

PRAGMATIC DILEMMAS IN ACTION RESEARCH

- Doing Action Research with or without the Approval of Top Management?

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ABSTRACT

This article problematizes a basic assumption that action research should be conducted in terms of acceptance by management. The importance of approval from the responsible stakeholders at the work practice, which is the subject of action research, has traditionally been emphasized in academic literature. External pressure can constrain an organisation to initiate and fulfil different types of needs for change. In this article we address the question of whether it is appropriate to accomplish action research in a way that creates pressure on an organisation to act. If the public risks suffering as a result of an organisation's inability or unwillingness to identify and rectify serious problems, there are strong arguments to answer "yes" to this question. This answer is particularly relevant when it comes to governmental organisations. The public has a legitimate requirement that tax-financed organisations should be well-functioning. This article illustrates how action research can put pressure on a work practice, and discusses the problems and challenges of this type of research design. An important contribution to action research literature based on this paper is that it shows that the dilemma in action research of balancing practice interests and those of science is not just about dealing with a dual agenda. The interest of the practice interests is multi-faceted. This paper points at the relationship between action research and principles for conducting critical research in information systems. Practical implications that can be drawn based on this paper are for example that it clarifies the challenge of different considerations that may be eligible in action research.

Keywords: Action research, Ethics and politics, Work practice, Organisational change, Information systems, Pragmatism.

1 Introduction

At the end of the 70s Susman and Evered wrote that there is a crisis in the field of organisational science because the research methods had become increasingly less useful for solving practical problems in organisations. They recommend action research as a way of acting (Susman & Evered, 1978). Avison et al. argued 20 years later that *“To make academic research relevant, researchers should try out their theories with practitioners in real situations and real organisations”* (Avison et al. 1999, p 94). Avison et al. pointed out that qualitative approaches to information system research are finally gaining acceptance and propagate for a particular strength of qualitative methods because of their value in explaining what goes on in organisations. They recommend action research since the method is unique in the way it associates research and practice (Avison et al., 1999). Many researchers have underlined the quest of the practical relevance of information system research (Keen, 1991; Benbasat & Zmud, 1999; Vand de Ven, 2007; Wieringa, 2010). As indicated above action research has been used in the information system (IS) community for a long time (Lau, 1997; Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1998) and researchers have come to the conclusion that this research method is receiving more and more academic credibility (Baskerville & Myers, 2004; Davison et al., 2004).

Chiasson et al. point out that action research facilitates the production of both theoretical and practical knowledge. They analysed action research articles in leading IS Journals and described the comprehensive diversity (Chiasson, Germonprez & Mathiassen, 2008). Avgerou argues that IS studies are broadening, thus becoming gradually more concerned with the wider context within which an organisation is embedded. IS researchers showed interest in studying the social consequences of IT, on areas such as national socio-economic development, work, privacy or democracy. Avgerou has classified different areas of IS research, where one is the social impact of IS (Avgerou, 2000). Wastell et al. explored how IS can be used to reduce crime (Wastell et al., 2004) and Chiasson et al. defined action research as a typical study in the societal impact of IS (Chiasson, Germonprez & Mathiassen, 2008). Traditionally, researchers have pointed at the importance of approval from the work practice when performing action research. Action research can be described as an iterative process involving researchers and practitioners acting together within a certain cycle of activities (Susman & Evered, 1978; Avison et al., 1999, McKay & Marshall, 2001). But what happens if an organisation is not interested in getting researchers studying IS and related processes? This challenges the common view of action research with consensus and researchers together with practitioners in a collaborative process as described in literature (Susman & Evered, 1978; Avison et al., 1999). Can it be appropriate to conduct action research even if an organisation does not want it? Is it even possible to carry out action research when the top management does not support the research?

To generate knowledge about social and institutional phenomena a pragmatic orientation towards intervention and design evolved as a way of knowing (Aakhus, 2007). The awareness of pragmatism as a research foundation is growing among IS scholars (Goles & Hirschheim, 2000; Ågerfalk, 2010; Goldkuhl, 2012), but Goldkuhl highlights that IS researchers are not suddenly more pragmatic. It is more likely that they have always had that characteristic, but they express it more explicitly nowadays (Goldkuhl, 2012). The aim of researchers to solve practical problems has led to an extensive development of methods, models and constructive frameworks related to the IS/IT phenomena. There is a wider focus in the IS-field than before and the field covers more areas than only the design of IT artefacts; other artefacts are also included. This is, for example, present in design science approaches (Hart and Gregor, 2010; Hevner et al., 2004; Sein et al., 2011). Consequently, we identify a need for IS researchers to discuss research methods that emphasise the improvement of, collaboration with and intervention in IS practices. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the complexity when doing action research which can stimulate to a discussion of what is possible and suitable to do as an action researcher when an organisation is reluctant or even hostile in relation to the process of action research and the results thereof.. We will illustrate this dilemma with an example of action research in a Swedish governmental organisation.

After this introduction, the article is organized in the following way: in Section Two, research methodology is described, followed by a theoretical background in Section Three. The paper continues an empirical illustration with analysis and findings from an action research initiative in Sweden (Section Four); and finally, the article is concluded in Section Five, comprising suggestions for further research.

2 Research Methodology

The overall research methodology in this paper is qualitative (cf. Myers, 2009). We use an empirical illustration of an action research initiative as a point of departure in this paper, and experiences from that initiative as a vehicle to discuss how action research can be conducted under conditions when there is a lack of management support in the organisation that is studied. As theoretical lenses (cf. Walsham, 1995) to analyse and illustrate the action research case (Yin, 1994) we apply a work practice model (Goldkuhl, 2005) and review published literature on action research (Section 3). The work practice model is used to illustrate the complexity in organizations linked to e.g. goal conflicts and the existence of different stakeholders connected to an organization. Based on the illustration of action research in the case, we compare the conditions and experiences with the conditions published in action research literature and generate dilemmas as a result. We also used published reports from the studied organisation in order to illustrate the dilemmas.

One of the authors of this paper has an insider perspective in the organisation that has been studied. Working part-time in this specific governmental organisation allows him to have developed

knowledge and experience of work practices spanning approximately 20 years. An insider view of organisations gives good access (Gummesson, 2000) to the field. Extensive access to the organisation was granted and empirical data was collected through participant observations from more than 100 police stations (about 7,000 hours of observation) and from interviews with more than 2,000 employees. IT-systems used in the work practice have been studied from a process perspective (from registration of information to output [e.g. reporting] and how the information is used in the organisation. A wide range of different types of documents, both internal and external, have been studied including internal information such as e-mails and other types of communication within the organisation. Presentations to the media and responses from the governmental organisation in the media have also been observed. In ten police districts, interviews have been conducted with persons from top management level of the organisation to the operative level, combined with participant observations in the work practice, where most of the registration of information in the IT-systems takes place. This is an example of the close access to the organisation. Balancing this with distance and reflection has been achieved working part-time at the university. This makes it easier to achieve periods of distance to the studied organisation. During those periods of time reports, research work and other tasks were performed based on empirical data and field notes from the time period active in the studied organisation.

In this research we are also guided by a pragmatic perspective, both as a point of departure and as an objective for the research result.

3 Action Research, Work Practice and information in IT-system

In this chapter, the two theoretical points of departure in this article are addressed: action research and work practice. For the concept action research (AR) the aim is to give a definition and theoretical background, while the term work practice is included because it is supposed to be used to analyse and understand AR better.

3.1 Action research

The definition of AR that we take as a point of departure in this article is: *a research method in which the researchers are involved to improve a work practice through active action and at the same time, collect data for research purposes*. Some definitions of action research in the literature are broad and could include such an interpretation. In an early description by Kurt Lewin, action research is explained as a combination of theory building and changing a social system through the researcher acting on or in the social system (Lewin, 1946; see also Rapoport, 1970, p. 499). But the most definitions of action research are formulated with more limited scope, where AR is seen as *collaboration* between the researchers and those who are responsible for the practice, which will be the subject of the research (see for example Blum, 1955; Susman & Evered, 1978; Masters, 1995; Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1996; Avison et al., 1999). The different phases in action research are

often described in a cyclical nature where it is important for the scientist to try to solve problems identified by an organisation (Susman & Evered, 1978; Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1996; DeLuca & Kock, 2007). Susman & Evered describe the process in five phases: Diagnosing (Identifying or defining a problem), Action Planning (Considering alternative courses of action for solving a problem), Action Taking (Selecting a course of action), Evaluation (Studying the consequences of an action) and Specifying learning (Identifying general findings). Collaboration between the researchers and the client system is essential according to e.g. Susman & Evered (1978, p. 588).

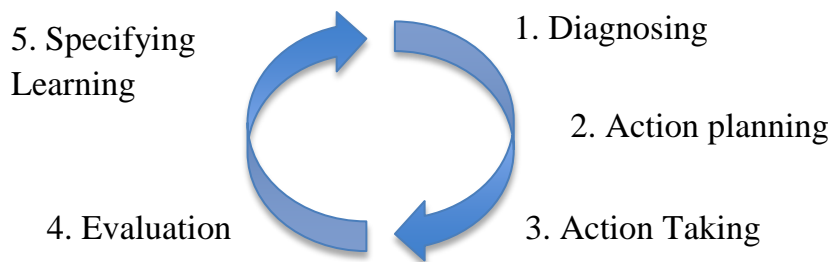


Figure 1: The AR Cycle (Susman & Evered, 1978, p. 588)

When action research is described within an IS research context, the researchers are given a “helping-role” in relation to the organisation (also called client system infrastructure, Susman & Evered, 1978) that is being studied and the methods involve the close collaboration of both researchers and practitioners. Collaboration is important in the phases of the research process (see for example Susman & Evered, 1978; Baker, 2000; Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1996). Needs, questions and issues in the studied organisation are of great importance for example in the diagnosing phase:

“Diagnosing corresponds to the identification of the primary problems that are the underlying causes of the organisation’s desire for change. This involves self-interpretation of the complex organisational problem” (Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1996, p. 238)

However the collaboration aspect above can be challenged and linked to the degree of success in action research projects. Avison et al. point out that successful action research is unlikely to be achieved when there is conflict between researchers and practitioners or among practitioners themselves (Avison et al., 1999). The researcher's responsibility is to cooperate, to negotiate and to avoid conflicts:

If the goals of the researchers and client differ drastically there is a tension. The researcher has lost his sight of the fact that he is to be of value to those whom he researches. Therefore, parties must negotiate their goals. Some method for satisfying

all of their goals must be found (Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1996, p. 239, see for example, also Warmington, 1980).

In an action research project it is therefore desirable that the principal for the organisation is an important *collaboration partner* for the researcher. In most literature about action research (See for example Susman & Evered, 1978 and Avison et al. (1999) above); this condition seems to be implicit, but some researchers makes it explicit:

“The goal is to alleviate the problem or to increase the effectiveness of the practice. In many cases, the action research project proceeds through a series of steps involving planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The researcher actively engages the organisational participants, particularly those responsible for the practice being investigated. Participation in the project is gradually increased to include others who are affected by the practice” (Baker, 2000, p. 370; see also Master, 1995).

3.2 Work practice

In descriptions of action research normally no distinction is made between action research in private vs. public organisations (see for example Susman & Evered, 1978; Avison et al., 1999). However, there are some papers that explore the dynamics of participatory action in the context of a bureaucratic organisation (see for example Nugus et al., 2012). In public organisations the work practice surrounding the environment in general is more complicated compared to a private organisation. For example, there are often a lot of goal conflicts in public organisations (see for example, Lipsky, 1980) and different types of stakeholders are strongly linked to public organisations. A generic model of a work practice (Goldkuhl, 2005) can be used to explain this type of complexity (see Figure 2).

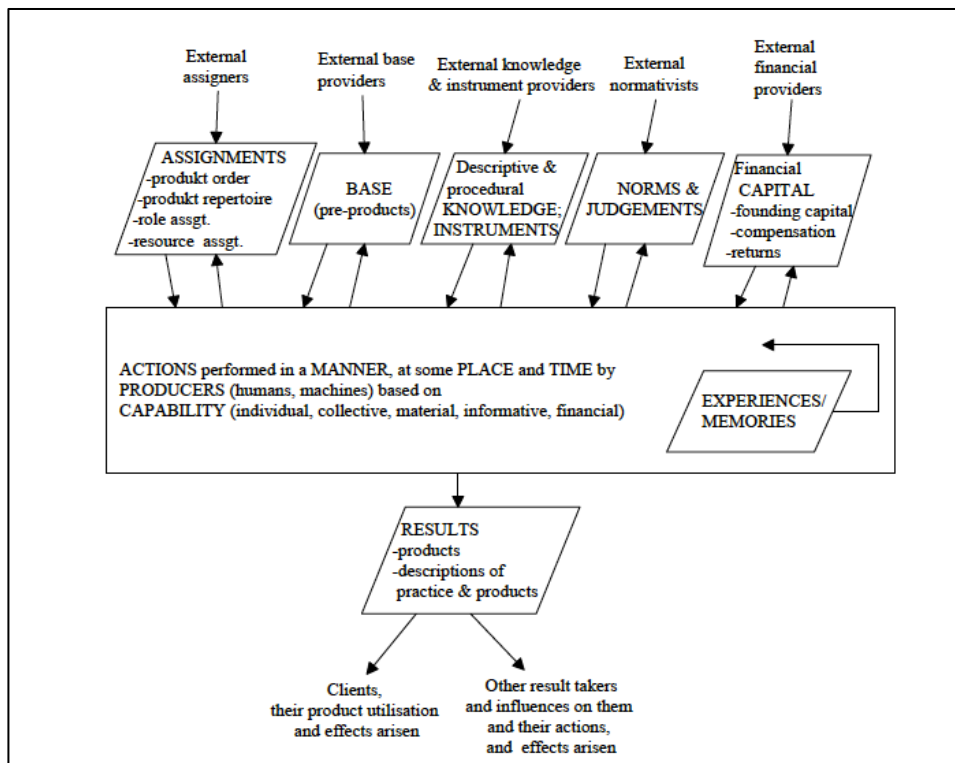


Figure 2. The generic model of a work practice (Goldkuhl, 2005)

Buchanan and Bryman state that the relationship between researchers and participants is strongly influenced by the organisational context in which action research takes place (Buchanan & Bryman, 2007). In order to further understand roles, relations and other aspects of action research the generic model of a work practice (Goldkuhl, 2005) can serve as a theoretical lens. Below we focus on a subset of categories that will be used in order to explore action research in a case study. *External assignments* can be clients' direct requests, but it is common that public organisations have role assignments that they have to fulfil. *Actions* in a work practice can involve people outside a particular organisation, which are the focus of action research. The *Participant* for action research can thus extend beyond an organisation's boundaries. The *Result* comprises both the products and the descriptions of practice and products.

3.3 Information in IT-systems

In the descriptions of practice and products in the work practice model, information from IT-systems plays an important role. (Holgerson, 2001) and Stephens et al. (2008) pointed out that information and communications technologies nowadays play an important role in persuasion, information exchange and documentation in organisations (Stephens et al., 2008). The use and interpretation of information in IT-systems is the main reason for several dilemmas in the AR-process illustrated in this paper.

It is often easy to get output from an IT-system compared to collecting knowledge about an activity in other ways. To quantify aspects of reality has become common (Porter, 1995). A balance score card is often used in organisations and can be seen as a communication tool (Anshu, 2012). Output from an IT-system gives a comparatively precise and reliable impression (Holgersson, 2001). However, research has shown that it is difficult to rely on such information. One example is when comparisons are made between organisations' performance (Luft, Sandra & Hunt, 1986; Eterno & Silverman, 2012; Holgersson, 2011). IT-systems filter knowledge and information from the work-practice. It may, but need not be deliberate action behind the filtration. Storing information in an IT system clarifies some knowledge that exists in the work practice (Holgersson, 2001).

Filtering and representation of information can be related to the ambitions for organisations to show attractive outcomes for different, external stakeholders. This is valid for all kinds of organisations. If you are in a management position there are several incentives to show good results, e.g. in terms of aggregated performance measures. Power (2000) pointed out that "creative compliance" is used in the audit process, games which both frustrate official intentions and which also lead to dysfunctional behaviour. It is possible to find this type of behaviour in different types of public organisations. Power (2000) has done his research in the UK, but this behaviour can be found in other countries. Brunson (1989; 1993), for example, has found that the presentation of numbers often has a higher priority than the reality behind the statistics in the Swedish government. Eterno and Silverman present in their book entitled "Management by Manipulation" how the police in New York (US) act to give the impression that the organisation operates in a certain way, even though it does not. The police have reportedly downgraded felony crimes to misdemeanours in an apparent attempt to keep crime statistics low for serious crimes. In May 2010, Village Voice published transcripts of audio recordings by Adrian Schoolcraft, a patrol officer in Brooklyn's 81st precinct, where police officers were encouraged by their superiors to manipulate crime statistics by failing to record robberies and other crimes and downgrading them to misdemeanours that were not recorded in the follow-up system. Eterno and Silverman's findings indicate that this type of manipulation has emerged over the past few years (Eterno & Silverman, 2012).

To adopt an outside perspective (e.g. a client focus) (see for example Eliasson, 1995), where an organisation's ability to meet citizens' needs is in focus, can be in direct conflict with the interest of leading positions in an organisation if the most important issue for the managers is to give an attractive picture of how the organisation performs. As an action, researchers need to take a stand.

Responsibility for the results needs to be taken whether they are in line with the organisation's willingness to present a good external result or not. As a researcher you have the responsibility to act, based on e.g. an agenda to achieve change (Myers, 2009). Beynon-Davies highlights that it is important to take into consideration the political environment in order to be able to improve an organisation's performance (Beynon-Davies, 2009). Brannick and Coghlan emphasize the importance of considering the impact of organisational politics, for example identifying the major stakeholders in the organisation and how they can get involved in the process, when doing action research. Brannick

and Coghlan highlight the issue of doing academic research inside an organisation and state that the subject of insider academic research has received relatively little consideration. They mean that being an insider influences among other things, the access to data, pre-knowledge, and the impact of organisational politics (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Nugus et al. pointed out that little research has focused on the ethical and political dimensions of power relations between management gatekeepers and staff in large organisations in the negotiation of actions research (Nugus et al., 2012). As mentioned above, descriptions of action research collaboration with the practice is seen as essential, but using the generic model of the work practice clarifies that especially in public organisations there are a lot of stakeholders in the work practice which can have different aims.

4 Empirical Illustration

In order to illustrate, reflect upon, and analyse the questions mentioned above the following empirical illustration is used as an example. The case is from a governmental organisation in Sweden. The organisation performs the majority of the country's traffic surveillance. To delimit the amplitude of the example, we will focus on an illustration of one area of the traffic-monitoring task – the work performed in order to reduce the number of drunk drivers on the roads.

4.1 Short summary of relevant research in the current example

A lot of research has been done in the traffic safety area (see for example Elliot, 1993; Elder et al., 2004; ETCS, 1999; Homel, 1986; 1988; Zaal, 1994). Four common tactics are defined by several researchers in order to reduce the problems with drunk drivers:

1) *Implement a large number of random drunk driver tests.* The purpose of this methodology is to increase the overall perceived risk of detection. The primary way to achieve this is to spread out the controls over time and space - not to catch drunk drivers.

2) *Implement targeted drunk driver tests.* The aim is to increase the perceived risk of detection of high-risk places at high-risk times and for specific risk groups.

3) *Targeted breathalyser testing* involves aligning the work against certain individuals or vehicles. It is about trying to convince specific persons to stop certain behaviour through support and increased risk of detection.

4) *Information campaigns.* Research has shown the importance of campaigns getting media publicity and including repressive activities by the police.

4.2 How the control and follow up system influence the work with breathalyser tests

To control and follow up the work done to reduce the number of drunk drivers, the actual governmental organisation are using key ratios in terms of number of completed breathalyser tests during a certain time period.

City/ Municipality	Number of citizens	Number of employees	Number of breathalyser tests per employee and year	Number of breathalyser tests during 2013
A	148 000	105	286	26775
B	132 000	92	286	28305
C	30 000	47	286	15810
D	12 000	8	243	2000
E	12 000	14	243	3200

Table 1. Goals used to reduce the number of drunk drivers in one county of Sweden, 2013.

E-mail to employees from a senior manager (See Table 1):

[...] Here's a list of the distribution of the quantitative targets for [...] for 2013. The Traffic Manager [...] has broken this down per individual in a formal way which I will not go into detail.

And an e-mail from the Traffic Manager to the employees:

[...] next year's traffic goals. The number of employees in the respective area /unit is taken from the personnel division. The numbers probably do not match with reality but it is a reality that we all live with.

As stated above, only the key figures in Table 1 are in focus. There are no goals concerning *where* the breathalyser test is taken. Neither are there targets that regulate the time of day *when* breathalyser tests have to be performed. Moreover, which *days* of the week or how the tests should be *spread* over the year are not taken into consideration when the goals are formulated and implemented (see 4.1). The basis for the calculation behind this goal is also questionable; the number of employees is not accurate with the real number of employees and what are the thoughts behind 286 and 243 breathalyser tests respectively per employee and per year? Why is this goal different in different areas? How the managers handled the traffic goals generated a lot of frustration from the employees and this was clearly communicated to the researchers. From the managers' point of view on the other hand, the problem was that the employees complain that key figures as in Table 1 were in focus. The managers'

perspective makes the situation problematic for the action researcher in this organizational setting. It was obvious, based on the empirical investigation, that the control and follow up system not satisfying at all.

An IT system is used to register data, process it and to present aggregated statistics, which form the basis for assessing the performance of the organisation. Here, the focus is solely on the number of breathalyser tests. Nothing else is registered and processed in the system and the importance to fulfil the number of breathalyser tests is communicated in different ways in the organisation; especially at the end of year. An internal e-mail from one manager to the employees in a unit illustrates this:

“What N especially touched upon was the importance that we meet our goals, as well those related to investigations & the emergency unit. The directives from the county police commander are crystal clear, we must manage to reach the goals we have been allotted!

Well, I will not nag about this, but when we are about 900-1000 (difficult to obtain an exact figure) breathalyser tests below target we must do something "clever" to fix the numbers.”

The way of controlling and following up breathalyser tests produces a very unfortunate effect. Figure 3 below indicates when alcohol-related accidents occur in traffic. There is a marked concentration during evenings and nights Friday/Saturday and Sunday.

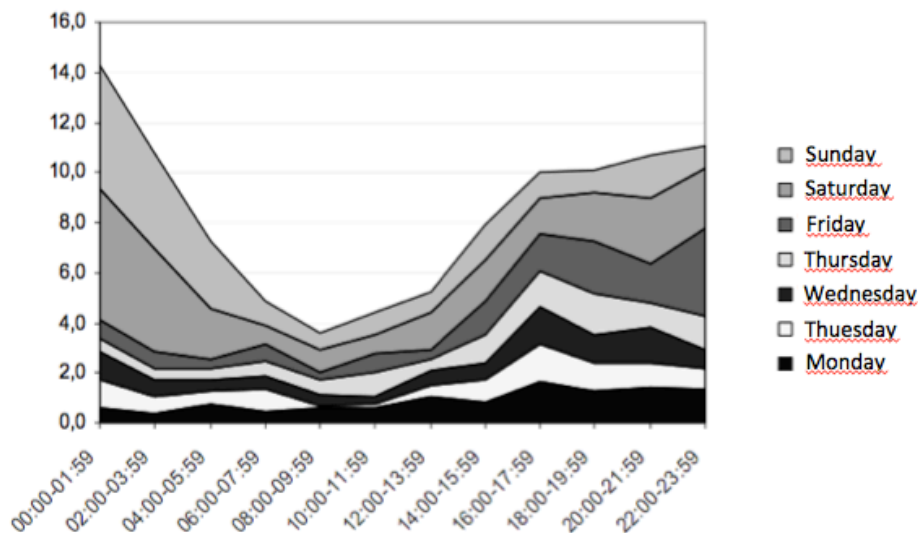


Figure 3: Percentage distribution per 24 hours of alcohol-related accidents (Woxblom, Holgersson & Dolmén, 2008)

If we compare the distribution of alcohol-related accidents with the performance of the tests, we can see that most of the tests were carried out on weekday(s) between 09.00 and 12.00 as shown in Figure 4. Most tests were thus carried out when the risk for drunk drivers was at its lowest.

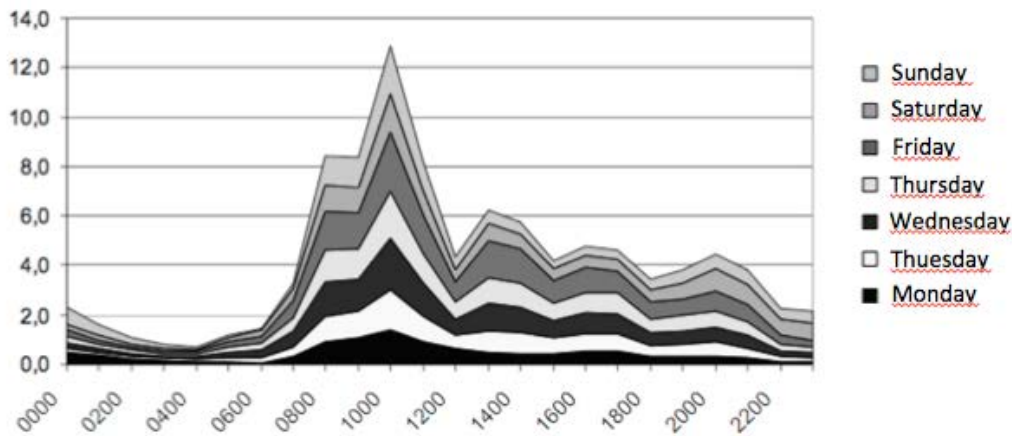


Figure 4: Percentage distribution per 24 hours of breathalyser testing (Woxblom, Holgersson & Dolmén, 2008)

A common expression in management literature is “What gets measured, gets done” (see for example Maureen, 2004; Wilsson, Croxson & Atkinson, 2006; Knopf et al., 2007). The present organisation’s way to control, manage and follow up the work to reduce the number of drunk drivers is focused on numbers. However, the most rational way to act to fulfil that number is not necessarily the best way of acting to reduce the number of drunk drivers (cf. the four strategies above). Based on the material above we can identify that the way to monitor and control and the IT-systems used, did not support what traffic-research has shown to work. Road accidents cost society large monetary sums every year and cause great suffering for humans. It is therefore important to minimize accidents and an important measure is to reduce the number of drunk drivers who drive on the roads. But the way the governmental organisation worked was not satisfactory in trying to achieve this. There was a great need to improve work practices (management principles, figures, reporting and IT-systems). The problem was not at all interpreted in the same way by the researcher and the top management. This caused a dilemma What was possible and suitable to do as an action researcher when the management was reluctant or even hostile in relation to the process of action research and the results thereof? This will we discussed in the next section.

5 Dilemmas in Action Research – A Discussion

In this particular action research setting, the management did not listen to the action researcher’s arguments; namely, that the way of setting this quantitative goal with lack of analysis was not conducive to achieving the overall objectives to reduce the number of deaths and injuries in traffic.

This caused a dilemma in the AR-process. The management dismissed the research results in contrast to the staff on the operative and field level who welcomed the findings. Rapoport pointed out a goal dilemma when doing action research:

“Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of peoples in an immediate problematic situation and the goals of social science” (Rapoport, 1970, p. 499)

The example with the breathalyser test shows it is not only a dual agenda between practical and scientific interest. The goal dilemma is more complex than Rapoport highlighted. Different stakeholders in the work practice have different agendas. Research in similar organisations in other countries has shown that management and ground staff have two completely different perspectives (Reuss-Ianni, 1993). Which approach is to be embraced by the researcher? The top management approach or that of staff on the operative level? The generic model for work practice by Goldkuhl (2005) also shows that public organisations have role assignments that they have to fulfil. The goal dilemma for the researcher will therefore be even more complex if these external stakeholders are also taken into consideration in order to broaden the view on collaboration within AR settings.

Another dilemma that Rapoport describes and which has a strong connection to the above discussion is the dilemma of initiatives. The service-oriented action researcher places the initiative to define the problem with the client (Rapoport, 1970). A problem occurs if the researcher finds out:

“[...] what the client initially thought of as the problem was not really the most important problem in terms of his goals or the primary task of the organisation. [...] If the researcher allowed the definition of the problem and associated initiatives to rest too exclusively with the client, he might be slighting both the practical and the scientific goals of the exercise” (Rapoport, 1970, p. 509).

Rapoport pointed out, however, that if the researcher was too brusque or unskilled in pushing his own perception and perspective, he might jeopardize the exercise because of resistance from participants in the organisation (Rapoport, 1970). But if there is a huge difference between what the researcher has found (the result) and the way of looking at the problem (perspective and process) it will be difficult or impossible even if the researcher is skilful. The dilemma of initiatives is more problematic than that shown in Rapoport’s article and one of these reasons is the interest from management to show that the organisation is working in a good manner. Legitimacy building is namely an important factor in an organisation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio, 1983) from an institutional theory perspective. Brunson (1989, 1993) has found that the presentation of numbers often has a higher priority in governmental organisations than the reality behind the statistics. Ydén (2008) points to this disconnection that aims to create a good impression rather than dealing with the problems of the organisation (Ydén 2008). The governmental organisation could, based on statistics of an increasing number of breathalyser tests, give the impression that the work to reduce the number of drunk drivers

works well. For the upper management this was obviously appealing, but also for the responsible politicians, controlling the organisation and legitimizing its existence vis á vis the public. They can be satisfied with this picture and not sufficiently interested to put pressure on the organisation to change their focus of the simplified number of breathalyser tests as a proof of how the organisation works. Politicians in opposition have another agenda. From the management point of view, the focus on the quantitative goal as the number of breathalyser tests was not seen as a problem. What the number was really saying and how this control and follow up system affects the road safety was not a welcomed subject and could risk questioning the façade of a well-functioning and goal oriented organisation. For an action researcher, this condition is a challenge and raises several questions: Is it possible to do action research without collaboration with and support from the top management in an organisation? Is it judicious to do research without consent? Is it ethical not to act from a tax payer or citizen perspective? This is important questions closely linked to the aim of the paper. To follow the title in Nugus et al.'s article "The politics of action research: "If you don't like the way things are going, get off the bus" is of course, an option. But such action in this case can be considered as going against public and common interest. Nugus et al. have their research formally sanctioned at the highest level of the organisation, but met resistance at lower levels in the organisation, where frontline staff was less supportive, suspicious or hostile towards management-led processes. Some executive directors reacted also defensively to negative findings in the data analysis (Nugus et al., 2012).

In the example above concerning breathalyser tests, society's interest to reduce suffering, deaths and injuries and the dearth of well-functioning traffic-safety initiatives with drunk drivers, were seen as the main problem. In this case, action research was a form of whistle-blowing. Several researchers have pointed out that whistleblowing is an important means of improving government transparency and accountability (Jos, 1991; Rosen, 1998; Rosenbloom, 2003). The goal-setting and follow-up activities needed to be changed, with or without collaboration of top management. Is it possible to succeed with such an aim? Can action research be conducted under such conditions? The answer is yes, at least to the last two questions. This paper would be too extensive, if the research process influencing the governmental organisation work with breathalyser tests was described in detail, since the study is longitudinal (2007-2013). A short description of the action research process follows.

The main tactic from the action research perspective was to use media to create external pressure on the organisation trying to achieve change. External whistle-blowing, strong evidence and mass media publicity have proved to be essential components of effective whistleblowing (Apaza & Chang, 2011). The result of a research study was presented on the major radio news channels and then newspapers and other major media outlets spread the news. In simplified terms, the research study illustrated that breathalyser testing was performed at the wrong time, in the wrong places and with the wrong purpose. Through research collaboration with ground staff in the field, the number of examples emerged and by convincing some of them to speak openly about some cases an actual problem was illustrated in a clear manner in the media. Although the organisation defended itself with regards to the criticism, the pressure in the long run became so high that it slowly began to generate change. The highest upper management level took away the quantitative goal to reach a specific level of

breathalyser tests, but left the follow-up system unchanged. However, middle managers kept the quantitative focus. If we take a look outside the organisation, some local politicians got the motivation to influence changes in the way the organisation formulated goals in the traffic safety area. This led to a situation where some managers requested assistance to develop new objectives and monitoring the current activity in other, broader and more comprehensive ways. It was however, a difficult balancing act from an action researcher's perspective. There was a need to maintain external pressure by various conditions being highlighted in the media while it was important not to spoil the collaboration with management that went in the direction for the improvement of work practices.

In the AR-cycle perspective (Susman and Evered, 1983) the first round of the cycle involved to a large extent media, some politicians and also ground staff in the organisation who contributed with information and ideas. The next round in the AR-cycle focused more on managers, partially media and a little less than before, ground staff. The next round in the AR-cycle will probably lead to more managers as participants, but also that ground staff are more and more involved in the process. The purpose of the first lap of the AR cycle was to force the management to get a picture of the problem that was more in line with public interest. The next lap in the AR cycle was to help management build a new way to manage and follow up activities. While the third row is about supporting the implementation of the new approach in terms of goal-setting and how the activity is monitored in the field of road safety. From the practice generic model, it was of greatest importance first to highlight the role of the mission of the organisation and the public's demands, while management's needs increased in importance as the process progressed.

6 Conclusions and Implications

The aim of this paper is to highlight and illustrate the complexity when doing action research and illustrates several dilemmas in action research. It exposes and problematizes certain concepts and themes that have been studied in previous research. Rapoport (1970) for example, pointed out dilemmas related to participation, actors, problems of identifying clients, goal conflicts, etc. Nugus et al. pointed at the importance of considering the politics of action research (Nugus et al., 2012). They also highlight that there are legitimacy-building activities in organisations, but the link between these activities and action research is not clear. This paper clarifies such a connection. Nugus et al. pointed out that:

"Little empirical attention has focused on the ethics and politics of negotiating power imbalances between executive gatekeepers and ground staff" (Nugus et al., 2012, p. 1947).

We agree with this conclusion, but elaborated on it further by adding other political dimensions that the action researcher has to deal with. An organisation has both a political dimension inside the organisation; but there is also a political dimension outside an organisation with strong connections to the work practice. In both dimensions, legitimacy is an important factor (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). As Beynon-Davies pointed out, it is important to take into consideration the political environment in order to be able to improve an organisation's performance (Beynon-Davies, 2009, see also Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). In this context there are reasons to make connections to principles for conducting critical research in information systems. Myers and Klein pointed out the importance of taking a value position for motivating and grounding a critical research project. They also advocate the principle of improvements in society and that critical researchers should identify important beliefs and social practices and challenge them with potentially conflicting arguments and evidence (Myers & Klein, 2011). In this paper dilemmas when doing actions research was illustrated through an empirical example (see section 4), which contained a discussion of problematic standpoints to take into consideration as an action researcher (see section 5). What is stated in this article has clear parallels to certain areas of critical research, but some of the findings and questions can be developed in further studies.

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