Action-Oriented Research: Models and Methods

In recent years there has been a growing interest in research approaches that can better inform policy and practice and lead to social action. This article describes four models of action-oriented research: action, participatory, empowerment, and feminist research. The historical roots, epistemological assumptions, agendas, and methodological strategies of each are discussed. Common features and distinguishing characteristics are examined. The article concludes by discussing implications derived from action-oriented research for family researchers and other social scientists interested in making their work more relevant to practice, policy, and social action.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in research approaches that can better inform policy and practice and lead to social action. This trend has occurred in response to such factors as a growing frustration among practitioners and policy makers with the lack of relevance of traditional research findings and an increasing desire among many social scientists to conduct research that has greater social relevance. A number of research approaches from different social science traditions have evolved independently in response to common frustrations with the inability of traditional positivistic social science methods to inform questions of practice or social action and in response to the emergence of postpositivist epistemological paradigms. While these approaches have developed many similar principles of inquiry, the lack of contact among them has delayed recognition of their common themes.

There are a number of contemporary research approaches that are directly concerned with informing practice and social change. Family scholars are probably most familiar with feminist methods (e.g., Allen & Baber, 1992; Reinharz, 1992; Thompson, 1992). Other "action-oriented" models include action research, empowerment research, and participatory research. These research approaches advocate remarkably similar agendas and share a core of epistemological assumptions and methodological strategies.

This article describes these four action-oriented forms of research and examines the epistemological assumptions, moral/ethical values, and methodological strategies that characterize each of them. The article focuses on commonalities among the four approaches, including their implications for family researchers. Examination of the characteristics that distinguish them from conventional, social science research is also included. In this article, the term conventional social science research refers to the positivistic scientific paradigm that has dominated the social sciences for the past century. Drawing on methods and logic first used in the physical sciences, this approach subsumes notions of causality, objectivity, and quantification with the goal of predicting and controlling human behavior (Prus, 1992).

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FOUR MODELS OF ACTION-ORIENTED RESEARCH

What follows is an examination of the distinguishing characteristics of each of four action-oriented research traditions: action research, participatory research, empowerment research, and feminist research. Each approach is introduced by a discussion of its historical origins. This is followed by an examination of three aspects germane to any research model: (a) agenda (What are the primary goals of the research? Which research questions are most worth asking? Who are the principal beneficiaries of the research findings?); (b) epistemology (What forms of knowledge are considered scientific? What role do values and ethics play in the research enterprise? Can social science be objective?); and (c) methodology (What are the most commonly used data collection strategies? How are they determined? What role do research subjects and other nonresearchers play in the research process?). These three dimensions of the research process have been selected for heuristic purposes, but they are not mutually exclusive. For example, the selection of a data collection methodology is closely related to both a researcher’s agenda and the epistemology that undergirds his or her work. A second caveat is that the descriptions of each model are by necessity brief. In introducing each model, I have attempted to emphasize their defining features. However, within any given approach there are likely to be numerous distinctions and ongoing debates. Readers interested in learning more about particular models are encouraged to seek out additional readings from the references.

Action Research

Action research is perhaps the most widely used form of action-oriented research. Kurt Lewin (1946) is generally recognized as having introduced this model of research nearly 50 years ago. He described a new approach to social research that involved the researcher trying to change the system while at the same time generating critical knowledge about it. Lewin argued that, for any field where action was a goal, practitioners needed two types of knowledge: general laws about behavior or systems derived from basic research and specific information about the particular situation in which action is desired.

Historically, action research has been most often associated with private industry and organizational development. More recently, this approach has been employed by scholars from a diverse array of social science disciplines including education (e.g., Elliot, 1985; McKernan, 1991), agriculture (e.g., Ortiz, 1991), and human development (Small, 1995). While the substantive focus has varied, common to all forms of action research is its agenda of producing research that can address practical concerns. However, many action researchers are also interested in contributing to the development of scientific knowledge. Rapaport’s (1970) frequently cited definition of action research reflects this dual goal: “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” (p. 4).

The majority of action researchers subscribe to a positivist conception of social science. They reject such tenets of mainstream social science as the objectivity and separation of researcher from what or whom is researched, the superiority of the researcher as expert, and the ability of the research process to be value neutral (Oquist, 1978; Susman & Evered, 1978).

Action research does not have any prescribed methodology. However, its emphasis on practical problems and its commitment to collaboration does mean that some methods tend to prevail. For instance, action research is always conducted in the setting where the problem is encountered, and the focus is usually on a single case or unit (McKernan, 1991). Entire populations (e.g., a classroom, organization, or community) are usually studied rather than a sample drawn from a diverse population. This tendency to focus on a single case may explain the preference for qualitative case study methods over quantitative ones.

A unique aspect of action research is that both the research focus and the methodology may change as the inquiry proceeds. Action researchers recognize that as the research process unfolds, the research problem may evolve, requiring a new definition of the situation as well as new methods for understanding it.

Action researchers value collaboration with nonresearcher participants. While the action researcher brings to the research process theoretical knowledge, experience, and the skills of conducting social science research, the participant collaborators bring practical knowledge and experience about the situations that are being studied. Both researcher and collaborators are viewed as possessing expertise and knowledge critical to carry-
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...ing out the action research process. Although the knowledge each possesses is different, it is complementary and essential to the research process (Susman & Evered, 1978).

Action researchers must be methodologically eclectic, usually much more so than traditional academic researchers. Because action researchers often deal with novel problems, they may have to design new instruments and techniques to gather data. Action researchers must also be sensitive to the needs and perspectives of their nonresearcher collaborators, selecting methods and measures that have a high degree of face validity and practical utility (Small, 1995). Given the multiple players involved in action research and the various perspectives they may represent, action researchers value the use of multiple methods so that this variety of viewpoints can be adequately captured and represented.

Because the results of action research are intended to directly benefit the situation in which they are collected, action researchers are concerned with making findings available to the participants and/or their representatives in a manner that is both timely and easily understood. However, given that action research also aims to contribute to the goals of science, action research findings are also likely to eventually be published in scientific journals.

Small's (1995, in press) Teen Assessment Project provides an example of action research that employs a quantitative methodology. In this ongoing project, Small and his colleagues work with a steering committee of community leaders to help them design a survey of the needs and concerns faced by adolescents and their families. The steering committee of local policy makers, educators, social service professionals, students, and other concerned members of the community work collaboratively with the researchers to identify the most important research questions and knowledge needs and to plan how and when to administer the survey. While each survey is unique, the typical questionnaire covers a range of issues relevant to adolescent health and development such as sexuality, drug use, mental health, family and peer relations, perceptions of school and community, academic achievement, and future aspirations. The data are analyzed by the researchers and then returned to the community to be disseminated and acted upon. Some of the ways that the data are shared include written reports, community forums and press conferences, press releases, and presentations to various government, civic, professional, and parent groups. A newsletter series, featuring major findings of the survey, are also sent to parents of the surveyed teens. While the first priority of this action research project is to provide relevant and useful data to each community in which research is conducted, findings from this program of research have also been published in scholarly journals (e.g., Luster & Small, 1994; Small & Kerns, 1993).

Participatory Research

Participatory research has been defined as a research process that does the following:

... attempts to break down the distinction between the researchers and the researched, the subjects and the objects of knowledge production by the participation of the people-for-themselves in the process of gaining and creating knowledge. In the process, research is seen not only as a process of creating knowledge, but simultaneously, as education and development of consciousness, and of mobilization for action. (Gaventa, 1988, p. 19)

Thus, the participatory research process involves a combination of three activities: research, education, and action (Hall, 1993). Its primary goal is to bring about a more just society through transformative social change (Park, 1993). Participatory research differs from more traditional social science research "in its commitment to the empowerment and learning for all those engaged in the process" (Hall, 1981, p. 6), as well as in the central role played by participant collaborators, and its highly politicized goals.

The participatory research tradition emerged from work with oppressed peoples in the Third World. Variations have been developed in many settings including ones in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Hall, 1981). More recently participatory research has spread to North America where it is being increasingly used in conjunction with various oppressed, exploited, and disenfranchised groups (Gaventa, 1988; Park, 1993).

The origins of participatory research can be traced to at least two sources. The first was a reaction by Third World scholars, social organizers, and educators to research methods developed in North America and Europe that were viewed as being more concerned with describing the social world than with changing it (Hall, 1981). In addition, there was a feeling that traditional research methodologies were not well suited to societies where major class differences existed and where
scientific knowledge production was monopolized by those in power. Methods were sought that would enable the oppressed and powerless to gain access to scientific knowledge so that greater social justice and equality could be achieved (Gaventa, 1988).

A second influence on the development of participatory research was Third World adult education movements, especially those that viewed education as a vehicle for personal empowerment, emancipation, and social transformation (e.g., Freire, 1970, 1982). The link between emancipatory education and participatory research is captured by Paulo Freire (1982):

If I perceive the reality as the dialectical relationship between subject and object, then I have to use methods for investigation which involve the people of the area being studied as researchers; they should take part in the investigation themselves and not serve as the passive objects of the study. (p. 27)

Like action researchers, participatory researchers reject positivistic philosophical conceptions of science. They argue for alternative paradigms that recognize that social science research can never be value free, that human subjects are not passive objects unaffected by the research process, and that participants as well as professional researchers possess critical knowledge. While participatory research has much in common with other action-oriented research approaches, there are some noteworthy differences, including the politicalization of the inquiry (Brown & Tandon, 1983), the degree of participant involvement, the types of research problems that are considered most important, and the emphasis placed on the research process itself.

Participatory researchers are openly and explicitly political. Their ideology emphasizes large-scale structural forces, conflicts of interest, and the need to overcome oppression and inequality through transforming the existing social order. The lack of access to useful and valued forms of knowledge by oppressed or disenfranchised peoples is viewed as a major problem that can be overcome through the research process. The beneficiaries of participatory research tend to be oppressed and disenfranchised groups who are not part of the existing power structure or knowledge elite (Brown & Tandon, 1983).

As its name suggests, the most central feature of participatory research is the participation of citizens in the research process. In participatory research, citizens are full partners in the research process and are usually referred to as co-researchers. The problem to be studied and the research questions that follow originate with the citizens whose interests will be affected by the research (Park, 1993). Ultimate control of the entire research process also rests with the citizen participants. Professional researchers are at the service of their citizen collaborators, rather than the reverse arrangement typical of traditional research.

Another distinguishing feature of participatory research is its emphasis on empowering the research participants. The process of gaining access to knowledge and skills normally considered to be the monopoly of experts is believed to be empowering, resulting in much more than just the information gathered (Gaventa, 1988). Through their active involvement in the research process, participants become more aware of their own abilities and resources and learn how to gather and use research knowledge. The opportunity to be actively involved in the research process often leads to increased ownership of the findings, more opportunities to reflect upon them, and greater commitment to seeing that they are used. In addition, once people begin to see themselves as researchers, they are prepared to address future problems when they arise (Gaventa, 1988; Park, 1993).

The empowering and collaborative nature of participatory research can also contribute to the process of social change through the creation of organized political groups. Because the participatory research process brings together individuals in a collective sharing, learning, and analysis, it can generate bonds of solidarity and an awareness of a common cause. Such citizen organizations may eventually become powerful political forces (Tandon, 1981).

In participatory research, the citizen participants are primarily responsible for the design of the study, including deciding how the data will be collected, analyzed, and eventually disseminated. The researcher plays an important role in the selection of methods by presenting the various options along with their strengths and weaknesses. The researcher may also help participants consider the human and financial resources available (Park, 1993). The researcher further contributes by sharing his or her research expertise and educating participants about how to implement particular methods. The researcher serves as a facilitator of the process, allowing the participants to take the lead.

Participatory researchers are open to the use of all available social science research methods
(Park, 1993). However, because citizens are primarily responsible for implementing the research, some techniques are less likely to be used. For instance, methods that require a high level of training or a high degree of financial resources are not often employed.

Methods that are inconsistent with the ideological and ethical principles of participatory research are also avoided. For example, techniques that create a distance between researcher and researched, or that objectify or deceive the subjects of the study (e.g., experiments using deception), are rarely used. Because the participatory research process is not only intended to produce knowledge that can change existing social systems, but also to personally change those doing the research and those being researched, methods that encourage interaction and self-reflection, such as interviews, are often used.

Published examples of participatory research are not yet common in mainstream journals (the journal Convergence: An International Journal of Adult Education is one exception), although written reports are becoming available from the centers and agencies that sponsor such research. In recent years, participatory research has become increasingly used in program evaluation.

An example of this approach can be found in Whitmore’s (1990, 1991) evaluation of a prenatal education program for low-income, single, expectant mothers. Whitmore worked collaboratively with a group of the program’s participants on all phases of the evaluation process, from determining the research questions through analyzing and interpreting the data. Whitmore (1991) reported that, because the participant collaborators were familiar with the women they interviewed, “they knew intuitively what would and would not work” (p. 5), and they were able to provide additional insights and understanding into the meanings of what people said. In addition to the value of the study’s findings, Whitmore reported that the women who had worked on the evaluation had personally benefited in a number of ways such as gaining self-confidence, reducing their isolation, and learning skills that could be used in other aspects of their lives.

**Empowerment Research**

The empowerment research model comes from community psychology where empowerment has been advocated as a primary goal of community research and action (Rappaport, 1981, 1987; Ser-}

rano-Garcia & Bond, 1994). While more has been written on empowerment as an intervention goal than as a research model, in recent years some attention has been given to the methodological implications of doing research that is empowering. The questions addressed are often related to issues of mental health (Swift & Levin, 1987), citizen involvement (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988), and community programs (Cochran, 1986). According to Julian Rappaport (1987), who is usually credited with founding and articulating this approach (Rappaport, 1981, 1987, 1990), empowerment is a process “by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs” (p. 122). The defining features of the empowerment model are its concern with the following:

- ... identifying, facilitating or creating contexts in which heretofore silent and isolated people, those who are “outsiders” in various settings, organizations and communities, gain understanding, voice, and influence over decisions that affect their lives. Empowerment is by definition concerned with many who are excluded by the majority society on the basis of their demographic characteristics or of their physical or emotional difficulties, experienced either in the past or the present. (Rappaport, 1990, p. 52)

Empowerment research shares much of its epistemological values with action, feminist, and participatory research. Rappaport (1990), drawing on the naturalistic research framework of Lincoln and Guba (1986), also offered some additional assumptions that he believes are consistent with the empowerment model. These include the idea that there are multiple and constructed realities, that human behavior is time and context bound so that enduring context-free generalizations are difficult, if not impossible, to make, and that causality is multidirectional and multifactored.

From the empowerment perspective, it is important to close the distance between researcher and researched, to “give voice to the participants’ definition of reality” (Rappaport, 1990, p. 56), and to help participants gain greater control of their lives through recognizing their strengths and abilities. Even vocabulary used is chosen carefully to ensure that it is empowering to participants (Rappaport, 1985). For example, the terms participant or coresearcher are usually used in place of subject.

Some features of the empowerment model not acknowledged or emphasized in other action-oriented models include its nondeficit or strengths
emphasis, its ecological/contextual orientation, and the need to use "paradoxical criteria" when evaluating social phenomenon.

Empowerment research attempts to ask research questions and employ methods that help participants (as well as researchers and policy makers) recognize their strengths and resources and gain mastery over the forces that affect their lives. For this reason methods and measures are preferred that identify and highlight the abilities and skills of those being studied as well as the contexts in which their capacities can best be realized (Rappaport, 1990). Rather than focusing on peoples' deficits, empowerment research attempts to emphasize their strengths.

Empowerment research is implicitly contextual and ecological. It is concerned with the study of relationships within and between various levels of the environment including individuals, groups, settings, the community, culture, and social policies. Mutual influences between and across these various contexts are assumed to occur over time (Rappaport, 1987). The important contribution of the historical context in which these other influences are embedded is also acknowledged.

The concept of paradoxical criteria refers to different stakeholders who have different and sometimes opposite expectations, perceptions, and preferences. For example, the criteria for evaluating the success of a social program may be different for the program's participants, implementers, and funders. According to Rappaport (1981), these contradictions are a natural part of human systems. An important role for the empowerment researcher is to help discover and highlight these contradictions. This is accomplished by employing research methodologies that capture the differing perspectives of each of the stakeholders and by recognizing that criteria may change over time.

The empowerment model does not specify a priori any particular research methodology. But, like other action-oriented approaches, the ethics and goals of the model do influence ideas about how research should be conducted. An empowerment agenda requires that "the means of acquiring data do not contradict the aims of empowerment, regardless of the content of the research" (Rappaport, 1990, p. 53). While such aims may favor qualitative methods over quantitative ones, both types are appropriate as long as the principles of empowerment are not compromised. Empowerment research also values the use of multiple measures so that different points of view can be adequately captured and represented.

Suarez de Balcazar, Fawcett, and Balcazar's (1988) quasi-experimental study of the illegal use of handicapped parking provides an example of research that was empowering at both personal and political levels. These researchers collaborated with a community disability advocacy group on an experiment examining the effects of police enforcement on illegal parking in designated handicapped spaces. Members of the local advocacy group were involved in all aspects of the research, including serving as data collectors. The study used an interrupted time-series design with a nonequivalent control group at another site. They found that there were both short- and long-term decreases in parking violations when police increased their enforcement of handicapped parking regulations, whereas there was no change when no police crackdown had occurred. In this study, the researchers attempted to empower the advocacy group members by making them critical members of the research team. The research findings were presented to both local and state governments where, according to the researchers, they had a significant influence on policy. For example, at the local level, the findings led to increased police enforcement of handicapped parking regulations and increased fines for violations.

**Feminist Research**

Feminist research is aimed at promoting the feminist agenda by challenging male dominance and advocating the social, political, and economic equality of men and women (Riger, 1992). It does this by using knowledge to create social change that will emancipate women and enhance their lives (Peplau & Conrad, 1988; Thompson, 1992). It is "research for women rather than about women" (Allen & Baber, 1992). Most feminist researchers are in agreement that traditional social science research has typically had a male bias (Cook, 1988; Peplau & Conrad, 1989; Riger, 1992) and that this bias contributes to the perpetuation of male dominance in society (Hubbard, 1988; Reinhart, 1992).

Issues in women's lives that have traditionally been undervalued or ignored, such as housework and family violence, are often the focus of feminist research (Allen & Baber, 1992). However, feminist scholars (e.g., Allen & Baber, 1992; Westkott, 1979) have argued that feminist research needs to go beyond simply describing or demystifying the lives of women and begin to draw attention to the political and social struggles of women.
The feminist approach to social science research has its roots in the women's movement (Mies, 1983). It grows out of an interest in combining the aims of feminism with scientific ways of constructing and using social knowledge (Peplau & Conrad, 1989). While feminist approaches have emerged from a number of social science disciplines, the writings most relevant to the focus of the present article come primarily from feminist scholars with affiliations in psychology, sociology, and family studies.

There is a diversity of perspectives about what constitutes feminist methods or feminist research. Some feminist scholars have argued that there is or at least should be a distinctive set of feminist methods (e.g., Mies, 1983, Westcott, 1979), whereas others have argued against the idea of a uniform feminist methodology (e.g., Riger, 1992; Thompson, 1992). A third group (e.g., Cook & Fown, 1986; Peplau & Conrad, 1989) has suggested that, while there is not currently a feminist methodology because "it is in the process of becoming and is not yet a fully articulated stance" (Cook & Fown, 1986, p. 3), someday there may be. There are, however, a number of issues where there appears to be agreement among feminist researchers.

Like other action-oriented models, feminist researchers take a postpositivist view of science (Lott, 1985; Peplau & Conrad, 1989). Feminist research is politicized inquiry and is explicitly ideological (Thompson, 1992) and change oriented (Fonow & Cook, 1991). Feminist researchers share the values of overcoming oppression, empowering women, and transforming society so that equality between men and women can be achieved (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983). The purpose of knowledge is to change or transform what is considered the patriarchal nature of society (Cook & Fown, 1986).

Feminist research also shares with other action-oriented approaches its recognition of the interdependence between the researcher and those researched (Gergen, 1988; Thompson, 1992). Most feminist researchers believe there is value in establishing an egalitarian relationship between researchers and participants and reducing the distance between the two (Fonow & Cook, 1991). Some feminists see the emphasis by traditional social scientists on separating the "knower from the known" and maintaining complete control of the research endeavor as a "reflection of the desire for domination characteristic of a culture that subordinates women's interests to those of men" (Riger, 1992, p. 730).

Some aspects of the feminist model that are given more emphasis than in other action-oriented research approaches are its concern with ethics, the role of reflexivity, and the attention given to emotional aspects of the inquiry process.

The feminist concern with ethical issues is manifested in a number of ways. According to Thompson (1992), feminists believe that social justice should characterize the process of doing research. This involves respecting differences, treating everyone as being of equal worth, and allowing people to "define their selves and their situations apart from the standards, constraints, demands and agendas of others" (Thompson, 1992, p. 16). Thompson also noted that some feminists suggest that an ethic of compassion and care should characterize feminist research. Researchers should actively promote the well-being of those who are in some way touched by the research process. A final way the feminist model addresses the issue of ethics is through its concern with language that might perpetuate women's subordination (Cook & Fown, 1986). Like empowerment researchers, feminist researchers are aware of the powerful potential of language to distort and discount the experience of those who are studied. For example, the generic use of masculine pronouns is avoided, as are grammatical expressions or metaphors that reinforce gender stereotypes.

Feminist researchers also emphasize the role of reflexivity as a source of insight (Cook & Fown, 1986; Mies, 1983; Stanley & Wise, 1983). Reflexivity involves reflecting upon, critically examining, and exploring the nature of the research process. Reflexivity extends to the research participants who may have their consciousness raised by their participation in the research process.

Fonow and Cook (Cook, 1988; Fonow & Cook, 1991) have suggested that a unique feature of feminist research is its attention to emotional aspects of the research process and the construction of knowledge. Feminist researchers emphasize how emotions can serve as a source of insight and affect the research process. For instance, the researcher's interpretation of a participant's experience may be upsetting to the participant and affect ongoing researcher-participant interactions. Rather than ignoring such emotional encounters, "feminist epistemology involves explicit attention to these experiences, analysis of their meaning, and the incorporation of conclusions into further inquiry" (Fonow & Cook, 1991, p. 11).
At one time, feminist researchers debated whether qualitative, interpretive research methods were more feminist than quantitative methods, but in recent years there appears to be greater consensus among feminist scholars that any method can be feminist (Allen & Baber, 1992; Peplau & Conrad, 1989; Reinharz, 1992; Thompson, 1992). Regardless of whether qualitative or quantitative methods are used, what is most critical is that they be adapted in a manner consistent with the values, ethics, and epistemologies of a feminist approach. Nevertheless, the more personal, interactive, open, contextual, and phenomenological nature of qualitative methodology has made it the most common choice among feminist researchers.

The topic, goals, and methods addressed in Blauser and Allen’s (1995) recent study of marital equality in feminist marriages exemplify some of the themes and strategies often included in feminist research. Married couples who identified themselves as feminists were interviewed about their marriages and the influence of feminist beliefs on it. While a number of qualitative data analysis strategies were employed, several are particularly illustrative of feminist research—for instance, the data analysis made use of reflexivity. The authors attempted to keep a critical perspective toward the self-reported data by initiating ongoing “reflexive conversations” among themselves and several colleagues. These ongoing verbal and written dialogues included hunches and feelings concerning analysis of data about the couples who were interviewed. In addition, the research participants contributed to the construction of the analysis by being given the opportunity to read through and comment on what had been written about them. Their corrections and comments were taken into account during the final data analysis. The study found a gap between an ideological desire to have an equal marriage and the actual practice of marriage. By identifying some of the strategies that couples employed to close this gap, the study went beyond simply describing the conditions of women and offered some insights into how they could be improved.

**COMMON ELEMENTS OF ACTION-ORIENTED RESEARCH MODELS**

Even though the various action-oriented research models have different disciplinary roots and historical traditions, they show a remarkable degree of similarity. The fact that very different tradi-

**Agenda**

With the exception of action research, most action-oriented research approaches are highly politicized, sharing an ideological commitment to obtaining and using knowledge to empower oppressed groups. All four models, including action research, strive to be consistent with the ideology of the clientele group with whom the research is conducted and attempt to include the perspective of everyone who might be affected by the research.

Action-oriented research models also share some similarities in the kinds of typical research questions examined. They are primarily concerned with research questions that will have implications for action, whether they involve addressing a practical problem in a particular situation or transforming the broader social structure. This leads action-oriented researchers to focus on variables that have a high potential for future action (Patton, 1986). In other words, malleable or movable factors that are open to human intervention are given greater priority.

Action, empowerment, and participatory researchers typically address questions that arise from the group being studied and that will have immediate and direct implications for the situation in which the study is conducted. Feminist researchers are also interested in questions that will have implications for social change, although the immediacy of the implications are less often the focus than in other action-oriented approaches. In contrast, conventional academic researchers are usually more interested in research questions that generate generalizable knowledge and contribute to theory development.

Whereas conventional academic social scientists have tended to study well-structured problems, action-oriented researchers tend to focus on “ill-structured” problems. Well-structured problems are ones that “tend to be solvable if the right sequence of steps is used in applying set principles. The problem is viewed as the same from all...
perspectives and once solved, the solution is applicable to the problem whenever it is encountered" (Tolan, Chertok, Keys, & Jason, 1990, p. 6). In contrast, ill-structured problems are ones that do not have well-defined or reliable methods of determining a problem or its solution. The problem definition may vary as a function of the particular situational circumstances and the stakeholder’s perspective. The relationship of research knowledge to action is not assumed to be reliable across encounters with the problem. Ill-structured problems require regular but differing solutions depending on where and when they are encountered (Tolan, Chertok, Keys, & Jason, 1990). The focus on ill-structured problems is related to action-oriented researchers' interest in understanding and changing human systems that are inherently dynamic and complex.

**Epistemology**

Models of action-oriented research are based on epistemological assumptions that diverge from many of the tenets of mainstream positivist social science. The orthodox view of positivistic social science includes such assumptions as: (a) the existence of a single, tangible reality that can be divided and reduced to independent parts, any of which can be studied, independently of others; (b) the belief that every action or effect can be explained as resulting from a cause that precedes it in time; (c) the view that research is a value-free endeavor and that the researcher is able to maintain objectivity and distance from the phenomenon under study; and (d) the belief that the goal of research is to develop a nomothetic body of knowledge that is highly generalizable across settings, people, and time (Guba & Lincoln, 1983; Sampson, 1978).

At one time there appeared to be some action-oriented researchers who were positivistic in their epistemology while adopting methods and pursuing agendas that were incongruent with such a paradigm. In recent years, however, essentially all action-oriented researchers ground their work in a postpositivist paradigm.

While positivist science treats human subjects as objects of inquiry who are unaffected by the research process, action-oriented research approaches view human subjects as active, self-reflective collaborators who play a critical role. Rather than ignore the reactivity inherent in the research process, action-oriented researchers acknowledge and value it. They take advantage of participants’ ability to self-reflect and collaborate in the identification and diagnosis of their own problems and in the generation of relevant knowledge.

A second way that action-oriented research and mainstream, positivist social science differ is that action-oriented research is future directed. It is concerned with creating change that will benefit those who are studied. Action-oriented researchers acknowledge that science cannot be value-free and believe that judging the morality of proposed solutions to social problems cannot be avoided. Mainstream social science, in contrast, is concerned with describing "what is," not with what proposing what "should be" (Babbie, 1986).

A third philosophical difference is that action-oriented research places more emphasis on the specific situation or context and less emphasis on universal laws. The action-oriented researcher posits that many of the relationships between people, situations, and events are a function of specific actors and the particular context in which they are embedded. These relationships can change as the definition of the situation changes and are often not invariant across contexts. Appropriate action is based not on knowledge obtained from previously conducted research, but on knowing how particular actors define their present situations so that planned actions will produce their intended outcomes. For example, Spender (1985) noted that “at the core of feminist ideas is the crucial insight that there is no one truth, no one authority, no one objective method that leads to the production of pure knowledge” (pp. 5-6).

Unlike traditional positivist research, which assumes that the research process is a neutral, value-free activity, action-oriented researchers acknowledge that the research process will affect the individuals and systems studied. Most action-oriented researchers would argue that the research process is itself an intervention and that changing the individuals and systems studied should be an acknowledged and accepted goal of the research process. Similarly, for many action-oriented researchers, the actual process of conducting research is considered as important as any knowledge derived from the research itself (Elden & Chisholm, 1993).

Their concern for promoting the well-being of those being studied and their acknowledgement of the reactive nature of the research process leads most action-oriented researchers to very seriously consider the ethical implications of a research
study. In contrast to traditional researchers, whose primary ethical concern is that subjects not be harmed, action-oriented researchers also believe that they should not be exploited. Using research subjects solely for the gain of researchers is considered exploitative. Most action researchers would contend that those being studied have as much right as the researcher to benefit from the research process. Unlike much conventional academic research where the benefits of a study are often seen in abstract terms (i.e., "to benefit science"), action-oriented researchers are concerned about how those being studied will concretely benefit in both the long and short term.

Perhaps because of their tendency to challenge prevailing positivist philosophical conceptions, most action-oriented researchers exhibit a strong awareness of issues of epistemology and their implications for conducting research. In contrast, many conventional social scientists have shown a surprisingly naive understanding of the epistemological assumptions underlying their methods (Kingry-Westergaard & Kelly, 1990). In the words of Kingry-Westergaard and Kelly (1990), this has resulted in generating

... scientific paradigms that contain principles or assumptions with which many researchers would disagree, if those principles or assumptions were made explicit. It also creates a narrowly focused worldview, or way of doing science, which precludes consideration of alternative metaphysical or epistemological assumptions in the practice of a given field of research. (p. 24)

Methods

The common epistemological assumptions and related agendas of action-oriented researchers have led to the development and use of a number of similar research methods. All of the action-oriented models value some form of collaboration between researcher and those researched. There appear to be several reasons for this. First, involving participants significantly increases the likelihood that the research questions will have relevance and utility for the participants who are often also consumers of the knowledge generated. Second, collaboration promotes local ownership of the research process and findings, and makes it more likely that the results will be believed and acted upon by collaborators. Closely related is the commonly shared view that the research endeavor is not just a way to understand participants, but is also a process for changing and empowering them. Finally, implicit in most action-oriented research models is the assumption that there are various sources and forms of knowledge that have value and legitimacy. Foremost among these sources is the experiential knowledge of research participants who are likely to possess unique insights that may not be available to researchers and other outsiders.

Action-oriented researchers are also likely to use methods that are responsive to the special characteristics of the people and situation under investigation. Because action-oriented approaches posit that it is the researcher's responsibility to devise measures and methods that will provide the best possible answer to the posed questions while being sensitive to the needs of participants, they are less likely than conventional researchers to limit themselves to existing methods and standard measures. Methods are favored that are not exploitative and can be easily used and understood by collaborators. This perspective extends to data analysis and dissemination. Because most action-oriented researchers are interested in sharing their research findings with participants and other stakeholders, there is a preference for strategies that are descriptive, straightforward, and easily understood by people who do not have formal research training.

Although neither quantitative or qualitative methods are a priori considered unacceptable, the proclivity toward qualitative methods is probably related to the greater ability of these methods to actively involve participants, the belief that such methods are less exploitative of subjects, and the methods' ability to capture the depth and complexity of the particular situation under study. In addition, one of the major drawbacks of qualitative methods—the limited ability to generalize to other situations—is less of a problem for action-oriented researchers because the immediate problem situation—rather than the search for universal, generalizable principles—is usually the primary concern.

Two other aspects of traditional positivist social science that are inconsistent with action-oriented research approaches, and that cut across the domains of epistemology, agenda, and methods, concern how the researcher's role is conceived. First, in conventional social science research, it is assumed that the researcher is the sole possessor of knowledge about the research process and that he or she should have complete control over its design and implementation (Hoshmand & Polk-
Implications

This overview of action-oriented research models suggests a number of implications for family scientists. Somewhat different implications are identified for three groups: (a) family scholars already working within one of these models, (b) family scholars with applied interests, and (c) family researchers in general.

Implications for Action-Oriented Researchers

Family scholars currently working in one of the action-oriented approaches (and those with a future interest in doing so) would greatly benefit from crossing disciplinary boundaries and learning from related models that have emerged in other research traditions. In addition to the obvious time and energy that scholars could save by not having to “reinvent the wheel,” such boundary crossing might also lead to greater cross-fertilization, and with it, significant advances in both methods and knowledge. Greater awareness of and interaction between these related research approaches might also hasten the recognition and legitimacy of postpositivist world views and research methodologies among more conventional social scientists.

Implications for Researchers With Applied Interests

Action-oriented research approaches are likely to be particularly valuable to family scholars with applied or clinical goals. For example, family therapists who wish to integrate research into their practice are likely to find action-oriented models useful for strengthening their clinical knowledge base while also contributing to the field’s scientific understanding. Family therapists will probably also find such an approach more consistent with and less intrusive to the goals of their clinical practice than more traditional methods of social science research.

Family scholars who want their research to have direct, practical relevance to audiences such as family professionals, policy makers, or the general public are also likely to find an action-oriented approach to be a useful and effective strategy. For instance, identifying and involving potential knowledge consumers early in the research process greatly increases the probability that the findings will be attended to and acted upon. A third group likely to find action-oriented approaches appropriate and effective includes evaluators of family programs. Action-oriented methods are well-suited to the dynamic, evolving character of most family programs. Because action-oriented research models recognize the inherently reactive nature of the research process, they can guide program developers and evaluators in making the evaluation an integral part of the program itself. Action-oriented approaches are also well suited to the evaluation of family programs and policies because of the importance such approaches place on recognizing and capturing the multiple perspectives and interests of various stakeholders.

Implications for Family Researchers in General

The implications of action-oriented research for conventional family scientists occur at least three levels: epistemology, ethics, and methods.

Epistemology. The postpositivist epistemology adopted by most action-oriented researchers poses a serious challenge to the positivist paradigm. While the rejection of the positivist paradigm by most action-oriented researchers stems primarily from its perceived inadequacy for informing practice and social change, most action-oriented researchers would contend that it is also inadequate as a model for science. Knowledge derived from conventional positivist research methods is considered limited because it fails to acknowledge and value multiple perspectives and sources of knowledge (Hoshmand & Polkinghorne, 1992). Postpositivist paradigms encourage researchers to be more flexible and inclusive in their recognition of how scientific knowledge is derived and legitimated. The test of knowledge is not whether it corresponds exactly to reality but how useful it is. As Hoshmand and Polkinghorne (1992) pointed out, “it is impossible to ascertain whether there is such a direct corre-
spondence. Instead, the test for knowledge is whether it serves to guide human action to attain goals. In other words, the test is pragmatic, not logical” (p. 58).

A second implication related to a postpositivist epistemology concerns the role of values. If, as action-oriented researchers argue, the research process is always affected by the researcher’s values, it is essential for family scientists to consider their values and the potential ways that they might influence the research process. Researchers must examine how their values consciously or unconsciously affect how they conduct their research, including the questions that they ask, the methods that they select, and how and to whom they communicate the results. As Namenworth (1986) pointed out, many “scientists firmly believe that as long as they are not conscious of any bias or political agenda, they are neutral and objective, when in fact they are only unconscious” (p. 29).

While the majority of family scholars would agree that human beings are active agents who possess free will and are at least partially responsible for their own behavior, family research is largely deterministic in its approach. It is focused almost exclusively on external causes and largely ignores the role that personal volition plays in human behavior and family dynamics (Howard, 1986). Family scientists would benefit from considering the active-organism orientation of most action-oriented researchers. Such a perspective has implications for how family scientists construct their theories of human behavior and family and human systems and for how they conduct their research.

Although not alone in their belief that human behavior and human systems are highly contextu-alized, action-oriented researchers remind us that people can only be understood by taking into account their personal history and the systems in which they are embedded. They also point out that our preoccupation with the search for universal laws or principles of human behavior may be ill-placed and lead us to overlook other valid, useful, and relevant contextually bound knowledge.

Action-oriented researchers remind us of how important it is for scientists to be aware of prevailing scientific paradigms and the epistemological assumptions underlying their work. As Kingry-Westergaard and Kelly (1990) noted, because many social scientists appear quite naive about the paradigms and corresponding epistemologies in which they work, they would be like-ly to disagree with many fundamental assumptions if they were made explicit. Consequently, a greater awareness and understanding of epistemology is likely to make family researchers more cognizant of the weaknesses of the paradigms in which they work and lead to greater scientific innovation. As Kuhn (1970) has pointed out, the most significant scientific advances occur when prevailing paradigms are challenged.

Ethics. Action-oriented researchers raise a number of important ethical issues. One issue concerns the beneficiaries of research. Most of us would like to think that our research contributes in some way to improving the human condition. However, as Rappaport (1990) noted, “much knowledge obtained from social science research is noncumulative and quickly forgotten, benefiting only the people who do research for a living” (p. 54). If our research is to be more than an intellectual exercise, we need to seriously consider who we hope will benefit as well as who may be harmed by our work. This not only requires asking research questions that can have practical utility for audiences outside of academia, but also means giving serious consideration to how the people who are the objects of our study will benefit, and insuring, at the very least, that they not be exploited by the process.

Closely related is the action-oriented researcher’s concern with making research findings available and understandable to nonscholarly audiences. Regardless of the research question, family researchers should consider whether their findings have any practical value and are of interest to audiences outside of academia. Most action-oriented researchers would argue that all scholars have an ethical responsibility to translate and share their findings with those who might benefit.

Participatory and feminist researchers raise a legitimate concern when they maintain that most social science knowledge is biased, usually in favor of those in power. According to these scholars, knowledge is power and power is rarely neutral. Through both its focus and methods, social research almost always questions or supports particular social forces. These forces ultimately either harm or benefit certain groups (Reason & Rowan, 1981). As Maguire (1987) pointed out:

The researcher, consciously or not, is in quiet collusion with either those who have power or those who don’t. Of course, many researchers never question the implications of their acceptance of the dominant paradigm research as-
assumptions. Their acceptance of the status quo is unconscious. Many are well-intentioned, caring and concerned people, attempting to live up to the standards of their discipline to produce knowledge useful to the solution of pressing social problems. (p. 25)

Scholars might begin by examining their own motives for conducting particular research, thinking critically about the biases inherent in the models that guide their research endeavors, and seriously considering the potential political implications of their findings. For many action-oriented scholars, failing to ponder these considerations is itself a political decision—one that tends to maintain the status quo.

**Methods.** Two strategies that may increase the practical utility of family research are focusing on strengths rather than deficits and collaborating with citizens in the research process. The deficit orientation of much of our research has the potential to be self-fulfilling. A deficit orientation can lead policy makers and practitioners to act only to remediate family problems rather than supporting and strengthening family life. A problem-free family is not necessarily one that is prepared to handle the challenges contemporary families face, and knowledge of problem prevention in families does not necessarily tell us what to promote.

Another strategy that could benefit family scholarship is the involvement of participants and other stakeholders in the research process. Such involvement need not be as extensive as the highly collaborative practices of most action-oriented researchers. At a minimum, it might be worthwhile to acknowledge that informed nonresearchers, such as those being studied and those who work or live closely with them, may possess valuable knowledge about the phenomena under study that could be used to guide a study’s design and interpretation of results.

**CONCLUSION**

There is a high degree of similarity between the various action-oriented approaches. They share a common core of epistemological assumptions, agendas, and a set of methodological strategies. Most of the models are highly politicized, with liberation and empowerment as primary goals. When differences occur, they tend to be differences in degree of adherence to principles or techniques and in the primary audiences who are to benefit from the research. Family scholars currently working in one of the action-oriented approaches, as well as scholars with a future interest in doing so, would be well advised to cross disciplinary boundaries and consider the work that has been done in other research traditions.

Except for feminist approaches, the use of action-oriented research models in family research has been rare. This genre of related models can provide family scholars with a way to conduct research that can contribute to both the solution of practical problems and the scientific knowledge base. Action-oriented research approaches also provide the benefit of raising a number of important issues that are relevant to family researchers of all orientations.

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