Action research in a world of positivist-oriented review boards

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ABSTRACT
Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) were created with positivistic research designs in mind, making the review process unsuited for most research efforts characterized as action research (AR). With the possibility that more IRBs will be created and that the definition of research will be expanded, certain types of research that falls under the umbrella of AR will be scrutinized. Specifically, the difficulty is for action research characterized by focus group or participatory research settings. The issues examined by the IRB such as voluntary participation, confidentiality, and risk to the participant are debatable for action research and need to be negotiated or perhaps reconsidered. Unless these issues are resolved, researchers may be reluctant to use this model in the future and AR will be marginalized. Recommendations are made to guide future efforts.

KEY WORDS
• action research
• criminal justice practitioners
• institutional review boards
Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) were created with positivistic research designs in mind, making the review process unsuited for most research efforts characterized as action research (AR). Considering the complexities in obtaining IRB approval in general, it can be even more difficult when using AR, particularly when partnerships between the researcher and the participant are involved. This may be due partly to the fact that IRBs are not as familiar with AR as with more conventional research approaches, and perhaps it is even more probable that review board members are completely unaware of the different types of AR that exist or that AR has such a strong and ethical regard for its participants. In essence, both AR and the IRB are competing for the same thing, that is, both strive to uphold ethical research. Ironically, the positivist nature of the IRB, and its power, prevents AR from employing ethical techniques with its participants in the way it was designed to do.

Examples from the field of criminology, specifically from the context of university professors and juvenile justice practitioners, are used to illustrate the difficulties in obtaining IRB approval. Although these examples are from one discipline and may not necessarily represent an international or agency-related perspective, it is believed that these illustrations can be applied to AR use in other settings or in other social science disciplines. Moreover, action researchers who work with vulnerable populations may share some of these same ethical concerns.

While it is recognized that IRB review may not be relevant to all AR work, especially among those who are not affiliated with academe or who do not have intentions to publish, it is possible for ethical review boards to increase their standards or for additional review boards to be established among professional organizations in the future. According to the American Association of University Professors (1999/2000), roughly 4000 IRBs were known to be operating in 2000. Most of these IRBs were affiliated with universities, hospitals, and private research institutions.

Concomitant with the potential increase in the number of IRBs, is the fact that the National Bioethics Commission issued a report in 2000 calling for a broader definition of research involving human participants, to include all scientific disciplines and professions (i.e. biology, social sciences, humanities, and professions such as business and law) (American Association of University Professors, 1999/2000). The movement toward extending the definition of research involving human participants may in turn increase the scope and authority of the IRB. To this end, AR may be placed under closer scrutiny regardless of what school or type of AR it is.
The Institutional Review Board and its history

The basis of the IRB stemmed from the Nuremberg Code of 1948, a set of guidelines established for the Nuremberg Military Tribunal to judge human experiments which involved concentration camp prisoners. This first part of the code stipulated that human participants must be afforded the opportunity to consent voluntarily to be in a research study. Additional aspects of the code included the capability of human participants to consent, to not be coerced, and to be informed about the risks and benefits of the research. Also included was the condition that researchers minimize risk and allow participants the freedom to withdraw from a research study. Similarly, guiding principles on conducting biomedical research that involved human participants (known as the Declaration of Helsinki) were promulgated in 1964 by the World Medical Association. These same principles were later revised in Japan in 1975 and in Hong Kong in 1989.

Almost ten years after the Declaration of Helsinki, a similar effort was undertaken in the US, when the protections for human participants were instituted by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. That same year, the passing of the National Research Act led to the creation of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research to develop a set of regulations. The Commission put forth the Belmont Report, which asserted that governmental regulations needed to be in place for research that involved human participants so that researchers did not unnecessarily harm the participants (either physically or mentally).

In order to comply with the Belmont report and the regulations established by the Commission, the Department of Health and Human Services (formerly known as the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare) and the Food and Drug Administration prescribed the regulations in 1981 as Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 46, Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46). Title 45 mandated that all research involving human subjects must be reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board, particularly those studies receiving federal funding. Depending on the IRB’s interpretation of the federal guidelines in higher education, even non-funded research projects that involve human subjects must comply with the university’s review board and researchers must submit a detailed proposal for approval.

Compared to other disciplines, an IRB proposal is required in most sociological and criminological research due to the nature of the subject population (e.g. prisoners, juveniles, mentally ill, etc.) and sensitive research topics. The most fundamental elements addressed in an IRB proposal are: voluntary participation; confidentiality and anonymity; risk/harm; and informed consent. Given the IRB guidelines, we know, as experienced and learned researchers, what is expected in the IRB proposal or what human participant issues the IRB committee will
scrutinize. While it is known what must be addressed when using surveys, interviews, or experiments, or in some cases, protected populations, it is often unclear and difficult to anticipate in advance what the IRB requires, what is needed, or what will occur when conducting a study that uses an AR approach.

Because there are many different types of AR, ranging from deep participatory approaches to more conventional ones, this article includes an overview of AR and how it differs from positivist inquiry. Following this discussion is a description of the potential impediments to obtaining review board approval when certain types of AR are used, which includes ethical concerns related to voluntary participation, harm and risk, and confidentiality. Also, using examples from the author’s previous experience in a criminological setting, additional issues that are unique to the AR process versus traditional research are discussed. (Other IRB concerns go beyond the scope of this article and are not presented.) Lastly, two sets of recommendations derived from the findings of the aforementioned setting are included. Since not all AR is subjected to IRB review by a university, federal agency, or private institution, the first set describes the conditions in which AR needs to be reviewed by an IRB. The second set of recommendations describes ways for action researchers as well as members of the IRB to tailor the IRB process to better fit AR.

On another note, clarification is needed in reference to the term practitioners used throughout this article. In the field of criminology, participants are sometimes practitioners. That is, social science research lends itself well to AR or AR lends itself well to social science where partnerships are established between judges, lawyers, social workers, police officers, probation officers, detention or prison personnel, etc. Thus, references are made to practitioners in several instances. Although this may not be characteristic of all AR in the social sciences, it is a typical approach in criminal justice studies. (Other participants in criminological studies include prisoners, young offenders, or patients, but this is not the focus here.) The level of participation with practitioners can vary; while professionals are not necessarily confined to an environment where oppression, racism, or sexism needs to be overcome (although in some cases this could be the issue), these professionals often need to resolve real-world problems that can be examined using a participatory approach. In some situations, criminologists work in tandem with practitioners to inform the entire scope of the project, including the design of a study and the implementation of outcomes. In other instances, it may be more practical for a group of practitioners to consult with a group of researchers. The kind of AR that is used and the way it is used varies.
Important differences between AR and positivist methods

Some claim the term *action research* was first used in the 1940s and is attributed to the work of Kurt Lewin and the Tavistock Institute (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Lewin (1946) believed that the AR process is a distinctive way to gather information about a social system while simultaneously attempting to change the system (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Peters & Robinson, 1984). However, AR in the 21st century goes beyond the Lewinian social-psychological definition of AR and involves more worldly, participatory, and modern forms of AR. At the same time, AR has recognizable roots long before Lewin and the Tavistock Institute; these efforts must be acknowledged as well (Fals Borda, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

AR has a rich history that can be traced back to praxis as described by Plato and Aristotle (Eikeland, 2001). Add to this rich history the efforts to combat social injustice and defeat societal ills in countries such as India, Colombia, and Mexico, as evidenced in the 1970s (Fals Borda, 2001). In addition, AR is diverse and has been linked to the works of feminist practice, group process such as T-groups, humanistic education etc. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). In the field of criminology, however, the roots of AR are not as easily detected. There is a paucity of AR. The examples of AR that do exist from this discipline, are, for the most part, dated. Researchers like Toch (1969), Warren and Staff of the Community Treatment Project (1966), and Wilkins (1969) were paving the way for future criminological research; however, their attempts to bring AR to the forefront received little recognition and have been perceived as unscientific and cumbersome. Some may speculate that as criminologists were vying for respect from other disciplines (and to achieve greater acceptance), many decided to adopt the positivist paradigm instead.

Even until recently, AR has not been visible in criminology other than one study by McEwen (1999). While McEwen’s use of AR may not resemble AR used by those internationally or organizationally, it seems to be the kind of action approach that criminologists would employ. In general, it can be characterized as participatory research. In 1995, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) developed a conjoint model for police officers and researchers (McEwen, 1999). Forty-one research projects were created where police officers and researchers combined multiple viewpoints, different skills, and various experiences to bring about change in an operational setting. Knowledge and combined knowledge, at best, were exchanged at all levels from research design, to analysis of findings, to implementation of action.

While the different types of AR cannot be explored in detail here (see Reason & Bradbury, 2001), it is important to note the general differences between AR and traditional research. Furthermore, as AR comes in many different shapes and sizes, some AR involves deep participatory approaches, while
others mirror more traditional research techniques. As Argyris (1968) explains, the positivist model diverges from AR since it instills an approach grounded in rigor to achieve accuracy. In empirical research, rigor is marked by control, control over the environment, the participants, and the research process. Additionally, rigor is demonstrated by the relationship between researcher and participant, as one that is temporary, detached, uninvolved, and objective. In AR, researchers are expected to abandon their role as ‘expert’ and adopt the role of change-agent, facilitator, consultant, co-investigator, or partner (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Rapoport, 1970; Reinharz, 1981; Whyte, 1989). Value judgments by the researcher become an integral part of the process, especially when a partisanship between researchers and practitioners is created. Reason and Bradbury add to this a more succinct definition:

Action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which . . . seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (2001, p. 1)

Unlike AR, strict empirical approaches are said to apply experimental designs, and reflection is seen as unnecessary. Many do not realize that AR uses both traditional paradigms to examine human and organizational behavior, but they are employed in messy real-world environments. Furthermore, as the goal of positivist research is to prospectively state the research hypotheses and establish causal links to support these hypotheses, AR and participatory approaches challenge this model as inherently unethical. As AR diverges from the power-control model, the research is instead tentative, evolving, and cyclical in nature. The ability to use multiple methods in one project means that the action researcher is ‘methodologically eclectic’ (Small, 1995, p. 943). In addition, what makes AR different is that the design and techniques used for data collection are developed in response to the input provided from non-researchers (Small, 1995). This is not to suggest that traditional research cannot and does not have an impact. In traditional research, change is often unforeseen, whereas in AR, change is not only the impetus for, but the goal of the project. The core issue is that AR goes beyond the discovery of knowledge and is change-oriented. With the creation of the IRB in mind and its goal of preventing harm to research participants, another key difference is that while AR seeks to avoid harm, it also seeks to bring about some good to the participant. In other words, AR is reciprocal in nature, as it can improve the quality of life or change a surrounding environment for the better. To further illustrate the differences between AR and positivist approaches, IRB requirements are discussed in the next section.
Action research and the review board

To begin the process, as in most research, an IRB proposal is submitted to a review board for approval, that is, assuming there are issues of human protections. Given that there are a number of issues that the IRB would consider before granting approval for a project, only a select few are highlighted here. Some of the issues that are covered include: how the appointment of practitioners by a supervisor to participate on an action team violates the IRB guidelines of voluntary participation; how harm may come to those practitioners who withdraw from a project, especially if it is known to their supervisor; and how practitioners who refuse to participate may be at risk of loss of job or job status. Furthermore, difficulties in describing explicit details of an AR project to positivist-oriented review boards are discussed as well.

These issues are illustrated further in the form of a mini-case study; that is, references are made to research conducted by the author which some may classify as participatory or focus group research. A collaborative effort was established between university researchers and juvenile justice practitioners to develop a decision support tool to classify delinquent youth in terms of risk and treatment. More specifically, a Classification Team was formed to determine the value and applicability of risk/needs assessment, review any existing predispositional instruments, and develop a list of assessment criteria for youth that practitioners could use. To select team members, two university researchers and two practitioners met to decide who would be suitable for the Classification Team. The team met once a month for a nine month period at a local private detention center for male and female juveniles in the Northern Panhandle of West Virginia. A variety of research projects were undertaken, and based on the research and group decisions, a classification instrument was not needed, but the needs of status offenders emerged as the main issue that the team needed to address. As a result, a proposal to establish a gateway center for youth diagnostics was created and subsequently implemented.

Voluntary participation

One of the conditions that must be met by an IRB is that participants choose to participate of their own free will. Using the example presented above, two juvenile justice practitioners and a university researcher decided who would be suitable for the team. At first, the decision was to appoint these individuals to the team. However, this plan was rejected by the IRB entirely. Instead, practitioners were invited to participate on the Classification Team. This did not satisfy the IRB either, for two of the practitioners invited were subordinate to another member of the team. The IRB was concerned that those who were subordinate would not be given the opportunity to decline the invitation given the
fact that their employer may not look favorably on their decision. From an AR standpoint, it was unclear what the IRB wanted in order to remedy the situation, since it is not uncommon for AR approaches to involve focus groups or participatory approaches. It seems that the IRB, concerned for vulnerable groups as in traditional research, was applying the same definitions to AR.

Clearly this is an example of where the IRB may not fully understand the nature of AR. While the IRB with all good intentions was designed to protect human participants, particularly those participants viewed as a protected population, the IRB cannot raise ethical reservations suggesting that adult employees are subordinate to their superiors, thus a ‘protected population’ of sorts. These terms, while applicable to certain empirical approaches, are not appropriate with AR. The IRB was created under the guise of keeping participants free from coercion, coercion that may be problematic for prisoners (a protected population) who may be forced to participate in research by a correctional officer or administrator. Appointment to participate on a project that involves practitioners (or employers and their employees) should be considered an honor and not misconstrued as threatening. As practitioners are the experts in this situation, they possess a great deal of knowledge about the field that is often unknown by the researcher. This precaution or concern for practitioners by the IRB is necessary, yet, at the same time, these concerns seem unreasonable given that most practitioners are autonomous adults and do not fit most IRB definitions of ‘protected population’.

Further arguments can be made to the IRB that AR is different from other approaches in the way ‘human subjects’ are perceived. Part of the AR agenda is to maintain the humane and ethical treatment of participants. First, action researchers believe that people should not be characterized as ‘subjects’. Instead, action-oriented partnerships involve ‘real’ people who are characterized as co-participants or co-researchers. Research participants are not to be used as a means to an end; participatory and action researchers do not see people as passive subjects or objects to be manipulated (Reinharz, 1981; Schubert, 1996; Small, 1995). Since they are more accustomed to the environment than the researcher, participants are seen as possessing value in the form of knowledge-in-practice about how to define the problem and how to pinpoint solutions (Cunningham, 1976; Krimerman, 2001). At the same time, the relationship is one that is reciprocal in nature, as researchers too, contribute an equally valuable perspective. Overall, this aspect deviates from the ‘expert model’ found in traditional research.

The contradiction here is that the same ethical concerns can be generated about the researcher. That is, university IRBs that are concerned about coercion of participants also should be apprehensive about faculty who are asked to participate in an activity by university administrators; concern should be generated when faculty are asked or appointed to task forces, councils, committees, or projects. Can faculty members be coerced to participate on a committee or in a...
research endeavor? For that matter, is it ethical for any person to be asked to participate in a study who is subordinate to another? If this is the case, our research will become limited to only a few populations. Taking this to the extreme, research on protected populations such as pregnant women (involving the fetus), children, and prisoners will be deemed unethical altogether.

In brief, AR is carried out with the participant. Action researchers believe in ‘research with people, rather than on people’ (Rowan, 2000, p. 5). Participants can be included in the entire research process instead of in a one-or-two time encounter. The extent to which participants are involved will differ depending on what type of AR is employed. Action researchers see and value the human beings we call participants, so much so that they are co-participants or co-researchers. For these reasons, AR should be perceived as an ethical approach to conducting research, not merely an abrogation of freedom to choose.

Harm and risk

Additional IRB concerns associated with practitioner participation can arise. In the examples described above, a supervisor would have to be notified if an employee/practitioner decided to participate because group meetings may take place during work hours. More explicitly, the IRB may be concerned that employees could be harmed or at risk if they choose not to participate or to withdraw from the project. In other words, if a supervisor knew that the employee was not doing his/her job, then this may be grounds for dismissal or loss of job. The approach of the IRB is one where assurances need to be made that employees can freely participate but that they can also refuse to participate without any repercussions. In AR, however, researchers can only assure the IRB that the risk associated with participating or choosing not to is minimal. In AR, like any other type of research, it is difficult to predict the ramifications that could occur as a result of a person declining to participate. At issue here is the fact that AR deals with similar ethical issues as exist in other types of conventional research. However, while the IRB may understand these dilemmas in the context of traditional research, they are less familiar with AR and the ethical angles that have been anticipated by the researcher. Familiarity with traditional approaches leads to a disadvantage to most AR in that IRBs will approve a project more easily if it mirrors positivist designs even if it means that the participant does not benefit, whereas in AR, the participant benefits more. Perhaps one way to reduce the likelihood of job loss or repercussions for participants is for researchers to engage in conversations with supervisors to explain the IRB process and the guidelines that must be followed. One final solution is for supervisors not to be contacted for those employees who initially refuse to participate.
Confidentiality

It becomes more complicated as concerns arise as to whether meetings will be held in a public, semi-public, or private forum in those AR settings that use focus groups. According to the IRB, what is said during a meeting and recorded may pose a risk to the participant if the information is not handled appropriately. However, one way to manage this is to verify that no single person is identified in conjunction with potentially damaging information. Following the traditional, scientific approach, the obvious route is for all individually identifying information collected during the project to be kept confidential, for documents to be stripped of any identifying information, and for results to be reported in aggregated form. In research that uses focus groups, reference might be made to the team or co-inquiry group, but individual participants should not be named. Information about positive outcomes may be associated with individuals who are responsible only if they assent. That is, team members who do excellent work on a project deserve recognition.

Another ethical dilemma, and one that cannot be easily avoided, is the case where a participant may reveal information in a public setting that they did not want to be publicized. This is true for scientific approaches too, yet it can be argued that action researchers are more privy to these problems and have the experience needed in order to address these problems when they arise. Also, despite the fact that group meetings may be held in a private or public arena, it is important that participants are informed that they may be used as a source of data and in some cases observed during group meetings (depending on the type of AR study).

Another way to ameliorate the situation, is to grant participants the right to review all documents (i.e. meeting minutes, transcriptions, etc.) to ensure that they are accurate and to include participants in the entire process down to the final report. Not only will this protect the participant, but it will complement the AR process since participants take on the role of co-inquirers. While this may be rare in practice, it is considered valuable to the process.

Action research and the unknown

Due to the fact that AR is a cyclical, iterative, and evolving process, it is difficult to specify to an IRB committee what exactly will occur during the project. Cunningham has voiced these same concerns:

The AR process makes it highly unlikely that the investigator will know exactly, or in advance, the design of the inquiry. Since every execution has to be evaluated and judged as to how effectively it meets the plan, revisions to fit new needs will be necessary. As hypotheses are validated or invalidated by the interim results, the problem may be redefined and the hypotheses and research methods modified. (1976, p. 218)
Embedded in most AR studies are many different types of research methods; however, they are not apparent immediately.

The situations described below include research with university members and practitioners who design and conduct an entire research project. Also, the research that involves additional participants who may not be members of the focus group or inquiry development team is highlighted.

As required by most IRB committees, the exact number of participants in the research study needs to be specified in advance. In AR, this can vary, and often does, as new members are brought into the process, and some members drop out. Referring back to the previous study, the IRB requested the exact number of participants, which the researcher claimed to range from eight to ten. However, after the team selection meeting, 11 participants were invited to participate initially, and all but one accepted. Then, five additional practitioners were invited to participate by the team after the first meeting, and three of the five accepted. Therefore, the total number of participants was larger than the number stated in the original proposal. In addition, the team also decided that at any point they might invite additional members to be on the team.

Oddly, the IRB also wanted to know specifically who the participants would be. While this kind of response may not be typical or representative of all review boards, it demonstrates the expectations which action researchers can be required to uphold. In response, the IRB was provided with examples of practitioners such as law-enforcement officers, education staff, detention staff, probation officers, attorneys and counselors. This did not satisfy the IRB’s request, and although it violated confidentiality, the names of the individuals were submitted. When and if the IRB persists, using the positivist model as a guide, the researcher will have difficulty choosing between confidentiality and adherence to IRB guidelines. A resolution of some kind is needed.

Moreover, in the study highlighted by the researcher, the possibility existed that surveys, interviews, evaluations, and data collection instruments would be used. At the fourth team meeting, a decision was made to conduct interviews with several police officers, and at a subsequent meeting, a decision was made to observe and interview the juvenile probation officer. Again, what makes the AR process unique is that it is not known when a particular method will be used or how it will be used. In addition, the researcher proposed that members of the team might be surveyed or interviewed retrospectively about the process. Again, it was difficult to specify the exact content of the surveys or interview questions to the IRB given the AR context and conditions.

In this same study, it was likely that an instrument to classify youth would be developed and validated. If a decision were made to develop an instrument for youth, then historical data files would need to be obtained. However, it was possible that the team would decide not to develop an instrument or would choose to develop a completely different tool. Positivist-oriented IRBs want
details about the specific data to be collected. Also, the IRB may request information about how records will be obtained. However, using AR, this information will not be known until the group agrees to develop an instrument and test it with available data.

Even if the researcher is able to articulate several possibilities, the IRB may decide that additional IRB proposals need to be submitted for each ‘new’ instrument, survey, or interview conducted. This would indicate that in an AR study, not just one IRB proposal will be submitted but several. Based on the researcher’s experience, additional approval was sought when the Classification Team decided to conduct interviews with police officers and an observation and interview with the juvenile probation officer. That is, the IRB would not approve the basic concept of the project or the proposed techniques to ensure that human participants would receive fair and ethical treatment. Submitting numerous IRB proposals at each new stage in the project can become a researcher’s nightmare. Research is then hindered by the IRB, and if this continues, AR will not flourish. It will be viewed as cumbersome, tedious, and time-consuming. This would be unfortunate given the wealth of opportunities for practitioners and researchers alike. At best, the IRB might approve the basic project plan and procedure, ensuring that ethical procedures will be followed (see Recommendations section).

**Recommendations**

**When AR requires ethical review**

Not all AR requires IRB review, yet at the same time, AR cannot always be exempt from the IRB or ethical considerations. Because review boards are not as familiar with AR as they are with positivist approaches (which they were originally meant to serve), it is difficult to recommend when AR should or should not undergo review. It may matter greatly to the expert of AR, but to most review board members, the different types of AR are unknown. This places AR at a disadvantage, especially if the definitions of research are expanded to include all types of research, and given that those scrutinizing the research may not be able to differentiate between the different types of research under the AR umbrella. There are gray areas about when and under what conditions AR requires IRB control. However, some preliminary or general recommendations can be made. In essence, these recommendations should be treated as tentative and evolving.

Naturally IRB review does not apply to all AR; research that is exempt by the IRB includes: educational or instructional practices; standardized educational tests; survey techniques; interviewing techniques; public observations of behavior as long as the person cannot be identified and is not at risk of criminal or civil liability; research about public officials; research that involves public or existing
data where persons cannot be identified; and research about food consumption and taste quality. Overall, it seems that the types of AR that may warrant IRB review are those that utilize deep participatory or focus group methods. Thus, in these situations, AR would require IRB review when:

1. employees, line staff, or those who may be subordinate to other group members are asked to participate in an AR project. IRBs need to be assured that the person’s decision to participate is not made by a supervisor or employer in the study (which would be deemed by some IRBs as coercive). Hence, action researchers need to make it clear to the IRB how practitioners choose of their own free will to participate and that a supervisor is not informed of their decision unless they agree;

2. participants are at risk of job loss or social standing if they refuse to participate or withdraw from the project, or if participation harms the participant’s reputation in the community (perhaps in cases where unpopular ideas are being proposed to authorities by an oppressed group or community);

3. a focus group or a participatory group is being observed during meetings or other activities. Action researchers must inform participants that what they say or do may be recorded. Allowing participants to review all of the documents produced may alleviate any potential problems and clarify any discrepancies of the participant;

4. participants are exposed to harm or risk at a greater level than normal in their everyday lives. This includes physical or mental risk, or undue stress.

These are just a few examples of when AR requires IRB review. Among action researchers there is a deep-rooted understanding that AR takes the participant into greater account than in other types of research. But, this does not mean it is or should be exempt from IRB review. Under the circumstances as described above, providing the IRB with a description of AR may facilitate the review process and allow review committees to see that AR is an ethical approach to conducting research.

Guidelines for IRBs and action researchers when review is necessary

AR is a very innovative and valuable way to conduct research in the social sciences and particularly in the area of criminal justice/criminology, although IRBs may not fully understand the ethical underpinnings of this model of research. Those in the humanities and social sciences may start to experience a process that is, in many ways, unjust, especially when their research is being compared to review board processes modeled after normal science and medicine. If more research is to be conducted using an AR model, then it will be critical for members of the IRB committee to be familiar with this design since at present IRB committee members may be more familiar with positivistic approaches than with
AR. Familiarity with AR by IRB committee members will make proposal review more efficient. This is not to say that AR should not be subject to ethical standards, but the problem lies with the fact that AR should not be expected to meet the same review standards as more traditional modes of inquiry. The end result is that AR suffers and becomes marginalized.

To facilitate this process, the IRB committee or agency review board can take several steps as well. These steps include the following:

1. Efforts should be made to restructure the review process where AR is concerned. In other words, a different set of guidelines or a different set of expectations should be created for action researchers to abide by. The requirements that stand today were developed for the purpose of natural science and medicine. To move this process forward, the structure and guidelines of the AR IRB proposal may have to be negotiated. At the same time, as AR adopts an active ethical stance, review boards must understand that humane standards and procedures will be upheld throughout the project as it develops.

2. If the former is not feasible, the action researcher and an IRB committee member should communicate about the true nature of this design and develop a set of guidelines or standards tailored to the specific AR study. For example, the IRB can request that an alternative protocol or some type of short form be submitted with each new addition to the project. This would reduce the amount of time spent away from the project yet comply with IRB policy.

3. A monitor could be appointed to work with the action researcher throughout the project to determine if there are any IRB concerns. In situations such as these, it may be possible to avoid any setbacks in the project.

4. It may be feasible in some projects for the researcher to submit quarterly reports to the IRB.

5. Not only should a member of the committee be familiar with this type of research, but the IRB needs to trust that the researcher is capable of making his/her own ethical checks during the project. In turn, the action researcher should be responsible and notify the IRB about changes in the process. Overall, these steps will facilitate the process, allowing the action researcher and the IRB committee member to agree on terms, move forward, and see to it that the research comes to fruition.

In essence, it is the duty of the IRB committee to question the project and the potential harm to human participants. Despite the difficulties in receiving approval for a study, in no way is this article meant to demean the responsibilities of IRB committees. However, the unfolding nature and unpredictability of AR (as seen with qualitative approaches) makes it difficult for AR to comply with the existing IRB positivistic-based guidelines. Following the empirical approach, an IRB proposal must explicitly state the steps and procedures that will be taken
with human participants. However, using an AR design, this is not always possible (Cunningham, 1976). It is possible to forecast the methods that will be used but not in enough detail so that exact copies and procedures can be articulated. If exact measures, instruments, and procedures are articulated initially, it is not AR. Hence, the challenge for this marriage to work successfully is mediation, especially when expectations of traditional methods clash with newer ones. In turn, since AR represents an ethical approach to conducting research where benefits to the human participants are the primary focus, it may serve as a vehicle to influence review boards. If accepted as an ethical approach to human inquiry, AR will prove a powerful tool for criminal justice and other social science researchers.

Summary

In sum, ethical standards have been developed to reflect the mainstream paradigm, in which the researcher in charge solicits information from a willing participant, in an ‘objective’ manner (Rowan, 2000). According to some, this form of research is perceived to be ethical even though the researcher’s prescribed role in the process is to extract information from the participant. By some standards, this unidirectional model is valued because we believe that empirically based research is ‘superior’; through it we are able to obtain accurate and uncontaminated results. Throughout the process, the researcher is presumed to remain detached from the human participants in the research. Again, this is considered to be a better approach, even though the researcher may extract information solely to meet his/her own needs (for publication, promotion, tenure, grants work, etc.). In most cases, the requirement that no harm come to participants is the laser-like focus for determining whether research is ethically appropriate. In some cases, researchers feel justified in this process of taking from participants because the participants are debriefed (see, for example, Rowan, 2000). Action research, in whatever form, embraces an ethical and humanistic approach. Yet, scientific approaches are viewed as more ethical and humane even though the participants in the study may be tested, controlled, and used with little gain to themselves. AR avoids this moral quagmire by creating a two-way relationship, through giving back to participants. The trade-off, of course, is some degree of compromise to the ideal of objectivity. One cannot work with a group of participants without, to some degree, becoming one of them. On the other hand, AR does not force one to forego the benefits of the scientific paradigm. This is so because the choices are not binary; one committed to making a difference in society has to negotiate between the demands of science and the messy realities of the world in which we operate.
Notes

1 Other elements must also be addressed, such as the duration of the project, number and ages of human research participants, where the study will take place, and the procedures applied to human participants. However, for the purpose of this article only the most pertinent issues are presented.

2 McElroy (1990) claims that researchers do not have to abandon their role as expert completely. Instead, researchers should concentrate on creating a collegial relationship.

References


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