principles to inform and help guide participants’ actions throughout the research process. These basic principles, that should be applied at all key stages of the process through developing the partnerships and seeking funding for the action

research, gathering and storing data, right through to the dissemination of the results have been identified by Brydon-Miller (2012, p. 158) as:

- Autonomy
- Sovereignty
- Beneficence
- Justice
- Caring
- Respect
- Commitment
- Transparency
- Democratic Practice

Brydon-Miller (2012) also identifies three specific issues of ethical relevance within the action research process: that of human subjects as participants; digital data collection and dissemination; and the action researcher as a responsible member of society.

Human Subjects as Participants

Within action research, human subjects are often participants who are not only involved in, but may also be in control of, the action research process. There are many ethical concerns when considering action research undertaken involving human subjects in social settings, not least being the effect of the research on the control group, if positive change is brought to other participants in the project and not to the control group, at least during the timescale of the project. In the earlier example given above of one of Lewin's action research projects, having provided an experiment group of unskilled factory workers with a highly participatory type of training program, the workers in the same factory who were in the control group who had received the more traditional didactic training program were less productive and experienced much lower morale. Other ethical issues surround community members being willing and able to actively participate in the research process, which may be of particular concern if action research is used formatively to inform the design or adaptation of certain social marketing initiatives, especially those targeting vulnerable groups.

Ethical issues within any proposed project of scholarly research are usually reviewed in advance by internal university-based panels. Other types of organisations, especially schools, or health-related bodies, may also undertake ethical reviews in advance of any research being undertaken. It is suggested that in the case of action research in community settings, Citizen Advisory Boards be established to oversee similar ethical reviews of participatory action research involving its own community members.

Digital Data Collection and Dissemination

This also raises ethical concerns, especially when digital voice recorders or cameras are used by participants to gather data within an action research project. Some attention must be paid at the outset of the research process as to whether data subjects' voices or images will be recognisable, attributable, and also how and in what format these sounds and images may be used to effect change.

The Action Researcher as a Responsible Member of Society

The key issue raised by Brydon-Miller (2012, p. 161) regarding the action researcher as a responsible member of society, is centred on the need to move away from a 'system of knowledge feudalism', and to do so through dissemination of the results of action research via 'open source publishing, sharing knowledge through electronic media sites like blogs and wikis, creating reports and presentations with a view toward increased accessibility of information' in order to make 'the results of research more broadly available and useful'.

However, considering the high level of researcher involvement in action research projects, and particularly in the context of action research for social marketing, there are other ethical issues that are also worth exploring in a little more detail because they can impact on the researcher and the research process in practice: issues of permanence of any solution for positive social change; issues of power and control; and cross-cultural ethics.

Permanence

Lewin did indeed consider the issue of 'permanence' in relation to enacting social change. His (1946) paper also explains how the design of a group-based action research project could help group members deliver more permanent solutions than, for example, one enthusiastic individual might be able to, especially when that individual may be faced with a whole range of obstacles to initiating and maintaining the desired social change.

Power and Control

There remain many settings where action research may not be wholly controlled and led by a group in a participatory fashion, even when such projects are undertaken in order to effect positive social change. This may be especially so, for

example, if the action research is of the diagnostic type, where those involved in proposing solutions to a problem may not be personally or directly affected by that problem. Lewin believed that the researcher should consider ‘groups in power’, and thus the need for action research to be a democratising process that takes into account the people involved with and affected by the social change, not only those in positions of leadership. In his work on minorities, Lewin (1946) also proposed that any social change also affects the majority. This insight can, and should, be considered in the context of contemporary social problems. Thus, for example, a social marketing program aimed at smoking cessation, or addressing obesity, or raising levels of physical activity, will have positive effects not only on those targeted, but also on society at large through not only having a healthier population, but also one that is less draining of limited public health resources.

Cross-Cultural Ethics

Action research remains in use in organisational management contexts, as well as in those of effecting positive social change. However, it must be remembered that many social marketing initiatives to enact social change will be led by organisations, whether those are in the public, private, or not-for-profit sector. Moreover, organisations and communities are becoming increasingly multicultural, and many social marketing initiatives are targeted across cultures and sub-cultures. Here, it is therefore pertinent to consider what can be learned from organisational management and be applied to social and community settings in the context of action research for social marketing. In management situations, key factors seen to contribute to successful organisational exchanges are the shared values between parties to any exchange process (Maignan and McAlister 2003), the importance of which encompasses the ‘extent to which partners have beliefs in common about what behaviours, goals, and policies are important or unimportant, appropriate or inappropriate, and right or wrong’ (Morgan and Hunt 1994, p. 25). Thus, within democratising participatory action research that can be seen to take a ‘stakeholder community’ approach, there is an assumption that there is a ‘common set of rules and behavioural expectations shared by the majority of members of a stakeholder community’ (Maignan and McAlister 2003, p. 83). However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ascertain shared stakeholder values and norms when dealing with cross-cultural norms and values across heterogeneous cultural groups, and increasingly difficult to rely on ‘universally accepted ethical norms’ (Nill 2003, p. 90). One proposed solution to dealing with the complexities in the various perspectives on business ethics is dialogic idealism (akin to a moral philosophy approach). This approach, which aligns well with the philosophical underpinnings of action research, is based upon communication between stakeholders who may come from various cultural backgrounds, and is seen to be particularly useful when ‘confronted with fundamental questions that have a substantial impact on stakeholders’ interests’ (Nill 2003, p. 102).

Action Research and Action Learning

Within an organisational setting you may also come across the term ‘action learning’. This is defined as ‘a continued process of learning and reflection with the support of a group of colleagues, working on real issues’ (Raelin and Coghlan 2006, p. 671). Thus, action learning takes place when undertaken in conjunction with others, who contribute to an individual’s learning process through ‘working and reflecting together on real-time problems occurring in their own work setting’ (Raelin and Coghlan 2006, p. 674), stressing the interactive nature of action learning at the group, and inter-organisational level (Argote 2013), particularly through engagement with ‘learning sets’. The concept of action research is focused not only on a learner *gaining* knowledge and understanding, but on that learner *employing* this knowledge and understanding ‘wherein learners participate in studies both as subjects and objects with the explicit intention of bringing about change in the setting under study’ (Raelin and Coghlan 2006, p. 671). However, there is a perspective that considers it less important to make such explicit distinctions between action learning and action research. Both activities (which are underpinned by action science, identified by Putnam (1999, p. 177) as being ‘based on an epistemology of practice as reflecting-in-action and [which] has developed largely within the framework of the theory of action approach’) could be better perceived as being at either end of a continuum of problem-based learning where, at one end, there is more emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge and understanding (*action learning*—although this may be gained through research, and may well effect change in the learner’s environment), and at the other, there is more emphasis on research and effecting change (*action research*—although knowledge and understanding may be gained by the learner throughout the research process).

Key Features of Action Research

Methodological

Action research is problem-based, applied research that both generates *and* applies knowledge. While action research can be seen to be undertaken from three differing perspectives (positivism; interpretivism; and critical science), Masters (1995) stresses that *it is not in the methodologies that the three modes of action research differ, but rather in the underlying assumptions and world views of the participants that cause the variations in the application of the methodology*. Thus, while action research is based on systematic enquiry, and is often seen as quasi-experimental, with success based on objective standards of achievement, methodologically action research is usually considered to be qualitative, inductive and interpretive.

Philosophical

Philosophically, the key features of action research are that it is democratic and democratising. It is participatory, collaborative and equitable.

Practical

In practice, the key features of action research are that it is an iterative reflexive process, one that requires high levels of researcher involvement, and one that is highly relevant to practitioners. Based on his understanding of Lewin's approach, Adelman (1993, p. 15) outlines five steps in the action research process:

1. Discussion
2. Decision
3. Action
4. Evaluation
5. Revision

These five steps compress the nine activities outlined in Lewin's original (1946) paper, where he identified the first step in the action research process as comprising all of the following:

- General idea (objective setting)
- Examination of idea in light of available means
- Fact-finding
- Decision for action
- Execution
- Reconnaissance—more fact-finding—to evaluate action
- Evaluating achievement of objectives
- Deciding what next steps should be
- Revising overall plan

Lewin also notes that once this first step has been completed:

The next step again is composed of a circle of planning, executing, and reconnaissance or fact-finding for the purpose of evaluating the results of the second step, for preparing the rational basis for planning the third step, and for perhaps modifying again the overall plan. Rational social management, therefore, proceeds in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action (Lewin 1946, p. 38).

This stage of evaluation or reflection on the initial action research and knowledge gained from it is therefore an important stage in the process as the action research cycle continues. How this works in practice can be understood from the case study detailed later in this chapter.

Action Research and Social Marketing

Social marketing is designed to achieve behaviour change for individual and/or social good through the use of a range of methods more akin to commercial marketing practices, including being based on and informed by theory, and an understanding of the ‘customer’ who is being targeted by the social marketing initiative (Andreasen 2002; Lefebvre and Flora 1988). However, the ‘medicalised’ nature of many social marketing initiatives, particularly those designed to address health behaviour change, brings about some interesting methodological paradoxes where we are expected to consider ‘service users as “customers”... yet the context of the services under investigation are often more akin to medical models of the doctor-patient relationship’ (James and Skinner 2009, pp 54–55). Moreover, it has also been suggested that those who design and deliver social marketing campaigns are not themselves affected by the problem the initiative is designed to solve, and indeed they themselves have little insight into or real understanding of the complexities of the problem (Fridinger and Kirby 2002; Williams and Kumanyika 2002). When action research is used formatively in the design, adaptation, re-design or improvement of social marketing initiatives, its empowering, democratising, participatory, and collaborative nature can be seen to make it a very useful method to engage those affected by a problem at a grass-roots level, thus ‘drawing on the knowledge of the target audience, relevant health professionals and other bodies connected to the social issue’ (Williams-Burnett and Skinner 2015, p. 3).

Formatively using a participant action research approach may also help reduce the risk of an ‘othering’ response to social marketing messages. This can happen particularly when individuals who have a fear response to social marketing messages deflect the message onto ‘others’ who they judge to be at risk rather than themselves. Thus, for example, men who encounter social marketing messages for HIV prevention specifically designed to change potential high risk behaviour in men who have sex with men (MSM) may consider that ‘this message is meant for older/younger/more promiscuous men’ (Bourne 2010, pp. 2–3).

It has also been found that public health messages tend to have more impact if they are seen to come from a well-known and respected source, and school has been identified as an early source of messages informing public health behaviour. The literature recognises two main approaches in schools that deliver public health messages: adult-led and peer-led. Peer-led approaches tend to be more effective in utilising established social networks which can be both more accessible by, and more acceptable to young people and adolescents; their messages are perceived as more credible and have more impact than approaches led by formally trained adults. Moreover, the use of social media amongst young people and adolescents is also seen to offer opportunities to encourage positive health behaviours through developing these as norms within these groups, thus addressing the socio-environmental context within which such behaviours are practised and developed. Peer-led approaches have also been found to be effective in dealing with the coping strategy of denial, a belief that is seen to be especially prevalent among young people that it

will not happen to them (Department of Health 2011). Messages disseminated among peers can often be seen to have more credibility, immediacy and impact than more formal and distant channels (Valente and Fosados 2006), and may better aid the adoption of positive health behaviours. Action research can be used within peer groups and networks to both understand the norms within them, and then target the network with positive health messages to change these norms. So, for example, a media campaign designed to increase condom use may be effective if targeted at groups of young people who had previously had less safe sex norms (Romocki et al. 1996).

The knowledge that may then be gained through and applied by an action research approach in this respect can be far more wide-reaching than ever before through the use of social media and other interactive digital platforms (Department of Health 2011). One such community-based participatory research partnership (Cyber-Based Education and Referral/Men for Men—CyBER/M4 M) made use of a digital platform in order to implement a chat room-based intervention to facilitate in-person social and sexual networking among MSM in north-western North Carolina. Members of the partnership were already aware of many local resources and could therefore offer advice to other chat room users on, for example, where to get tested for HIV and AIDS, and where to obtain free condoms in the local area. The partnership's 'CyBER educators' would also announce their presence in public chat rooms, stating they could also provide information to other chat room users in answer to questions about HIV and AIDS. This pilot study not only concluded that 'chat room-based interventions hold promise to systematically reach internet communities of MSM, a group that is particularly at risk for infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases', but also led to more insights into how chat room interventions could be best delivered in future (Rhodes et al. 2010).

However, not all networks are digitally enabled, and it must be acknowledged that peers can be found in a wide range of social, cultural and professional institutions and informal groups (Romocki et al. 1996). The shared knowledge that could be gained and employed using an action research approach of any of the three types recognised by Grundy (1982) either wholly led by the group, or facilitated by an 'expert' is also recognised as being highly influential, particularly in effecting changes in risk behaviours (Romocki et al. 1996; Valente and Fosados 2006).

It has been found that while 'many publicly funded social marketing campaigns continue to have little effect on levels of participation in physical activity, especially among key target groups such as women and those from lower socio-economic groups, there is evidence to suggest that independent fitness instructors are attracting, retaining and motivating these harder to reach demographic groups' (Williams-Burnett and Skinner 2015, p. 1). Both researchers are qualified fitness instructors, and in their study an action research approach found that not only were higher levels of participation in physical activity found for this particular key target market group 'in a non-traditional fitness setting of a local community centre or school and led by independent fitness instructors' (p. 2), but that independent fitness instructors could better engage their target market, through the use of social media, than the more formal public sector-led social marketing initiatives such as

'Change4Life'. Specifically, while, for example, the official Facebook page of Change4Life had far more followers, 'likes' to posts, and 'shares', the Change4Life page was more didactic, and less engaging and participatory compared to the Facebook pages of independent fitness instructors. Independent fitness instructors tended to post more frequently, provide more information regarding new and existing classes, and also to provide more motivational posts to class members. Their pages were also much more engaging of the class participants, who also posted personal success stories and positive feedback on classes. These insights, gained through what can be categorised as 'empirical action research' allowed the lead author to then improve her own Facebook presence in her fitness instructor role.

Another good example of action research can be found in the Dutch Health Council's campaign aimed at informing the general public and motivating people at risk of Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) to seek medical advice. This action research involved the development and distribution of educational materials regarding HCV. The development was undertaken in collaboration with 'experts' from the Dutch College of General Practitioners and materials were distributed among all primary care practices. In addition, educational sessions on HCV management were also run for GPs along with in-practice support for HCV risk assessment that was provided throughout the entire 4 months of the public campaign's intervention period. During this period there were substantially higher numbers of tests in the region covered by the social marketing campaign, and this was seen to be a result of the increased awareness of HCV testing by primary healthcare practitioners. However, another finding from the project was the recommendation that in-practice support should be provided for any such future interventions, since it was this that was seen to 'improve diagnostic uptake and optimize case finding' (Helsper et al. 2010).

Case Study

This case study outlines a real-world action research project initiated by the director of the charitable organisation that housed homeless street drinkers. This group, defined as 'chronic homeless' are seen to be 'the most disadvantaged and underserved groups among the homeless population' (Levine and Huebner 1991, p. 1113). The chronic homeless tend to have multiple needs; in addition to their problem drinking they may also misuse substances, and have significant physical and mental health issues. The chronic homeless are therefore less likely to seek out service provision, and may be less likely to engage with service provision (Bennett and Barkensjo 2005). Such service provision also tends to be provided from within the medicalised doctor-patient model, and often not only assumes, but to some extent perpetuates, low levels of self-efficacy among service users.

General Idea (Objective Setting)

At the time this action research project was initiated most, if not all, hostels offering shelter to the chronic homeless provided their services on the condition of total abstinence from alcohol, basing their intervention on the 12-step program. The city's hostel accommodation was at the time provided by a range of organisations, including the local council, religious groups, local charities and housing associations. The main aim of this provision was to offer 'transitional housing... with the emphasis of moving people on to permanent housing, and supported housing became more readily available' (James and Skinner 2009, p. 56). Although all hostel service providers expressly forbade residents to drink on the premises, some did allow residents to drink off the premises without facing eviction. Thus many individuals who could not comply with the hostel rules ended up back on the street and back to their chaotic drinking, with little chance of ever being able to gain stable accommodation.

The action research project was initiated by the director of a charitable organisation housing these chronic homeless. The initial idea came to him while working as a project manager for one of the local council's hostels. His practical experience had led him to believe that these very rules regarding alcohol consumption not only had a negative effect on the service users, but were also the cause of conflict arising between hostel staff, who were required to enforce and 'police' these rules, and residents, who would often break them, leading to them being evicted, another situation of friction and conflict. The general idea was to test whether allowing residents to drink on the premises of a hostel would actually be a positive move, perhaps leading to more stability of accommodation for this group of chronic homeless. This service design was untried, and the idea was initially met with a great deal of resistance from funders, staff and service users themselves.

Examination of Idea in Light of Available Means

The idea was to allow residents in one hostel to drink on the premises for a test period only. The hostels already housed residents, and staff were already in place. Thus no additional resources were required to make the action research project feasible. However, one issue regarding the feasibility of undertaking the project arose because of the nature of the service users who would be expected to participate in this experiment. Homeless street drinkers tend to 'exhibit high levels of perceived risk... low levels of self-efficacy... are often not only less willing participants than customers of commercial service providers who enter into exchange relationships voluntarily, but... are often less able to judge which service offerings may be most appropriate to meet their needs' (James and Skinner 2009, p. 52). Moreover, hostel staff were also reticent to collaboratively participate in the project,

believing that allowing hostel residents to drink on the premises would lead to even more friction and conflict between staff and residents.

Fact-Finding

Qualitative research, employing a narrative method, asking street drinkers to tell their stories, and to find out their life experiences had already been undertaken by the project manager. It was this prior knowledge that led to the idea for the project. From this research he knew that street drinkers often expected to be evicted from dry hostel accommodation because they knew they would not be able to sustain abstinence from alcohol, and so viewed such accommodation as only a temporary solution. Moreover, there were issues of loneliness experienced by hostel residents who had no real say in who would be sharing their accommodation. One feature of the chronic homeless is the camaraderie found in their 'drinking gangs' on the streets, and so it often became only a matter of time before their need for company overtook their need to avoid alcohol.

Decision for Action

The project manager therefore wanted to test an experiment where those housed could choose their co-tenants, have little if no on-site supervision (although crisis intervention was always available), and could drink on the premises. While, as noted above, all stakeholders were initially against the whole idea of any new service design, it was implemented 'against the express wishes of both staff and service users and was driven by one person's belief that applying yesterday's solutions to today's problems was only making things worse, not better for service users' (James and Skinner 2009, p. 63).

Execution

The project was initiated for a 3 month trial period. Hostel residents were to be allowed to drink on the premises, but only in their own rooms, not in any communal areas, and this mitigated advance staff and service user worries of the potential for wild parties. 'The result was that Tresillian House became the first direct-access hostel in Wales that allowed people to drink on the premises' (James and Skinner 2009, p. 57).

Reconnaissance: More Fact-Finding—to Evaluate Action

The project was evaluated through weekly staff meetings, and regular hostel meetings where residents could also feedback on their experiences. While occasional parties were held by residents initially, their novelty soon wore off, and there arose only limited incidents of violence, which were also seen to decrease over the term of the pilot. There was however one unintended consequence that did need to be addressed in any future design of such hostel provision. Because residents could not drink on the premises, they had less contact with their former street drinking gang, and they made new acquaintances from around the local area, many of whom preyed on their vulnerability and even entered the hostel to steal. Although staff were aware of what was happening, they could only intervene if residents cooperated, which they were reticent to do. Thus discussions took place with collaborative participants in the action research process, and as a result of the knowledge gained, interventions were designed to help residents deal with this problem, for example by encouraging residents to see the hostel as their ‘home’ and to get to know people much better before inviting them in.

Evaluating Achievement of Objectives

The pilot was evaluated as a success by the project manager, staff, residents and funders.

Staff members agreed that their jobs were easier as they did not have to police the impossible, evictions had dropped a little, and confrontations had diminished. Therefore it was agreed that drinking would continue to be allowed in all the flats but not in the main communal areas. These were seen as public areas and also used a space for individuals to sleep overnight in emergencies so were not seen as part of the accommodation (James and Skinner 2009, pp. 57–58).

Deciding What Next Steps Should Be

Based upon the initial experimental action research, the next step was to establish two hostels where, from the outset, residents would be allowed to drink on the premises. The action research was of a formative nature as it allowed insights to be gained that informed the design of this innovative service provision. Bids had been invited by the relevant local government department to fund innovative solutions in supported housing, and thus funding was available to establish these hostels in partnership with a local charitable organisation. The project manager was also seconded to lead the initiative, and so all financial and time investments in the project were allocated. The two properties were sourced, fitted out, and ready to

take in residents within two years. While the original funding bid presumed these hostels would accommodate between 8 and 10 people, by the time the premises were ready, they were instead able to accommodate 19 individuals at no extra cost to the government's funds.

Revising Overall Plan

The knowledge gained from implementing the pilot project provided key insights into the way this initiative went forward. In particular, residents were involved in deciding who would share their house when a vacancy arose, and staff learned that the group dynamics of the street drinking gangs persisted in the house, so, for example, each house would have a 'leader' who was recognised as such by the other residents, and to whom other residents would often turn to discuss problem issues. Thus staff had to respect this hierarchy, while also encouraging and enabling other residents to have their say in matters relating to the house.

The charitable organisation that provided the partnership to the project then also later allowed drinking on their other hostel premises.

The project was a resounding success, and is now seen as a model for supported housing for the chronic homeless where drink may be allowed on the premises.

After the first two years, contrary to previous experience of dry accommodation, the biggest number of vacancies was created by deaths rather than eviction of residents, in part explained by the generally poor health of the tenants. Arrests and criminal justice interventions also dropped... flats were usually immaculately kept and the number of hours spent drinking diminished... Tenants would often decide not to drink for a period and could frequently do this without medical intervention (James and Skinner 2009, p. 62).

In summary, the key to the success of this particular action research project was that by involving the service users completely as research participants in the experiment, new insights were gained from the process that enabled better solutions to the problem to be implemented. Once the initial reticence of both residents and staff to actually allow drinking on the premises had been overcome, not without some problems caused by challenging behaviours in the early stages of the process, things in the hostel calmed down relatively quickly. The staff were not having to deal with as many problems as they had anticipated, and the residents weren't holding wild parties and wrecking the hostel (as both residents and staff feared would happen when the project was first proposed). One of the key insights generated from the process was that chronic homeless street drinkers often relapsed when in dry accommodation because they were separated from the support system they had previously received from their 'drinking gangs'. Once residents were also then involved in making decisions about who else came into the hostel as either a visitor or resident, they were empowered to make choices that suited them best. Another feature of this process was that the residents' lifestyles became less chaotic—no longer were they in a cycle of finding accommodation in a dry hostel, falling

off the wagon, and then being evicted back onto the streets; they could now, with the support of the service delivery staff, learn to control their drinking, and because their drinking did not lead to eviction, other of their social problems were also alleviated – for example, having an address and not being classed as homeless led to more consistent provision of other services.

Some tenants have now lived at Shoreline properties for nearly ten years. Some are able to maintain regular periods when they do not drink, some are accepted in local pubs, and all drink in a more healthy manner. When crises occur they are dealt with quickly by very experienced staff members who know their tenants and their culture (James and Skinner 2009, p. 62).

Summary

Key Issues for the Use of Action Research for Social Marketing

Action research is a method that is often applied to solving real-world social problems, and that is where it originated in the approach developed by Lewin in the 1930s and 1940s. Whether the type of action research is expert-driven, facilitated in a collaborative manner, or totally emancipatory and led by the participants in the process, what remains key is that this empowering and collaborative approach leads to the acquisition of knowledge that can address social problems, and that this knowledge is then *applied* to effect social change. One other benefit of adopting an action research approach to social marketing issues is that, unlike in methods, once the knowledge that has been generated is applied to the problem, a period of reflection and evaluation takes place as part of the research process itself. Hence adaptations can be made in the next cycle of the process to change or improve upon the solutions that are being implemented.

By involving research participants who are affected directly or indirectly by the social problem as *active* participants in the research process, the use of action research can help generate solutions that, in a quasi-experimental manner, can be applied as solutions to social problems. Once the knowledge generated from the research is enacted upon and applied to the problem, a period of evaluation or reflection takes place to decide on the next steps. Thus, this is an iterative process, and not one that hands down a solution from an expert on high. As Lefebvre (2012, p. 124) insists, we must be more collaborative in our attempts to address social issues through social marketing initiatives, and ‘not just become like a surgeon who walks into an operating room and starts a procedure without even knowing the patient’s name.’

Key Internet Sources

Action Research: provides research and behaviour change solutions based upon social marketing principles to a range of public agencies, non-profit organizations, and private companies who are seeking to promote positive behaviours in their communities, workplaces, and environments: <http://action3630.com/>

infed: this is a free-to-access not-for-profit site provided by the YMCA George Williams College: <http://infed.org/mobi/action-research/>

Institute of Development Studies: is based at the University of Sussex: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/publication/action-research-for-development-and-social-change>

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