

Faculty of Nursing and Health Sciences, Skubiszewski Medical University of Lublin

JOLANTA GÓRAJEK-JÓŻWIK

Action research in nursing

Numerous publications point to the fact that action research – a strategy to solve problems scientifically where they originate, is used successfully in many countries of the world (1, 2, 9, 11, 13). It is assumed that it has entered the world nursing as a “response” to not paying too much attention to the results of scientific research (8). Walsh and Ford even write about ignoring the research results by practitioners, meaning the nurses who deliver care for those who need it (12).

For contemporary nursing, which tends to follow the principles of evidence based nursing, action research is an important issue, mainly because of its theoretical and practical implications. In nursing, as in any other field of science, specific terminology is used, regardless of where in the world care is delivered and evaluated. The lack of necessary terminology hinders communication between the representatives of a given discipline, and prevents the exchange of views (theory) and experience (practice) on the interdisciplinary plane as far as care in its broad sense is concerned.

It is assumed that the process of nurses academic education in Poland, started in 1969, created favourable grounds to conduct scientific and academic research side by side with other disciplines (in the context of the present issue mainly of the caring nature). Practitioner nurses not only use the results of the research from other fields, but also more and more often realize the need and opportunity to make their own contribution into nursing, including practical care.

Interest in action research stresses another important fact which recurs in various publications: any results that relate to the scope and character of practical care activities are always presented in the context of an implemented research strategy, namely the action research.

The present work is of theoretical character and its basic aim is to demonstrate the essence of the action research, analysed from the point of view of the theoretical and practical nursing. Indirectly, the assumption is to show the possibilities of influencing the quality of nursing care through the purposeful and systematic reference to this strategy.

For the purpose of this work it can be assumed that nursing has two basic aims to fulfil: to describe and explain the condition it is dealing with (nursing as a science) and propose how to achieve a condition defined as desired or assumed. In the latter case it may be helpful to draw on what the action research has to offer.

THE ESSENCE OF ACTION RESEARCH

In the mid 80s of the 20th century Cox evaluated action research in the context of problems in nursing education. He argued that “(...) it may be useful when the focus of interest is in a changing situation, such as the process of curriculum development. In such situations, which are essentially

concerned with innovation, a different type of research is often employed, 'action research', requiring the active involvement of everyone concerned. It consists essentially of a cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation and recommendations for changes in the light of that evaluation, until a tried and tested situation has been achieved which appears as satisfactory as possible" (2).

It is interesting to note that in a comprehensive publication by C o r m a c k , about scientific research in nursing, from which the above quote comes, the essence of action research was not defined (1). C o x specified areas in which the strategy can be implemented, he signaled its value as well as the difficulties it poses (2). A similar description can be found, among others, in the work by P o w e r s and K n a p p . Here, however, the action research is contained in the notion of applied research which explains a lot because "applied research is concerned with using knowledge generated by an investigation to develop practical approaches to problematic situations". It is important that "findings may be less generalizable than those of basic research because of the focus on specific problems. However, there is complementarity between the two approaches when the usefulness of new knowledge produced by basic research is tested by applied research (10).

The introduction that clarifies the essence of applied research allows to set the action research in a reality of varied scientific research. It is clear that "action research is applied research that is oriented toward producing innovation and change" (10). Another, quite essential explanation is found in the work by P o w e r s and K n a p p who say that "it can be self-evaluative and autobiographical, involving, for example, examination of one's own caring practices or teaching activities; or it can be collaborative, emphasizing the role of participants as partners and stockholders in studies that are responsive to their interests and concerns" (10).

Chronologically speaking, one of the first definitions of the action research that appeared in the Polish written sources, together with an interpretation of that term, was given in a work directly connected with the issues of organization and management. Additionally, a certain category was established already at the beginning to classify the term. It was defined as "a kind of applied research which consists in a collaboration between a theoretician and practitioner in order to solve practical problems, directly in the place of their origin, together with carrying out the scientific purposes". The quoted work provides an additional explanation that the described action pattern follows the paradigm by J. Dewey, in which there are such constituents as: "formulating a suggestion, intellectualization, proposing hypotheses, arguing, testing hypotheses in action" (4). Based on these truths, it is easy to conclude that the cycle of activities undertaken in the action research is concurrent with the stages of a research process, and in nursing – with an approach based on solving the problems of the subject of care, known as the nursing process. The similarities make the action research convergent with many current trends in theoretical and practical nursing (9).

The action research constitutes an important issue directly in the process of nurses education. The method is fundamental in "a collective search by the partners of a given institution (e.g. school, kindergarten, hospital) for the ways of development, mainly through the analysis of their own practice and a broad sense context, which is here understood literally as an active environment" (13). For the purposes of this work, it can be assumed that the latter generalization is in its scope similar to the proposition by C o x (2).

The actual theoretical and practical interest of the native nursing community in the action research reflects the content of individual messages from conferences in which the essence of the research method follows the propositions from the field of organization and management mentioned earlier (5, 6). In practice, there are no publications which would actually discuss the application of the method in the process of care delivered in the centres of health protection or other places of patients' residence. Even if theoreticians and practitioners do engage in collaborative projects, for the sake of rational investment in the quality of care, the term 'action research' is not used to describe the actual situation.

Available nursing publications in English stress that the action research is a strategy adopted by both theoreticians and practitioners. It is a way to seek solutions to actual problems that appeared while the professional tasks were carried out. The problem is solved immediately where it originated, mainly by the practitioners who can access the knowledge and experience of the theoreticians (researchers). The practitioners approach the theoreticians to take up a specific research procedure in order to determine the essence of the difficulty they have come across in their work with the subject of care, its causes and the chances of its elimination or possible reduction by using the capacities the theoreticians (researchers) have at their disposal. This requires implementation of certain methods, used to gather information about the problem (e.g. through observation of the phenomenon, interview, measurement) as well as to process it.

Practitioners, by being aware of the obstacles they face in their professional work and by speaking about them directly, contribute to the research procedure. Thanks to such kind of approach they influence the quality of their own activities. The initiatives they undertake are voluntary and professional in character, all working towards one aim – to improve the quality of their work. To achieve this they are not supposed to base their judgment on their intuition and/or organizational solutions which they are capable of proposing themselves, but they should follow the results of scientific research concerning the problem in question.

The action research, by definition, requires deep professional awareness, including the conviction that one is able to influence rationally the quality of caring work thanks to the well understood complementary activities of those who are engaged in a field of theory with those who implement the theory directly in practice. Good communication between the two parties working towards a scientific solution to the problem is fundamental for the effective outcome of the efforts of the whole team. Co-operation and harmony in formulating generalizations and opinions become particularly important when the outcome, meant to be scientific, is to result in far reaching changes affecting the style and methods of work, including employment reorganization.

In world-wide nursing the action research has for many years been in the focus of interest of theoreticians and practitioners. Some authors speak about it as a “means of choice” that enables to reach a natural state of approximation between theory and practice and can at the same time improve the results of care through a scientific approach to solving problems where they originate (7, 13).

ACTION RESEARCH AND THE QUALITY OF CARE

To reach a high degree of responsibility for what happens at the place where the nurse performs her role, function and professional tasks which are directed at the complex subject of care such as an individual who is healthy, at risk, ill or dying and at the same time to co-operate with other members of a therapeutic team, the patient's family and/or people who are close to him, it is necessary to look for both innovative and inspiring theoretical propositions and good practical solutions, not to mention the ones that have already proved effective. The basic aim is to undertake collective efforts for more effective caring process, without necessarily having to perform more physical or intellectual effort. The delivered care is to be based on facts (on the evidence-based nursing), it is supposed to satisfy the cared and the caring ones, mainly through the purposeful changes in the bio-psycho-social condition of an individual, a social group or the whole population which they perceive as positive.

The initiation of the process in which the action research strategy will be able to fulfil the role that is assigned to it is the diagnosis of the problems by the practitioners in their working place and the need to implement some changes. At the basis of the process lies mutual work of researchers and practitioners, where, by definition, the scope of the activities is different. The role of the researchers is to assist the practitioners in arriving at the state of reflection over their own work, of objectivization of the evaluation of the undertaken activities as well as suggested and implemented changes. The very

practitioners are directly involved in the research, what is more, it is they who verbalize the problems for the future collaborative efforts.

The principal advantage for the researcher from the action research strategy is the possibility to come close to the problem in question and be directly involved in the scope and character of what happens at the place of research. Webb states that owing to this the researcher can reach a deeper understanding of the investigated issue.

By analyzing the value of action research from the practitioners' point of view it is worth making a reference to the publications which stress that the action research draws on the professional wisdom and experience of the practitioners. It motivates them to participate actively in the rational, scientifically based ways of overcoming difficulties that may bear a direct or indirect influence on the results of caring, and the care understood in its broad sense. The nurses of theoretical and/or practical orientation, who were actively engaged in the strategy of action research, evaluated it positively, which does not mean, however, that it poses no difficulties. Hence, apart from highlighting the benefits, some critical comments are made which stress adopting a realistic approach to the action research and to the reality in which the nursing care is delivered. Nearly 20 years ago Cox wrote: "The whole process can be quite stressful because all the participants have been prepared to subject their work to critical scrutiny by everyone else involved, so it may be hard to combine both involvement and objectives. However, the methods of action research are particularly helpful in the evaluation of innovative scheme" (2).

By no means should the action research be regarded as a universal means that can help solve all the obstacles the nurses may encounter in their work. There are a lot of limitations, including some basic ones such as human capacities and facilities available in one's working place. As a result there can occur some differences in objectives between the researcher and the practitioner when the former wants to verify the proposed hypotheses (as characteristic of the researcher's approach), while the latter wants to solve the problem quickly (as characteristic of the practitioner's approach) (3, 4, 7).

CONCLUSIONS

Scientific research constitutes nowadays an issue of particular interest for a large group of nurses, including the "researchers" who are professionally involved in research and the "practitioners" – nurses who take direct care of people who need it. It is a regularity that nurses in many countries in the world more and more often reach for such solutions that diminish the discrepancy between theoretical nursing and its practical potential. The main aim of such an approach is to raise the quality of care.

There is a vast amount of evidence, quoted in the present work, that testifies to the fact that the action research has been adopted in the field of nursing from other disciplines of science. That, however, does not diminish the value of the matter discussed here; more so, a lot of nurses – researchers and practitioners appreciate the possibility to apply this strategy, mainly because of the direct link between the action research and the quality of care. It means that practitioners, who rely on scientific research, can improve the condition of care. It must be stressed that the action research is a major contributing factor in diminishing the gap between theory and practice, which, as in any other discipline of practical nature, nursing included, is considered to be of special worth.

The need to employ the theoreticians into the strategy in question is probably what the native nursing realizes to a greater or lesser extent. The nurses caring for

single individuals or whole groups of people, implementing action research, by definition can rely on the researchers' help and assistance. The researchers, on the other hand, can come closer to the professional problems, including the caring ones, which occur in work places due to the variables which are known to the practitioner or else are hard to define.

Many initiatives that have been recently undertaken in native nursing have a lot in common with action research. Some of them are quite close to its principles, for example shifting the model of care from a traditional one to the individualized approach which takes place in the context of co-operation between practitioner and theoretical nurses. The problem, however, is that the changes are made for organizational and practical reasons rather than scientific, which result from the analysis of the present state of things. It is this scientific aspect of action research strategy, however, that could constitute a solid foundation in an argument whether to implement the changes or leave the situation as it is. Showing the scope and character of the consequences for the situation in the context of broadly understood care would be its natural complementation.

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SUMMARY

The present work is of theoretical character and its basic aim is to demonstrate the essence of the action research, analysed from the point of view of the theoretical and practical nursing. Indirectly, the assumption is to show the possibilities of influencing the quality of nursing care through the purposeful and systematic reference to this strategy. Available nursing publications in English stress that the action research (as applied research) is a strategy adopted by both theoreticians and practitioners. It is a way to seek solutions to actual problems that appeared while the professional tasks were carried out. The problem is solved immediately where it originated, mainly by the practitioners who can access the knowledge and experience of the theoreticians (researchers). The practitioners approach the theoreticians to take up a specific research procedure in order to determine the essence of the difficulty they have come across in their work with the subject of care, its causes and the chances of its elimination or possible reduction by using the capacities the theoreticians (researchers) have at their disposal. This requires implementation of certain methods, used to gather information about the problem as well as to process it.

Action research w pielęgniarstwie

Praca ma charakter teoretyczny, a jej celem podstawowym jest ukazanie istoty *action research*, analizowanej z pozycji teoretyczno-praktycznej istoty pielęgniarstwa. Pośrednio zakłada się ukazanie możliwości wywierania wpływu na jakość opieki pielęgniarstwie poprzez celowe i planowe odwoływanie się do tej strategii. W dostępnych angielskojęzycznych publikacjach podkreśla się, że *action research* (jako badanie w działaniu) jest strategią przyjętą przez teoretyków i praktyków. Jest drogą dochodzenia do rozwiązywania rzeczywistych problemów, pojawiających się w trakcie realizacji zadań zawodowych. Każdy problem jest rozwiązywany w miejscu jego powstania, głównie za sprawą praktyków, którzy mają możliwość korzystania z wiedzy i doświadczeń teoretyków (badaczy). Zwracają się do nich o pomoc, aby ci podjęli określoną procedurę badawczą celem określenia istoty trudności, na jaką napotykają w pracy z podmiotem opieki, przyczyn i możliwości ich usunięcia lub przynajmniej zminimalizowania. Pociąga to za sobą konieczność sięgnięcia do odpowiednich metod, wykorzystywanych do zgromadzenia informacji o problemie, jak również przetworzenia ich.