

## **Beyond Qualitative Inquiry: A Neoliberal Society and Power Relations in Action**

### **Research by Higher Learning Institutions**

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## **Abstract**

*The exercise of power in neoliberal societies as a mode of action upon the actions of others can either be positive or negative. In research, the relationships between researchers and communities have been changing from research 'on' to research 'with' the community. Therefore, there is a dual commitment to study a system and concurrently to collaborate with members of the system in changing it in what is regarded as a desirable direction. This paper intends to evaluate the power relations in action research exhibited by institutions of higher learning and their impact on development in a knowledge based economy. This will be done by critically revisiting the principles and process of action research, which is more of a holistic approach to problem - solving rather than a single method for collecting and analyzing data. A process goes beyond just qualitative inquiry, a fact that forms the basis of this paper.*

**Key words: Neoliberalism, Power Relations, Action Research and Qualitative Inquiry**

## **1.0 Introduction**

Neoliberalism supports extensive economic liberalization. Policies such as privatization, fiscal austerity, deregulation, free trade and reduction in government spending in order to enhance the role of the private sector in the economy. Neoliberalism has transformed the society into an “enterprise society” based on market competition, inequality and privilege of an individual. Ball (2012) observes that neoliberalism in higher institutions of learning has been installed through the financialization and marketisation of research. Knowledge is represented as an increasingly valuable form of capital and as a global commodity (OECD, 2013) and as such it is a site of contestation, inclusions, exclusions and maldistribution. The historical legacy of the university conceived as a crucial public sphere has given way to universities identifying themselves as being more instrumental, commercial and practical. This has been produced and necessitated by the withdrawal of the state from funding while simultaneously encouraging privatization of the educational service and greater reliance on market forces (McCoy, 2015). As the global knowledge economy becomes increasingly competitive, the role of higher education is under intense scrutiny. The function of higher education in nations varies dependent on the system’s history, structure, the traditional roles and responsibilities of faculty and the experiences, involvement and characteristics of students (Taylor & Fransman, 2004).

The core duty of higher institutions of learning being research and generation of new knowledge is now being dictated by the market needs and the various financial institutions that are willing to fund the process of ensuring a problem in the society has been solved through research. This brings in an element of power relations both with those that are funding the research and those with whom the research is being done on to necessitate the solving of the problem at hand. Action research is conducted with the primary intention of solving a specific immediate and concrete problem in a local setting. This is a main feature that puts this kind of research ahead of the others and hence the observation of it being beyond qualitative inquiry.

## **2.0 Beyond qualitative Inquiry**

Flick (2008, 2014) defines qualitative research as a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning. By systematic he means planned, ordered and public, following rules agreed upon by members of the qualitative research community. By empirical he means that this type of inquiry is grounded in the world of experience and inquiry into meaning encompasses the idea of a researcher trying to understand how others make sense of their experience. Denzin & Lincoln (2000) explains that qualitative research involves an interpretive and

naturalistic approach. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. They continue to say that all qualitative researchers aspire to illuminate social meaning an idea that was also expressed by Gall, Borg & Gall (1996). Hence, it provides both the researchers and the participants with a discovering experience since it must develop thorough and comprehensive descriptions of the context. Cresswell (1998, 2002) gave his definition of qualitative research focusing on the methodological nature, the complexity of the end product and it's nature of the naturalistic inquiry. Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The research builds complex holistic pictures, analyzes words, reports, detailed views of informants and conducted the study in natural setting. Gillis & Jackson (2002) explains that qualitative research integrates the methods and techniques of observing, documenting, analyzing and interpreting characteristics, patterns, attributes and meanings of human phenomena under study.

Taylor & Pettit (2004) observes that the current state of educational inquiry, particularly as it relates to action research and qualitative inquiry is highly dependent on each other. They explain that these studies can be qualitative or quantitative, solo or collaborative at the moment of project initiation, at the time of data collection or at the analytic and writing phase. Streubert & Carpenter (1995) discusses that the purpose of qualitative methodology is to describe and understand rather than to predict and control whereas Greenwood & Lewin (1998) notes that ideally the purpose of all action research is to impart social change, with a specific action as the ultimate goal. Action research is not concerned with whether the results are generalized to any other setting since its major goal is to seek a solution to a given problem; it is limited in its contribution to theory but it is useful because it provides answers to problems that cannot wait for theoretical solution. Moreover, Kelly (2005) expressed in his work that action research is considered an alternative approach to traditional social or scientific research, as it moves social inquiry from a linear cause and effect perspective to a participatory framework that consider the context of people's lives. Moreover, it involves a cyclic process of research, reflection and action. This view offers a critique of, and challenge to, dominant positivist social science research as the only legitimate and valid source of knowledge.

The above observation is meant to bring out a discussion of the fact that action research goes beyond qualitative inquiry. Though, the qualitative methods, quantitative methods or both may be used not only to solve a problem but also act and reflect on the action employed towards the same. Cornwall & Jewkes (1995) believes that what distinguishes participatory research (which is one of the myriad of terms for action research (Greenwood & Levin, 1998) from conventional research is not primarily about the methods or theory but concerns the "location of power in the research process." Basing on this argument this paper critically assesses how a neoliberal society exhibits power relations in action research conducted in higher institutions of learning, with a keen eye on funding of research through grants by various organizations or research institutions.

### **3.0 Action Research**

In a time of rapid change, when global forces are reshaping the ability of ordinary people to influence decisions which affect their lives, social change practitioners are challenged to learn new skills and competences and to develop their capacities for learning through critical reflection on action. Over the last decade, as people have moved from quantitative research methodologies towards naturalistic inquiry, many new and interesting forms of research have emerged. Various identified as teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), Action research (Winter, 1987; Carr, 1989), Reflective practice (Schon, 1983; 1987) at the

heart of all these investigative enterprises has been a common focus on practice as inquiry (Newman, 1992). Action research has many descriptions, terms and definitions. This is because it deals with concrete problems. Susman and Evered (1978) defined action research as a process consisting of five phases;

- Problem identification or definition
- Consideration of action alternatives
- Action taking
- Evaluation of the consequences of actions
- Extractions of lessons learned

Action research has been traditionally defined as an approach which is based on a collaborative problem-solving relationship between researcher and client which aims at both solving a problem and generating new knowledge (Drew, 1980). Action research developed largely from the work of Kurt Lewin and his associates, and involves a collaborative cyclic process of diagnosing a change situation or a problem, planning, gathering data, taking action and then fact-finding about the results of that action in order to plan and take further action (Lewin, 1946, 1948; Dickens & Watkins, 1999). The key idea is that action research uses a scientific approach to study the resolution of important social or organizational issues together with those who experience these issues directly. In the words of Reason and Bradbury (2001:1) 'action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview.' Critically looking at this definition action research entails flourishing of the individual person and their communities. Hence action research has the following features;

- a) Action researchers take action; they are not merely observing something happening; they actively work at making it happen.
- b) Action research always involves two goals; solve a problem and contribute to science.
- c) Action research is about research in action and does not postulate a distinction between theory and action. Hence the challenge for action researchers is to engage in both making the action happen and stand back from action and reflect on it as it happens in order to contribute theory to the body of knowledge.
- d) Action research is interactive; it requires cooperation between the researchers and the client person, and continuous adjustment to new information and new events. In action research the members of the client system are co-researchers as the action researcher is working with them on their issue so that their issue may be resolved for their system and a contribution be made to the body of knowledge. As action research is a series of unfolding and unpredictable events, the actors need to work together and be able to adapt to the contingencies of the unfolding story.
- e) Action research requires an understanding of the ethical framework; values and norms within which it is used in a particular context. In action research ethics involves authentic relationships between the action research and the members of the client system as to how they understand the process and take significant action. Values and norms that flow from such ethical principles typically focus on how the action researcher works with the members of the organization.

#### **4.0 Paradigms of Action Research**

The term action research is a generic one and is used to refer to a bewildering array of activities and methods (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005; Mott, 2005). At its core action research approach, which focuses on simultaneous action and research in a collaborative manner. Within this approach are multiple paradigms or methodologies, each of which has its own distinct emphasis. Greenwood & Levin (1998) notes that some action research methodologies have developed from sociology and focus on how communities as socio-political systems enact social change. Other action research approaches have their origin in applied behavioral science (Coghlan & Coughlan, 2003). Parallel to this approach is one that focuses on relationships, both in the workplace and between social partners in regional development (Gustavsen, 1992, 2001). These approaches look at action research as a central process for building relationships is democratic dialogue.

A significant feature of all action research is that the purpose of research is not simply or even primarily to contribute to the fund of knowledge in a field, or even to develop emancipatory theory, but rather to forge a more direct link between intellectual knowledge/ theory and action so that each inquiry contributes directly to the flourishing of human persons, and their communities (Reason & Torbert, 2001). Action research rejects the separation between thought and action that underlies the pure-applied distinction that has traditionally characterized management and social research. These approaches incorporate a collaborative enactment of action research cycles whereby the intended research outcome is the construction of actionable knowledge. There are different approaches of action research which include; traditional action research, participatory action research, action learning, action science, developmental action inquiry, cooperative inquiry, clinical inquiry, appreciative inquiry, learning history, reflective practice and evaluative inquiry amongst others. Ngechu (2006) explain that action research or applied research is named according to purpose, principal researcher and the method of data collection. Action research is an approach to research that works at gathering data in the field by non-traditional methods with the concerns of practitioners who want to improve organizations and communities. However, Coghlan & Brannick (2005) regretfully notes that action research has often become a glib term for involving clients in research and has lost its role as a powerful conceptual tool for uncovering truth on which action can be taken. But dependable truth can only be achieved when research is done with the actual casualties under scrutiny. Nevertheless, first hand effect can only be experienced best in real action. Looking at this view this paper intends to evaluate the power relations in action research exhibited by institutions of higher learning and their impact on development in a knowledge based economy. Hence, the next part looks at power relations in action research at organizational level in a neoliberal society.

#### **5.0 Power Relations and Action Research in Institutions of Higher Learning**

Participants of action research process are very likely to differ in their power to influence the process and its outcome, due to difference in status, education, networks, gender and age. A Foucault (1982; 2000) view of power is that, power is not thought of a type of relation between individuals. Power is not thought of as some external autonomous force rather it exists only when acting upon another person and not necessarily in an adversarial fashion. The fundamental ideas emerging are that power is a system, a network of relations encompassing the whole society, rather than a relation between the oppressed and the oppressor. Secondly, individuals are not just the objects of power, but they are the locus where the power and the resistance to it are exerted.

Cornwall & Jewkes (1995) explains that participatory research is focused on gaining knowledge through action using a “bottom – up” approach, which focuses on locally defined priorities and perspectives. In

practice as they continue to say is a choice that is both personal and inherently political. Personal in the sense that the decision to use a participatory approach is influenced by a researcher's attitudes and views whereas political asks questions about who is researching whom and why are placed at the forefront.

In order to manage the content and control agendas of the action research project and the power-political processes of influencing and ensuring the legitimacy of the project, there is need to manage your superiors, peers and colleagues (Kotter, 1985). Building on the work of Greiner and Schein (1988), Coghlan & Brannick (2005, 2010) identified key power relationships.

Through different stages of research that is identifying a research problem, data collection, analysis, presentation and action, there are different emphasis on who participates and who is given power to shape the research process.

At the stage of identifying a problem, first, there is a relationship with your sponsor. In the case of higher education, a sponsor may be discussed in different lights, power relations begin with the monetary sponsors of the research through grants. The neoliberal influenced financialization has set off a series of intertextual chains that are visible in research funding, knowledge mobilization and construction and destruction of academic identities. Ball & Olmedo (2012) noted that knowledge production through academic research is now part of the neoliberal project that values income generation, commercialization, mobilization and performance management over creativity, criticality, discovery or scholarly independence. Research is viewed in terms of its market value. Moreover, it is initiated in response to funding flows and by responses to policy concerns that are determined outside epistemic communities. The sponsors whether private or government exercise their power by stipulating the topics or areas of research to be funded therefore enhancing biases and lack of balance between social based and science based research. The sponsors give a guide on the composition of the researchers in a research group not only on personal information like age and gender but also their academic levels and professional fields and experiences. In addition, these researches as much as they are done to meet the demands of the sponsors, action research entails that at least an immediate problem is solved in the process. Examples of institutions that offer grants but they also spell out their requirements which make them very competitive are;

- Media Legal Defence Initiative (MLDI)
- Kenya Prosperity Fund
- SIDA PFAN Initiative on Clean Energy Financing
- Food & Business Applied Research Fund
- USAID: Supporting Health Communications and Marketing Program in Kenya
- Making All Voices Count: Joint Initiative to Support Civil Society Groups
- UNESCO/Poland Co-Sponsored Fellowships Program 2016
- YALI Regional Leadership Center East Africa Program 2016
- DREAMS Innovation Challenge 2016
- Various departments of KEMRI, UNICEF, CDC, DANIDA, WHO, USAID, and various Social Science research bodies like SSRC and CODESRIA amongst others.

Moreover, National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), a government of Kenya sponsored institute in charge of research also do offer grants and scholarships, mainly science based research is given priority over the social sciences. Though, this seems to change due to the need of enhancing interdisciplinary research.

Nevertheless, a sponsor may be someone who gives you time off to attend the course, take study leave and use organizational materials for research. The sponsor may be your immediate superior within the same department. In this case the relationship may be close and supportive. The sponsor may be elsewhere in the organization, in a position of higher management. You need to work maintaining this relationship as the continuation of the research project may depend on it. It may be difficult if it emerges that the sponsor is a source of problems within the organization. One needs to keep the sponsor abreast of developments and seek his or her counsel for example in Kenya, teachers teaching certain subjects especially the compulsory subjects in the school curriculum or who are enrolling to do research education related courses are favored as they take up study leave.

Another relation that is of concern in this context is a sponsor's relationship to other executives. The credibility and access may depend on the sponsor's status and standing within the organization. If other executives do not consider the sponsor favorably, it may have a negative effect on how research project is perceived. The sponsor's power relationship with other powers in the organization is critical in gaining acceptance for that research. This can be the case between higher learning institutions and the other organizations that give out the grants for research.

Third, there is the relationship of executives with each other. The power dynamics between departments may be relevant feature in promoting or blocking the research. If you are from one department, that may inhibit cooperation from other departments. This may be the most significant political force for you as insider researcher and the one over, which it may be most difficult to exercise control. The key is to build personal relationships with significant persons in other departments so that they will cooperate. Perhaps some of them will be members of your project team. The other relationship is between the researcher and significant others. Whatever relationship between the sponsor and other executives, you must be able to establish your own relationship with significant others, many of whom may be key executives. This is particularly relevant if the researcher wishes to interview senior executives and ask what might be experienced as awkward questions. If your sponsor falls from favor, you will need to have established relationships with significant others in order to maintain your profile and project. Interdisciplinary research encourages studies not just to borrow from each other but the success of one is dependent on the other.

The other relationship is between executives and others in higher management. Senior management at a corporate level may undermine the research or withdraw consent. The relationship tends to be remote, in that the executives are not likely to know the researcher personally. It is usually unnecessary for them to have any detailed knowledge of the project. You may not have access to these people, so you may find it difficult to exercise influence over them.

Cornwall & Jewkes (1995) propose four modes of participation which I ideally identify indicating the power relations at the stage of data collection. They are;

- i) Contractual – where people are contracted into the projects of researchers and people act as informants
- ii) Consultative – people are asked for their opinions and consulted by researchers before interventions are made
- iii) Collaborative – researchers and local people work together on projects designed, initiated and managed by researchers
- iv) Collegiate – researchers and local people work together as colleagues, combining their different skills in a process of mutual learning

These show the relationship between participation and control. However, Cornwall & Jewkes (1995) argue that most conventional research is contractual and tends to maintain rather than challenge the relations of power. In reality researchers use different modes at different stages in research process, the most important idea being using the people to identify the problem and reflectively try out actions to sort out the problem at hand.

At the stage of analysis and presentation, the researchers may have a guideline set by the sponsors on how it is to be done. Moreover, the researcher may need a workable relation with his or her peers or research assistants who will be handy in helping sort out the data according to the set standards.

The issue of power relation in research and in this case action research cannot be assumed. It forms a very important component to be considered at all stages of research as discussed above.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

Action research integrates research and action in a series of flexible cycles involving holistically rather than as separate steps. Action research starts from a vision of social transformation and aspirations for greater justice for all. Action researcher aim to act morally and promote social justice through research that is politically informed and personally engaged. They construct themselves as agents able to access mechanisms of power in a social group or institution and influence the nature and direction of change (Somekh, 2006). Gaining confidence in using action research and reflective practice methods requires more time and preparation. The challenge is not just to teach research methods but to help social change practitioners learn and improve their ways of working through the medium of action research. This involves weaving together diverse methodological strands and research traditions and combining these with learning about theories and concepts of power, participation and social change. Action researchers need to understand the power relations at hand to be able to appropriately interact with power holders. They should also maintain a reflective self – critical perspective. Most institutions of higher learning in African have embraced the triad approach by Reason (1994) while undertaking their learning and research. The triad involves the individual, group and community as a whole. Since educational and research goals are directed towards the achievement of the millennium developmental goals and vision 2030, they are highly action oriented in order to make life better for the individual, group and the whole community and also to bring a balance in a neoliberal society. It is ‘research with’ rather than ‘research on’ as it involves the issues pertinent to the community and they are the ones in a better position to devise more effective corrective measures. Hence, going beyond the traditional qualitative inquiry methods as it is action oriented and self reflective throughout its research process until a corrective measure is evident.



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