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# Action Research and Collaborative Management Research: More than Meets the Eye?

A. B. (Rami) Shani, David Coghlan, Stefano Cirella

Action research and collaborative management research emerge from different traditions and each begins from a different foundational position in regard to action and to collaboration. Both are different from the traditional research, evaluative research or practitioner research orientations. From a grounding in a philosophy of practical knowing as social science, this article engages in a comparative theoretical exploration of action research and collaborative management research through a focus on the operations of human knowing which yield a general empirical method. It reviews the origins of each approach and how they differ significantly from each other in the context in which they operate, with consequent differences in how the research is implemented and how the relationship between the parties is structured. The general empirical method provides a critical perspective on assessing the quality of action research and collaborative management research in terms of dimensions of real-life action, the quality of collaboration, the quality of inquiry in action and sustainability. The aim is to develop understanding of how these two approaches relate to one another so as to advance knowledge of the different modalities or expressions that comprise the broad field of action- and collaborative-oriented research as a social science of practical knowing.

**Key words:** action research, collaborative management research, general empirical method

## Introduction

As the field of management research matures, so are the different streams of thoughts and practice that emerged during the past century. “Management” and “research” are the targets for growing criticism. Management and its practitioners are criticised in the public debate and in scholarly writings for acting irrationally based on unfounded beliefs and imitation (Pfeffer, 2009). Management science and the researchers it engages are criticised for producing knowledge of little relevance for management practice (Starkey, et al., 2009). Action research and collaborative management research approaches, embedded in a synergistic engagements of managers and researchers, enhances the relevance of both for management practice (Shani, et al., 2008; Coghlan, 2011a). In this article, we locate practical knowing as social science, describing its characteristics so as to ground the foundation of how action research and collaborative management research have the potential to yield both robust theory for scholars and actionable knowledge for practitioners. We examine and distinguish between action research and collaborative management research, in order to demonstrate the unique added value of each and possible limitations. The general empirical method advanced by Coghlan (2010a) will provide the standard template for the comparative investigation.

The evolution of management inquiry is characterised by methods that are based on varied degrees of *action* and *collaboration* that were advanced during the last (and the current) century, each of which seems to emphasise distinct scientific or collaborative or action features. Such methodologies include action research, participatory action research, action learning, action science, developmental action inquiry, co-operative inquiry, clinical inquiry/research, appreciative inquiry, learning history, intervention research, and collaborative management research, to mention a few (Shani, Adler, & Styhre, 2004; Coghlan, 2010a). The collaborative and action research orientations are based on a specific world view (ontology), epistemology that expresses how we seek to know (the theory of knowledge) and methodologies that articulate the approach that is being adopted for inquiry (Cassell & Johnson, 2006).

This article utilises the structure of human knowing framework to contrast action research and collaborative management research. The structure of human knowing involves the experiencing and the questioning of the experience in order to arrive at some judgment that helps verifies the answer to the question (Dewey, 1933; Kolb 1984; Lonergan, 1992). A comparative investigation of action research and collaborative management research provides the platform for a discussion about the nature of how we know and how we inquire into how and what others come to know.

### **A social science of practical knowing**

Since Plato, philosophers have explored different forms of knowing, such as aesthetic, mystical, religious, interpersonal, moral and common sense knowing (Tekippe, 1996). In the context of this article, action research and collaborative management research may be located in the realm of practical knowing, which seeks to shape the quality of moment-to-moment action (Reason/Torbert, 2001). The point of departure of this paper is the case for practical knowing as a social science (van Hoolthoon & Olsen, 1987; Shotter, 2007) and an action science (Susman & Evered, 1978; Argyris, Putnam & Smith, 1985; Torbert, 1991; MacLean, et al., 2002; Eikeland, 2007).

The realm of practical knowing focuses on the concerns of human living and the successful performance of daily tasks and discovering immediate solutions that work (Lonergan, 1992). It may be contrasted with scientific knowing in that it is particular, contextual and practical and while science has theoretical aspirations and seeks to make universal abstract statements (De Vos, 1987). Practical knowing is content with only what it needs for the task at hand while scientific knowing tries to be exhaustive and seeks to know everything and state accurately and completely all it knows. Practical knowing is typically spontaneous and tends to have an emergent quality to it while science is methodical. Practical knowing uses language with a range of meanings, while science develops technical jargon. These contrasts may be posited of positivist science and action research in management and organisational research (Susman & Evered, 1978; Coghlan, 2011). In summary,

practical knowing remains in the world of things-related-to-us while scientific knowing relates things to each other (Lonergan, 1992).

A central dimension to the engagement in practical knowing as a philosophy of social science research is that it involves researching in the present tense (Chandler & Torbert, 2003). Much of what we refer to as qualitative research is focused on the past. Action research and collaborative management research build on the past, take place in the present with a view to shaping the future. Accordingly, engagement in the cycles of action and reflection perform both a practical and philosophical function in its attentiveness and reflexivity as to what is going on at any given moment: through attention to language, body language, eloquence, pauses, questions, omissions and so on, and how that attentiveness yields purposeful action.

A particular characteristic of practical knowing is that it varies from place to place and from situation to situation. What is familiar in one place may be unfamiliar in another. What works in one setting may not work in another. Therefore, what we know needs be differentiated for each specific situation. In order to understand actions in the everyday, we need to inquire into the constructions of meaning that individuals and groups make about themselves, their situation and the world, especially for the task at hand. We know that actions may be driven by assumptions and compulsions as well as by values. Accordingly, practical knowing is always incomplete and can only be completed by attending to figuring out what is needed in situations in which one is at a given time. As no two situations are identical we reason, reflect and judge in a practical pattern of knowing in order to move from one setting to another, grasping what modifications are needed and deciding how to act. It engages in the 'messiness' that marks the production of management knowledge (Lowstedt & Stjernberg, 2005).

### **The general empirical method**

A method for engaging in inquiring in the present tense is one that enables attentiveness to experience and enables a focus on how one processes what one experiences and come to judgment as the basis for decision and action (Coghlan, 2010a). In this direction, a method is not a set of rules to be fol-

lowed meticulously, but a framework for collaborative activity that deals with different kinds of questions, each with its own focus. In accordance with Table 1, for knowledge to be realised we need to attend to

- Attend to data of sense and of consciousness (experience)
- Envisage possible explanations of that data (understanding)
- Prefer as probable or certain the explanations which provide the best account for the data (judgment).

Engaging this method requires the dispositions to perform the operations of attentiveness, intelligence and reasonableness, to which is added responsibility when we seek to take action (Table 1).

**Table 1 General Empirical Method** (Modified from Coghlan, 2010, p. 156)

<b>Experience</b>	<b>Attentiveness</b> [to data of sense and of consciousness]	Empirical Level
<b>Understanding</b>	<b>Intelligence</b> [Envisaging possible explanations of that data]	Intellectual Level
<b>Judgment</b>	<b>Reasonableness</b> [Preferring as probable or certain the explanations which provide the best account for the data]	Rational Level
<b>Action</b>	<b>Responsibility</b> [for action]	Responsible Level

Before moving to examine action research and collaborative management research in more detail, we draw together some challenges for a social science of practical knowing.

1. A first consequent challenge within the field of *action* and *collaborative* management research is to ground methodologies in the practical form of knowing that seeks to enhance the practice of communities, organisations and individuals, where interests and concerns are human living and the successful performance of daily tasks and discovering immediate solutions that will work (Susman & Evered, 1978; Gibbons, et al., 1994;

Schon, 1995; Reason & Torbert, 2001). Understanding everyday actions requires inquiry into the constructions of meaning that individuals make about themselves, their situation and the world, and into the drivers of the actions, such as assumptions, compulsions and values. Organisations and groups hold their own shared meanings which direct their actions (Schein, 2010). The collaborative dynamic of *action research* and *collaborative management research* involves engagement with others in conversation as to the insights that they have into situations, how those insights differ, the priorities that different stakeholders may have and how to negotiate collaborative action.

2. A second consequent challenge within the field of *action* and *collaborative* research is that in the everyday practical world, no two situations are identical. A remembered set of insights is only approximately appropriate to the new situation. In order to move from one setting to another, we must grasp what modifications are needed and to decide how to act. The social science of practical knowing needs to be able to accommodate the changing nature of data where situations are not identical and how they shift as a consequence of intervention.
3. Moving the general empirical method as an individual activity to a collaborative setting in action research and collaborative management research involves participants attending to their experience, having insights into that experience, making judgments as to whether the insights fit the evidence and then taking action (Coghlan, 2009). Unlike practitioner research, collaborative management research and action research involve an external researcher that is armed with a wide variety of research methodologies and tools that are brought to the inquiry process. The conversations between researchers and practitioners seek to bring out experience, test insights and form shared-judgments about that experience and then make decisions and take action. Through these conversations, constructed meanings may be uncovered and tested, and action planned, taken and reviewed.

## **Action research and collaborative management research**

Although the two terms, action research and collaborative management research, are often used as umbrellas including a set of different research approaches, they also represent specific and autonomous approaches. This article entails this view. Firstly, the two approaches are briefly defined and presented in the next subsections.

### ***Action research: Some key features***

A definition, provided by Shani and Pasmore (1985, p. 439) captures the main themes of action research.

Action research may be defined as an emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioural science knowledge is integrated with existing organisational knowledge and applied to solve real organisational problems. It is simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in organisations, in developing self-help competencies in organisational members and in adding to scientific knowledge. Finally it is an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry.

This definition captures the critical themes that constitute action research: that as an *emergent inquiry process* it engages in an unfolding story, where data shift as a consequence of intervention and where it is not possible to predict or to control what takes place. It focuses on *real organisational problems* or issues, rather than issues created particularly for the purposes of research. It operates in the people-in-systems domain and *applied behavioral science knowledge* is both engaged in and drawn upon. Action research's distinctive characteristic is that it addresses the twin tasks of bringing about *change in organisations* and in generating robust, actionable *knowledge*, in an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of *collaboration and co-inquiry*, whereby research is constructed *with* people, rather than *on* or *for* them.

Action research is an inquiry process which researchers and practitioners work together to achieve two objectives: to address an organizational issue and to generate scientific knowledge (Shani & Pasmore, 1985). The key idea



is that action research uses a scientific approach to study the resolution of important social or organisational issues together with those which experience these issues directly. The foundations of action research come from Lewin (1946) and Collier (1945), who independently generated the notion of action research, though as Friedlander (2001) reflected, Lewin's notion of action research introduced purposeful efforts aimed at achieving clear goals, but did not conceive of participants deciding what issues they might want to study or be active in designing the study. Action research became integral to the growth of the theory and practice of organization development (Coch & French, 1948; Pasmore & Friedlander, 1982; Burnes, 2007; Coghlan, 2012).

Good action research may be judged in terms of the four factors from Shani and Pasmore's (1985) definition: how the context is assessed, the quality of collaborative relationships between researchers and members of the system, the quality of the action research process itself as cycles of action and reflection are enacted and that the dual outcomes reflect some level of sustainability (human, social, economic and ecological) and the development of self-help and competencies out of the action and the creation of new knowledge from the inquiry. While an action research intervention may not be replicable as the exigencies of a particular situation may not be repeated, the learning needs to be transferable and the process may be transportable to other situations. While these qualities pertain to action research within the action research paradigm, they are typically not so regarded from the paradigm of positivist science, which views these quality dimensions from its own perspective and definition as to what constitutes science (Eikeland, 2007).

### ***Collaborative management research: Some key features***

According to Pasmore and his colleagues (2008), collaborative management research (CMR) is not a new thought. CMR efforts in the early part of the 20th century produced innovations ranging from time and motion studies (Taylor, 1911) to high performance work systems (Trist & Bamforth, 1951) to human relations at work (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). These efforts were not formulated with an explicit intention of undertaking collaborative

research; they were simply natural evolutions of existing collaborative relationships that led to ground-breaking projects with benefits to both the organisations involved (i.e., the creation of semi-autonomous work teams that resulted in improved productivity as captured by Trist and Bamforth (1951) and the field of scientific management (i.e., with the development of a new theory and principles of work design). The benefits come from possible emerging models of collaborative actions (Hatchuel, 2005), that can be effective both for managerial implications and for knowledge advancements.

The most comprehensive definition of CMR was advanced recently by Pasmore and his colleagues (2008, p. 20):

Collaborative management research is an effort by two or more parties, at least one of whom is a member of an organisation or system under study and at least one of whom is an external researcher, to work together in learning about how the behaviour of managers, management methods, or organisational arrangements affect outcomes in the system or systems under study, using methods that are scientifically based and intended to reduce the likelihood of drawing false conclusions from the data collected, with the intent of both proving performance of the system and adding to the broader body of knowledge in the field of management.

As such, CMR is research that occurs in a natural setting within a specific business and industry context, involves true collaboration between practitioners and researchers, addresses an emerging specific issue of concern, uses multiple methodologies that are scientific, involves the creation of a learning system via the establishment of learning mechanisms, improves the system performance and, adds to the scientific body of knowledge in the field of management. As the name implies, at the core of CMR one can find the terms collaboration and management.

“Collaboration” implies research efforts which include the active involvement of managers and researchers in the framing of the research agenda, the selection and pursuit of methods and the development of implications for action (e.g. co-determination of the research, co-evolution and co-interpretation). “Collaboration” does not impose the requirement of an equal partnership in each of these activities, although a more equal partnership would be ideal (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985 and Reason, 1988 for a discussion

of the benefits of collaborative inquiry). At the heart of this endeavour is “collective inquiry” which is the joint pursuit of answers to questions of mutual interest through dialogue, experimentation, the review of knowledge, or other means. To be more precise, management engages in collective inquiry in order to get a better understanding of a certain issue or phenomenon by means of input of scientifically valid knowledge from researchers. Similarly, scientists engage in collective inquiry in order to get a better understanding of a certain issue or phenomenon by means of practically valid knowledge from practitioners. If two parties don’t share a fundamental interest in learning, there can be no collective inquiry and no collaborative research.

“Management” is an activity or set of activities that can be carried out by an individual or a team or a group of people who are not formally managers. One can explore *management* as a noun: an individual or collective group of actors who aspire to influence the behavior or performance of a system, or as a verb: the practice of those actors, i.e. what formal or informal managers actually do to achieve their intentions. As such, *management* also signifies an art or practice, i.e. what managers tacitly or explicitly know and believe about how to go about managing an organisation or complex system. Within the context of CMR, one can view management as ways to improve the capabilities of individual managers, the organisation or even the capabilities of a network or society; as ways to address specific aspects of management that are the focus of the study such as, specific managerial actions, systems of management processes affecting organisational culture or performance or, coordinating mechanisms among networks of organisations.

Collaborative management research provides an inquiry process that through multiple studies, the accumulation of knowledge over time about different aspects of management, and across types of systems will clarify when and how managerial actions can make a difference. The inquiry process of experiencing, understanding, judgment and action, as captured by Coghlan (2010a), is likely to confirm or disconfirm assumptions and is likely to result in general accumulation of managerial wisdom and scientific knowledge that eventually influence how management is taught and practiced (Kuhn, 1962; Pasmore, et al., 2008).

### **Action research and collaborative management research**

Action research and collaborative research inquiry orientations, as we have seen above, seems to have some similar and some distinct features. Table 2 captures some of the key features of both. A comparative examination reveals the following: both are focused on developing deeper level understanding of an important issue for both the system studied and the scientific community; the purpose of the study is identification, modification and transformation of the studied system (Savall & Zardet, 2011); they constitute a transformational social science in the realm of practical knowing (Reason & Torbert, 2001; Coghlan, 2011); they share the concern for the inquiry process and scientific rigor; the researcher is involved in the inquiry process, and lastly; both are concerned with system improvement and added value to the management science.

Action research and collaborative management research are embedded in research, collaboration and the synergy between them. Both tend to engage an external researcher/s in the conversation and discovery process. At the most basic level, action research efforts start from action and is followed by a collaborative inquiry process, and this refers to the ontology of 'action' and 'intervention'. Collaborative management research tends to start from the development of a shared view of a critical issue of interest to investigate to both senior management and the researcher. This is followed by the exploration of alternative ways to design the inquiry mechanisms and process. As such, the collaborative management research ontology includes 'collaboration' and 'intervention'. For example, one of the collaborative management research approaches includes Intervention Research that tends to emphasise the notion of intervention. Here, the research process includes a direct intervention in the organisation, that allows for the contextualisation of the change and formalise it as models, tools and procedures (Hatchuel, et al., 2002). The theoretical perspective 'defines the basic issues and objects of management research; the collaborative protocol warrants research logic stimulated by management issues in pioneering organisations' (Hatchuel & David, 2008, p. 144). Collaboration with practitioners is called for because 'the unifying view of innovative design processes that we have looked for in this program is precisely an effect of the collaborative scheme' (p. 157). The selection of

**Table 2: Action research and collaborative management research: Comparative perspective on key features**

	<b>Action Research</b>	<b>Collaborative Management Research</b>
<b>Essence (ontology)</b>	* 'Action' and 'intervention'	* 'Collaboration' and 'intervention'
<b>Why</b>	* Enabling a system change and/or supporting new initiative. *Research interest	* Investigating a 'red and hot' management and research topic of mutual interest.
<b>Context</b>	*Wide variety of organizations and loosely coupled organizations *Initial interface with members at all levels	*Business context with complex and competitive business environment *Initial interface with senior management
<b>Relation to senior management</b>	*Senior management as a possible partner in the process	*Senior management as key partner in the process
<b>Role of senior management</b>	*Sanctions the effort but not necessarily involved in the framing of the research focus nor its design	*Involved in the initial framing of the research focus and the study design
<b>Role of the researcher</b>	*Possible ongoing engagement with senior management *Facilitating the inquiry process *Facilitating the ongoing learning process	*Ongoing engagement with the senior management *Maintaining the balance between involvement and detachment of senior management *Facilitating the mutual education and inquiry process
<b>Structuring the research</b>	* Laying the foundation for a learning system * The learning taking wide variety of shapes and forms.	*Project design orientation *Exploration and designing alternative learning mechanisms to carry out the study.
<b>Data generation/collection</b>	*Exploring wide variety of data collection tools and processes. *Choosing the most appropriate data collection tools and data collection process.	*Exploring wide variety of data collection tools and processes. *Choosing the most appropriate data collection tools and data collection process and involvement of senior management with final decision
<b>Interpretation of data</b>	*Research team reviews raw data and create shared meaning of the data and identify possible action steps.	*Study teams review raw data and create shared meaning of the data and identify possible action steps. *Management team reviews study teams' work, raw data, creates shared meaning of the data and advances action items and next steps.
<b>Time</b>	*Emergent and flexible time orientation, project dependent.	*Project and time cycles driven by the business context and influenced by the regular business cycles.

managerial partners is driven by an 'assessed research potential' and the collaboration is established through a contractual form that 'is not a consulting contract. An IR contract clearly states the research purpose of the partners during the program. The academic team should not commit to solving a problem or conducting some planned change' (p. 152).

Based on the different ontology, the context and the process within which action research and collaborative management research take place seem to differ as well. Most CMR efforts take place within a specific business context or a business organisation. The business context, such as competitive business environment with economic performance indicators, shareholders, business cycles, is likely to have an impact on the CMR process and outcomes. Action research efforts seems to take place in a wide variety of organizations as well as loosely coupled organisations, such as NGOs, educational systems, religious systems and communities. Another key difference in the context of both action research and CMR is the initial interface with the system. In CMR the initial interface is with top management that is viewed as a key actor in the process. In action research the initial interface is not limited to senior management that is not necessarily viewed as a key actor. The initial interface is with members at all levels of the organisation.

Action research and collaborative management research place the researcher as an observing engaged actor. The interactive relationships that develop in both orientations between the researcher/s and the members of the system generate deeper level analysis, insights and understanding (Fredberg, et al., 2011). These sets of issues seem to be a critical contextual element for both action research and collaborative management research. In CMR the role of the researcher is also the ongoing engagement with the senior management, maintaining the balance between senior management involvement and detachment from the study and, facilitating the mutual education process and research skills acquisition. In action research the researcher is mainly concerned with facilitating the inquiry process, facilitating the ongoing learning process and at times the engagement of senior management.

The role of senior management seems to differ in each approach. In CMR senior management is viewed as key partner in the process and plays an important role in the initial framing of the research focus and the study design

(Cirella, et al, in press). In action research senior management is viewed as a possible partner but not a necessary one in the framing of the study focus. It usually will sanction the effort but is not necessarily involved in the study design. The structuring of the inquiry process seems to follow similar pattern. In CMR the orientation is different. Specific design alternatives are explored and choices about specific structural and processes configurations are made. Furthermore, following exploration of alternative learning mechanisms to carry out the study, specific choices are made about the most appropriate study learning mechanism (i.e. steering committee, study teams, links between study teams and formal organisational management hierarchy). In action research effort the focus is on laying the foundation for a learning system and learning system seems to take wide variety of shapes and forms.

The inquiry process provides some additional insights into the similarities and differences between CMR and action research. In CMR and action research, the process follows collaboration around the exploration of a wide variety of data collection tools and processes and choices about the most appropriate data collection tools and data collection process are made. In CMR, senior management will be involved in the final decision about the recommended data collection tools and data collection process. In action research and CMR, following the data collection, study teams review raw data and create shared meaning of the data and identify possible action steps. In CMR, the management team will also review raw data, the shared meaning of the data and identification of possible action items that were created by the study team and create their own shared meaning of the data and couple that with what was created by the study team and advance action items and steps (Cirella, et al., in press).

## **Discussion**

The nature of both action research and collaborative management research is such that over the decades of practice, each has evolved into a wide variety of approaches, each of which seems to have somewhat different emphasis.

***The general empirical method in action research and collaborative management research***

This section illustrates how the general empirical method, based on the operations of human cognition: experience, understanding and judgment and then action, enable us to generate insights into the similarities and differences between action research and collaborative management research. The essence of our argument is captured in Table 3.

**Table 3: Enacting the general empirical method in action research and collaborative management research practice**

	<b>Action Research</b>	<b>Collaborative Management Research</b>
<b>Attentiveness to Experience</b> [To data of sense and of consciousness]	What problem/opportunity is presenting itself that needs addressing?	What issue/problem is of common interest and concern for the researchers and the top management of an organization? What are the sources and nature of the issue?
<b>Intelligent Questions for Understanding</b> [Envisaging possible explanations of that data]	How is the nature and significance of the problem/opportunity understood?	What insights emerge so that the organizational members and researchers may arrive at a shared understanding of the issue's meaning and significance? Which research methods may be helpful in the inquiry process How may the data be effectively organized in order to be jointly interpreted?
<b>Reasonable Questions for Reflection</b> [Preferring as probable or certain the explanations which provide the best account for the data]	How the intended consequences of the actions can be transported to other relevant settings?	What shared judgment as to the nature of the issue and the methods to inquire further and to address it is formed?
<b>Responsible Questions for Action</b>	What actions can be taken? Which are the intended consequences?	Jointly What actions might be taken to address the shared understanding of the issue/problem

Our approach in this section is to attempt and address both approaches on a meta-level. At the core, applying the general empirical method to each approach is a matter of being attentive to experience and observable data,



questioning that experience with a view of receiving insights/understanding in seeking possible explanations of that experience and forming judgments on the explanations which provide the best understanding of the experience. These activities occur within each community of practice (e.g. researchers and practitioners) as they seek to know the issue from within their own perspective and together with other communities of practice as they jointly explore its meaning and develop shared strategies and action as a community of inquiry. Engaging this method requires the dispositions in individuals, in separate communities of practice and together as a community of inquiry to perform the operations of attentiveness, intelligence and reasonableness, to which is added responsibility when they seek to take action.

Both action research and collaborative management research are grounded in experience: a problematic situation or a developmental opportunity as a possible stimulus, the experience of working to engage collaboratively with others to enable change to take place and to generate actionable knowledge and robust theory (Argyris, 2004). In action research there is the experience of confronting a challenge that a system is experiencing for which there is no evident solution. In collaborative management research management is grounded in a set of specific challenges, either internally or externally driven, that trigger the necessity to take an action without a full understanding of the challenges or having an evident solution.

Experience is subjected to inquiry in order to a search for insight or understanding into the identified experience. In action research inquiry into outcomes may lead to inquiry into actions, possibly into goals and into intentionality in order to uncover reasoning behind actions. In collaborative management research inquiry into how to collect information such that the process can help in the inquiry process, and outcomes and how to organize the data collected such that shared interpretation or sense making of the data can be enhanced, are likely to enable possible action strategies to be developed and experimental action taken.

Any insight generated must be subjected to some sort of verification, where as the participants reflect on how each insight has illuminated inquiry and they check that their insights are reasonable in fitting the evidence. In action research, one can check if the inquiry into action, goals and intention-

ality confirmed insight into theory-in-use or action logics (Argyris, 2004). In collaborative management research, the involvement of the senior management and or the study teams in the process is likely to trigger ongoing verification. Furthermore, as shared sense making of the data collected takes place, the collective that works through the data verifies accuracy and degree of relevancy. Lastly, the question of appropriate action accompanies the judgment. In action research the orientation seems to vary significantly between the different approaches. In collaborative management research the management tendency is for a solution that can be implemented quickly due to nature and culture of cycle times.

Action research and collaborative management research engage with the operations of human knowing: experience, understanding, judgment and action. Yet, each orientation has its own emphasis in different contexts, for example, in action research it can be addressing a practical problem, generating transformational change or building a helping relationship. In collaborative management research, the focus is on addressing a specific challenge that requires managerial action.

Choosing a particular approach: action research or collaborative management research, involves the consideration of four factors (Shani & Pasmore, 1985). First, there is the context, both external and internal, in which the issue for development (or the problem to be addressed) is located. Understanding the context with these complexities and forces for and against change is a critical consideration that might lead to managerial issue focus, collaborative management research, or an open ended challenge that may not be managerially related, that may led to an action research project. Second, there is the quality of relationships between organisational members and researcher and between the organisational members themselves that becomes the foundation for collaborative inquiry and action. In both action research and collaborative management research the quality of the relationships are viewed as critical to the inquiry and action processes and require major emphasis and effort. Third, how the action-oriented inquiry may be conducted needs to be considered. Issues of structuring the inquiry fall into this category. Collaborative management research can trigger the design of learning mechanisms tapestry, while action research action orientation may lead to a partnership between

and insider and outsider action researcher that co-led the project. Fourth, the dual outcomes of both action research and collaborative management research are some level of sustainability (human, social, economic ecological), and the development of self-help and competencies out of the action and the creation of new knowledge from the inquiry (Docherty, Kira, & Shani, 2009).

The general empirical method provides a perspective on assessing the quality of action research and collaborative management research in terms of dimensions of real-life action, the quality of collaboration, the quality of inquiry in action and sustainability (Shani & Pasmore, 1985; Coghlan & Shani, 2008; Pasmore, Woodman, & Simmons, 2008). Attending to and inquiring into experience in the realm of practical knowing, grounds the engagement with real-life issues. As a collaborative process it enables inquiry into individual and shared actions, co-inquiry into what these actions might mean and a search for shared insights and so to generate further questions and ultimately affirm shared judgments and take joint action. Cycles of attending to experience, understanding and judgment, both individually and collaboratively constitute a reflective process through which insights may be identified and corrected and so learning becomes explicit. The outcomes of engaging in the general empirical method are that the knowledge generated be understood to be actionable and transportable and adaptable to other settings.

## **Conclusion**

We have engaged in a comparative exploration of action research and collaborative management research, through a focus on the operations of human knowing which yield a general empirical method. We have grounded action research and collaborative management research in a philosophy of practical knowing as social science. Each approach emerges from a different tradition and each begins from a different foundation.

In the general empirical method criticality is a function of judgment. It is in the act of judging that an insight or particular understanding is reasonable (i.e. fits the evidence or not) that a person critiques the insight and critiques his/her own cognitive processes. Coghlan (2010b) proposes the notion of *interiority* as the means by which we can turn from the outer world of practi-

cal knowing and of theory with the ability to recognise their competence and to meet the demands of both without confusing them. Interiority involves shifting from *what* we know to *how* we know, a process of intellectual self-awareness. As a concluding point to this article, we draw on interiority as a notion that can recognise and value how both realms of theory and practical knowing provide critical different perspectives on the comparison between action research and collaborative management research.

- On the level of *theory* the distinction between action research and collaborative management research is useful as it provides scholars and researchers a significant elaboration of the similarities and distinctions between these two forms of action modalities (Coghlan, 2010a, 2011). The significance of this elaboration, alluded to earlier in this article, points to key methodological challenges as to the nature of collaboration, the role of the researcher and to how actionable knowledge is generated.
- On the level of *practical knowing*, the distinction provides practitioners with a focus of what the aim of the research is and how roles are enacted (as in Table 2).
- On the level of *interiority*, the comparison enables us to appreciate the similarities and differences on the levels of theory and of practical knowing and recognise the validity of both realms without confusing or devaluing either of them.

For action research, inquiry-in-action is foundational and collaboration is a core value. For collaborative management research, collaboration is the core value and action is an emergent consequence. Where both differ significantly from each other is the context in which they operate, as we have seen in table 2, with consequent differences in how the research is implemented and how the relationship between the parties is structured. The aim is to develop understanding of how these two approaches relate to one another, so as to advance knowledge of the different modalities or expressions that comprise the broad field of action- and collaborative-oriented research in a social science based on practical knowing.

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