

# Applied Social Psychology

Understanding and Addressing  
Social and Practical Problems

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# 16

## YOU CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

### *Action, Participatory, and Activist Research*

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#### CHAPTER OUTLINE

Definitions of Different Types of Social  
Change Research  
Action Research  
Participatory Research  
Activism in Research  
Differences and Similarities Between Action  
Research and Participatory Research  
Differences Between Traditional  
Psychological Research and Social  
Change Research

Moving Away From Strict Definitions:  
Research That Influences Society  
Influencing Policy Directly  
Influencing Society by Changing  
Structural or Social Barriers  
Difficulties and Limitations of Research for  
Social Change  
Summary

The newspaper, magazine, and television coverage of psychology often makes it sound as though the only way in which psychology makes a difference in people's lives is through clinical psychology and the process of therapy. Often research is talked about as though it is something very separate from life, from helping, and from making things better. All of the applied social psychological research you have read about in this book proves that this is not the case. Research findings can be used in various ways to improve society. But beyond

that, there are many research projects that, by the very act of being conducted, help to change the world one step at a time.

When you read the title of this chapter, you may have asked yourself whether this whole book is not about changing the world one piece at a time. The answer to that question is "yes and no." All of applied social psychology by definition has real-world relevance, and much of it will end up changing the lives of individuals or communities. Findings from these studies may assist other researchers or practitioners in



**Figure 16.1** The Difficulty of Distinguishing Types of Social Change Research

SOURCE: Cartoon by Simon Kneebone (Wadsworth, 1998).

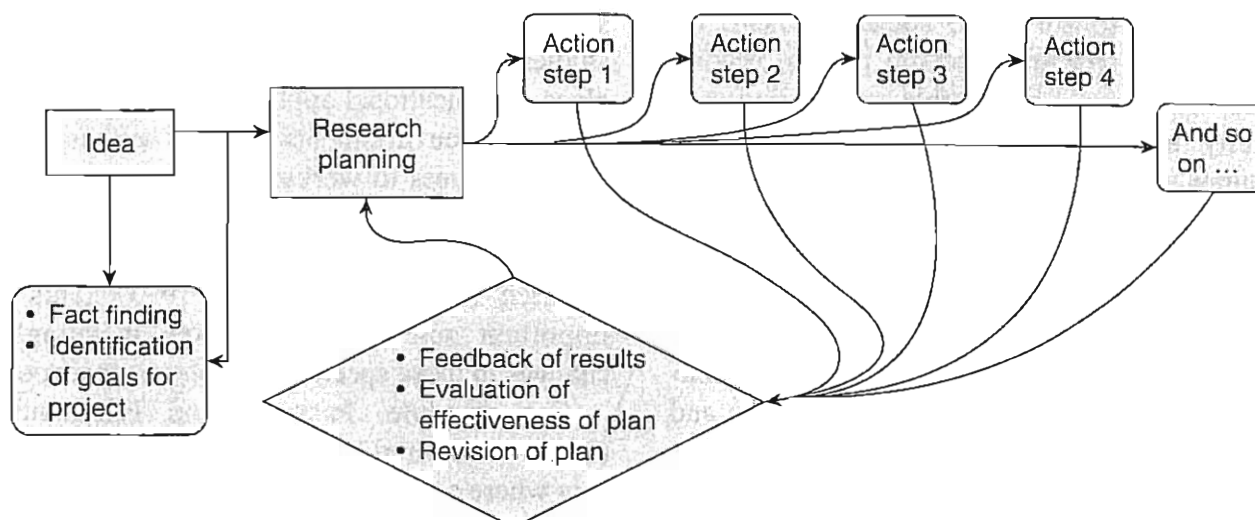
seeing fruitful avenues for social interventions. The results of applied social psychology studies may be used by social activists to inform their demands or by government officials to help devise their policy recommendations. But in most of these cases, the goal of the research has not been to deliberately create social change. The research that you will read about in this chapter has explicit social or situational change goals. That is, the research, to a greater or lesser extent, was developed to change something about the specific situation right at that time rather than, or as well as, later.

These distinctions between research that deliberately sets out to change society and research that has other goals are, however, not always clear-cut (Figure 16.1). Who is to say that a health promotion study that compares three different types of smoking cessation programs is not changing the world? If the study helps to reduce a dangerous behavior (smoking) in a small or large group of individuals and to thereby reduce health risk and economic hardship, is that not improving society? Of course it is. The research covered in this chapter, however, has as its purpose an immediate impact on

policy and/or the improvement of social conditions for a whole society, group, or community of disadvantaged people.

#### DEFINITIONS OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF SOCIAL CHANGE RESEARCH

Applied social psychologists are not the only people who do research to effect social change. The labels and definitions for the types of research that do this are somewhat different across disciplines. This section defines what we mean in psychology by each of the terms we commonly use. But it would be very difficult to discuss these terms without also relying on the work of sociologists, anthropologists, and the like because this field tends to be **multidisciplinary** (i.e., people from many disciplines working together) and **interdisciplinary** (i.e., people who use knowledge and skills from across disciplines). By necessity, this chapter can only scratch the surface of the breadth and depth of research that tries to make a real difference in society. It is hoped that this will give you a flavor of the types of research possible and perhaps



**Figure 16.2** The Action Research Process as Described by Lewin (1947)

even a desire to do this kind of research yourself. You should note that there are no new research *methods* for you to learn in this chapter because these types of research use a variety of methods that you already know. These studies are still correlational, descriptive, and/or experimental and use the same tools for gathering data.

The most common terms for research that has the goal of changing situations in society are **action research**, **participatory research**, and **activist research**. Each of the first two terms (action and participatory) describes both a way of approaching research (e.g., epistemology, values, assumptions about research) and a particular research process. The last term (activist) is used less often and refers to a particular standpoint that the researcher takes toward the research process and the project at hand. It is not unusual to see combinations of these terms (e.g., participatory action research [Wadsworth, 1998]) if a study takes components of each type and uses them in one study. This chapter looks at some of these hybrid approaches later.

## Action Research

Action research is the oldest of all the types of research discussed in this chapter, having been developed and advocated for use in psychology by Kurt Lewin in an article published in 1946. Lewin (1946) argued that when psychologists seek to facilitate social change, they must conduct “comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social

action and research leading to social action” (p. 35). He went on to criticize the academic focus of much of psychology at that time, saying, “Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice” (p. 35). In Lewin’s view, change can occur only if an iterative process of research is followed (Figure 16.2), that is, planning that includes appropriate “fact finding,” execution of the plan, evaluation of the effectiveness of the action taken (usually involving more fact finding), followed by another cycle of planning, action, and evaluation, and so forth.

The process that Lewin suggested is different in emphasis and content from the standard research process that we all learn in research methods (for a review, see Chapter 3 in this book). In that model, the process for a single research project is much more like a straight line. The planning takes place, the study is carried out, and the project is considered to be complete when the original plan has been executed and the data have been analyzed and interpreted. The data from that study may then be used to evaluate the theory driving the research. Future studies to continue the process may be planned by that researcher or other researchers. But the essence of a good research study, according to the principles underlying mainstream psychological research design, is that a study is planned well and then carried out exactly as specified.

Lewin was not discarding all aspects of the standard research process, but he placed more emphasis on the effectiveness of the particular

intervention to solve the social problem. He believed that for any research plan to accomplish this, it must be flexible and revised constantly according to new information. This requires multiple cycles of planning, data gathering, and plan revising by the same researcher(s) and within the same project. Lewin also thought that for any social change to be long-lasting, the action plan must be developed based on diagnosis of the problem within the specific social context (e.g., the local community or factory) and must involve the cooperation of the people from that setting (Lewin, 1946).

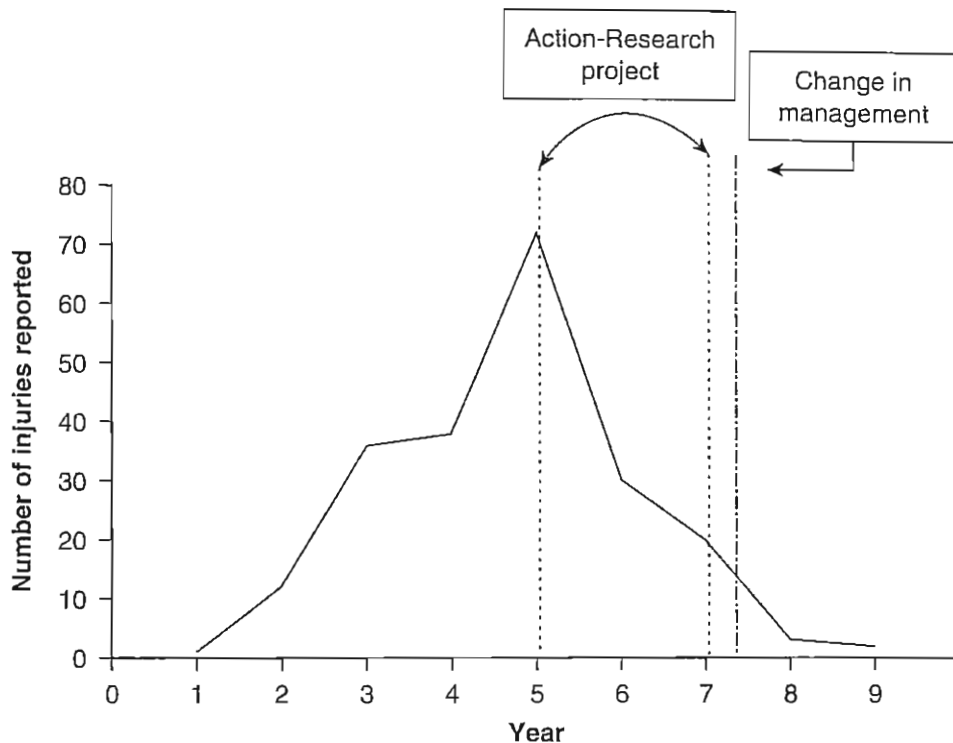
It is clear that Lewin, as someone who had escaped from fascism, had strong views about many topics that he studied. But he thought that this did not get in the way of "good science," that is, that action research was an objective process well within the appropriate role for social scientists. He argued that carrying out research in this way gave greater insight into how situations worked in comparison with other methods (e.g., surveys) of social research. He also thought that action research, because of its applied context, was a superior process for testing psychological theories and producing knowledge.

Lewin died a few years after he proposed this approach. During his life, he applied his plan for action research to issues ranging from improving intergroup relations (i.e., race relations) to democracy and democratic leadership to modifying the food-buying and preparation habits of wartime housewives to support the war effort (Lewin, 1946, 1947).

If you look at the diagram of Lewin's view of how action research should work (Figure 16.2), you can see that it would be possible to follow Lewin's directions as a *research process* (e.g., by attempting to find the best bottle or aluminum can design to sell more sparkling beverages) without using his underlying assumptions that the method should be used to understand social phenomena and to effect social change. But most action research (Peters & Robinson, 1984) does keep the key elements of Lewin's model even if the research has tended to focus on closed group change (e.g., making change within a specific organization) rather than on general societal change (e.g., reducing prejudice in one community while gaining an understanding of how to reduce conflict between groups in

society more generally). Most of the published studies during recent years have been of workplace or educational applications in which negative work environments (e.g., those that cause injury or stress to workers) or school practices (e.g., how to best teach learning-disabled students) are modified through cycles of action research (e.g., Cunningham, 1993). This is important research that makes meaningful changes in those specific workplaces or schools.

For example, Pasmore and Friedlander (1982) were hired by the management of a factory where an outbreak of sore arms (diagnosed as tenosynovitis) among the workers had resulted in a drop in productivity, high absenteeism, sick leaves, and surgeries across a 5-year period. If the problem could not be solved, the factory would shut down and all workers would lose their jobs. On previous occasions, the company had hired medical researchers to try to ascertain the cause of the injuries. None of these actions had been successful. Pasmore and Friedlander realized very quickly that the workforce, whose members were local, rural, and primarily women (90% female vs. 100% male supervisors transferred in to the plant from elsewhere), had very little control or say over their work environments. They had, in fact, never been asked about what they perceived to be the cause of the injuries. A committee, the Studies and Communication Group, was created by the researchers and was composed of five workers (with or without injuries), two foremen, the employee relations manager, and the researchers. These group members were introduced to **action research principles** (e.g., that an understanding of the problem and decisions about a solution could not be reached before several rounds of data gathering, discussion, reexamination, and revision had been done, that cooperation and trust were crucial to the process) and were encouraged to discuss their beliefs about the "soreness problem." Across months of meetings, members of the committee designed an interview and survey, were trained in a number of research skills (e.g., participant observation), conducted the research, and prepared recommendations for change based on analysis of 50 interviews and a survey of all employees. The results of this research were then fed back to all employees and the management (the latter of



**Figure 16.3** Arm Injuries Reported Prior to, During, and Following the Research Project

SOURCE: Adapted from Pasmore and Friedlander (1982, p. 357). Copyright © 1982 Cornell University.

which initially did not take kindly to many of the recommendations that blamed the management style of the organization for increased work stress) and resulted in many small and large changes in the work environment.

You can see, by examining the graph in Figure 16.3, that the research itself caused a reduction in injuries long before a full management change was effected. This should not be mistaken for a simple **Hawthorne effect**, that is, the phenomenon where productivity is increased because researchers single out and pay attention to workers. In fact, some researchers argue that action research capitalizes on the Hawthorne process and goes much further (Gottfredson, 1996). Pasmore and Friedlander (1982) agreed, suggesting that the nature of an action research project makes changes in the environment. They identified a number of features of their project to support this claim. The cooperation and trust built between employees and managers in designing and carrying out the various data collection stages, the massive publicity campaign that informed workers about the project and ensured them that the problem was being taken seriously, and the disruption of power dynamics between the plant manager and the employees

all were integral parts of the research process and became key factors in the reduction of the stress that was responsible for the injuries.

This example follows the procedures that Lewin set out for action research; the researchers planned, did research to gather facts, and implemented a series of changes, each time coming back to the group to pass on the information and to reassess the plan before moving to the next action. What you may have noticed as well is that this project involved in-depth collaboration with the people in the particular setting to accomplish the action research cycle. This is not a requirement for action research, but as you may recall from the discussion earlier in the chapter, Lewin believed that collaboration of any kind would make the action research more successful in sustaining changes. When real collaboration is present, as it was in the “sore arms” study, these researchers have much in common with those who describe their work as “participatory.”

## Participatory Research

Participatory research evolved in Latin America and other parts of the “Two-Thirds World”—Asia, Africa, and Central and South

America (this term is used by activists to illustrate that the so-called First World is only a small proportion of the world's countries and peoples)—from roots quite separate from action research traditions (Park, 1999). Paulo Freire is often given credit for beginning this tradition through his popular education process. Freire (1970) dedicated his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (translated from the original Spanish) “to the oppressed, and to those who suffer with them and fight at their side” (p. 7). It was Freire’s view that “authentic education” was truly working *with* an oppressed group rather than providing information *for* or *about* the group. Freire put this into action with peasants in Brazil who learned to read as they also learned about their own culture, heritage, and status within Brazilian society. He facilitated social action based on people’s own discovery of their social position and their solutions for change. He suggested that many social and political change efforts had been unsuccessful because they were designed based on the perspectives of the educators and politicians rather than on the perspectives of the people for whom the plans had been developed. Can you see how this point of view could be applied to research in psychology?

Have you ever participated in a psychological study? How much did you contribute to the direction of the research? To what was studied? To how the conclusions were used? If you are like most undergraduate students, you probably have been asked to fill out a survey or be part of an experiment. Although your beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions were no doubt of great value to the researchers in completing their study, your role as a participant was quite limited. **Participatory research** involves a very different level of involvement. A study can be said to be participatory when it requires the involvement of people from the group or community of interest in some or all of the stages of research. Maguire (1987) suggested that “participatory research combines three activities: investigation, education, and action” (p. 29). The *investigation* part of the process is a “social” investigation “involving participation of oppressed and ordinary people in problem posing and solving” (p. 29) and is not an academic library exercise (although no one says that

you should not also make yourself aware of any previous research or theory about the problem). Both the participants in the study and the researchers are *educated* in the process about the possible causes of the problem “through collective discussion and interaction” (p. 29). Finally, both the researchers and the participants “join in solidarity to take collective *action*, both short and long term” (p. 29, emphasis added). The reasoning is clear. The people who are going to be affected by change efforts should be involved in directing that change, and mutual education will be necessary for that to occur. Take a minute now to compare Maguire’s outline of the process of participatory research (investigation, education, and action) with Lewin’s plan for action research in Figure 16.2. Can you see the differences and similarities?<sup>1</sup>

Have you read many studies from researchers who took a participatory approach to their work? If you are like most undergraduates in psychology courses, you have not. Have researchers who care about the lives of those in poverty asked single mothers what they thought were the most important issues in their lives? The answer in most cases is no. Participatory research is fairly rare in psychology, even in applied social psychology. But it is gaining popularity.

So, how would a researcher tackle issues such as those facing poor single mothers? A participatory researcher would, at a minimum, involve this group of women in brainstorming about the problems they face and would like to see solved. The experts in this case would be the women whose life experience this is and, to a lesser extent, the researcher who has expertise in research. Studies using this type of approach range from those involving some participation during the early stages of research, to those involving some individuals from the community/group during every phase of the research and action up to and including the desired social change. Sometimes researchers call their work “participatory” even when a social action or change is not part of the study. However, Maguire (1987) and others (Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993) would not call this participatory research. “Participatory research includes political action, especially actions that cultivate ‘critical consciousness’ and are oriented towards structural change, not

towards adjusting people to oppressive environments” (Cancian, 1993, p. 94). In this way, we could differentiate between research that is “participatory” in nature (involving the affected people more fully in the research process, which looks more like the collaboration described in the Pasmore and Friedlander [1982] example of action research) from “participatory research” (which follows the full process outlined by Maguire [1987]).

In participatory research, researchers often diminish their own expert status by providing training in research skills, such as interviewing and developing questionnaires, so that participants can be actively involved in carrying out the research. Sometimes this training and work would be paid, and this may have the additional benefit of providing an immediate temporary remedy to participants’ financial situations. But even if this is not the case, the skills gained from being part of the research may be beneficial for participants’ self-esteem and life and career skills in many ways beyond the issue that is the focus of the research.

A good example of participatory research is the study carried out by Davidson, Stayner, Lambert, Smith, and Sledge (1997). This study was undertaken after another more traditional approach they tried had failed dismally. Working in the psychiatry department of an academic medical center, Davidson and his colleagues had previously attempted to design and implement an elaborate relapse prevention program for psychiatric patients who were released from the hospital. This program included education for patients about the nature of their disorders and the symptoms of relapse that were unique to them while they were still in the hospital, preparation of an “action plan” for dealing with symptoms while they were living on the outside, groups held twice a week to reinforce the program, and availability of the groups for patients once they were released. All of this sounds like a good idea, doesn’t it? That is what the doctors and other clinicians associated with the program thought. To their dismay, the program was completely and utterly ineffective, with many readmissions to hospital. Even more surprising to the staff members and researchers was that not one patient used the program following his or her release.

Davidson and colleagues (1997), on reflection, realized that they had taken all of the professionals into account in their formulation. Based on the views of these experts, their plan to prevent relapse was based on the assumption that readmission to the hospital was the result of a clinically definable relapse, that is, a person’s return to a severely symptomatic state. (Recall that Freire believed that basing programs on the perspective of professionals alone would lead to failure.) They began to wonder whether there were other reasons—even more important ones—why a person might be readmitted. So, the researchers started again, this time with the goal of “learning how patients might view the problem of recidivism differently and how they might be involved in a fuller and more constructive way of addressing the problem” (p. 771). Can you see how this shift in focus begins to move the research into a participatory research framework?

Of the patients who had been readmitted to the hospital two or more times, 12 were invited in open-ended interviews to talk about “their experiences of rehospitalization, the circumstances of this event, and the functions it served in their lives” (Davidson et al., 1997, p. 772). They were also asked to reflect on the relapse prevention program they had gone through and why they had not participated after they left the hospital as well as what things they felt might have been more useful to them. The most important finding that emerged was that the desire to prevent hospital readmission was entirely the clinicians’ agenda. For the patients themselves, the hospital provided “safety, respite, food, and privacy” (p. 774) along with caring. To some, it was a “vacation.” This was in extreme contrast to their lives outside of the hospital, where most of the patients were “homeless, broke, [and] unemployed” (p. 775), living on the streets or in homeless shelters where the beds were less than 12 inches apart. Moreover, the patients felt powerless to control their illnesses and did not see mental health treatment as effective, with the exception of their medications in some cases. They perceived the programs in the hospital to be more like school exercises where they were expected to perform, but they did not see these as being related to improvements in their well-being. Their views could not have been more



different from the clinicians' views. The hospital still wanted to prevent readmissions where possible because hospital stays are expensive. These findings made it clear that any programs based solely on the assumptions of clinicians were doomed to fail; success could be achieved only by "follow[ing] the lead of the patients in assuming that their restoring a decent quality of life for themselves in the community would make the hospital a less appealing alternative" (p. 777). In other words, there had to be a social change.

Further discussions were held with patients and other individuals who had once been patients but were now leading "productive lives in the community" (Davidson et al., 1997, p. 777) (i.e., self-labeled mental health consumers) to guide the direction of new solutions. On the basis of these discussions, groups were moved out of the hospital and into the community to overcome transportation barriers and to provide a new social community in the city. The groups were changed to be more focused on social support than on education and relapse prevention. Support for patients from one another was encouraged in various ways. For example, mental health consumers were hired to arrange social and leisure activities that were desired by the patients, to provide transportation to the groups, and to accompany patients on outings. They were also taught to co-lead the support groups, providing role models of success. A number of other changes were aimed to reduce "feelings of powerlessness." Not only did these changes reduce hospital admissions and the length of hospital stays for people who participated in the new programs by 70% to 90% in comparison with people who did not have the program, but also the new community of mental health consumers acted to sustain the groups beyond the 3-month plan and helped to change the program to accommodate budget cuts and other obstacles. In other words, this participatory project changed the communities into which these patients were released and facilitated the move out of their patient role. It is a great example of how a participatory research study can make a large difference in a community and can even create a sense of community where one did not exist previously.

## Activism in Research

Most participatory research is also activist research. That is, the researchers are taking a position and action on a controversial issue or social problem (Merriam-Webster, 2003). Usually, the researcher is working for the benefit of the oppressed group. For example, Cancian (1993), a self-described participatory researcher, described the process as "a radical type of activist social research in which the people being studied, or the intended beneficiaries of the research, have substantial control over and participation in the research" (pp. 93-94). You can see in the example of the treatment of psychiatric patients (Davidson et al., 1997) how the program changed as a result of the research from something designed and controlled by clinicians to a program designed jointly and controlled on an ongoing basis by the mental health consumers themselves. Clearly, this is activism, even if it was not originally intended to be.

Not all activist research is participatory. It is possible to conduct research using a variety of methods and processes where direct participation of the people involved most directly with the issue is not included. Nancy Russo's empirical work debunking "post-abortion trauma syndrome," a condition fabricated by the anti-abortion lobby, is one such example (Russo & Denious, 2001; Russo & Zierk, 1992). Russo worked as part of a task force of the American Psychological Association's Division 35 (Society for the Psychology of Women) to investigate this issue.

Russo and her colleagues conducted a secondary statistical analysis of survey data gathered for the U.S. Bureau of the Census. It was a very well-conducted national probability sample of male and female youths ages 14 to 21 years. This study was originally designed to examine youths' experiences in the labor market but included many questions on health and fertility, including follow-up surveys of 5,295 women 8 years later. This follow-up included measurement of women's self-esteem and adjustment, that is, variables that the anti-abortion lobby had claimed were irreparably harmed by abortion. Russo found that women who had abortions had higher overall levels of well-being on follow-up than did women who had not had

abortions, even though the stresses of unwanted pregnancies were experienced. Delaying child-birth and having fewer children spaced further apart were also related to higher levels of self-esteem and well-being. Russo found no evidence that abortion is harmful to women. She did *not* claim that abortion is directly related to a sense of empowerment and well-being but rather argued that it has an indirect relationship through reducing the number of children to which a woman gives birth. The task force then collaborated with a pro-choice group, Pro-Choice Forum, that had a large international online audience to disseminate the information from Russo's and others' studies. Russo stated, "This is our attempt to let people know the facts" (quoted in Crawford, 2003). You should note that there is no participation of a group of women who have had abortions in the design, conduct, or interpretation of the results from this study. The researcher is the sole force driving the research. Therefore, this is an example of activist research, which takes a stand on an issue (pro-choice on abortion) and action (conducting a study and disseminating the results in a politicized forum), but not of participatory research.

You may have noticed that the amount of coverage devoted to activist research in this section was much less than that devoted to the action and participatory research processes. This emphasis represents the amount of research of each kind in the applied social psychology literature more generally. There are relatively few researchers who describe their research as strictly activist in character. This does not mean, however, that components of each of these approaches are not found in other applied social psychologists' work.

#### DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN ACTION RESEARCH AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Some authors believe that there are key ideological differences between action research and participatory research that have kept their literatures separate. According to Brown and Tandon (1983), "The two traditions focus on different levels of analysis, use conceptual tools

from different disciplines, hold fundamentally different assumptions about the nature of society, and attend to different central problems" (p. 283). Table 16.1 provides a summary of these comparisons. Yet there are many similarities between research that is called action research and studies that are participatory. (These similarities are examined in more detail in the next section on comparisons between these approaches and mainstream research.)

The **level of analysis** (individual/group vs. societal) is probably the most distinct difference between the two approaches. Researchers who hold an action research perspective often focus on *the individual within the group* for their analyses. Consider the example of the research to deal with sore arms in an electronics factory, where Pasmore and Friedlander (1982) were hired to solve the sore arms problem. The researchers were aware of many features of the group, that is, the management's relationship with the workers and the style of management that were affecting the individuals' work lives. They were not, however, focused on the world outside the factory, where the gendered dynamics of the work world reinforce the dominance of male managers over female employees, or on the class dynamics, where men from the cities were transferred in to take over management of the local and primarily rural workers. The authors were aware of all these societal realities, but they chose solutions that made modifications to the existing system rather than trying to overhaul it substantially. They were sensitive to the realities of the workers, but they were hired by the employer. The researchers collaborated with all of the stakeholders within the factory, but they were bound to come up with solutions that met with management's approval or else they would have been completely ineffective. This makes the project an excellent example of action research, but the research is not participatory in the meaning used in this chapter, nor is it activist.

Davidson and colleagues' (1997) example of the psychiatric patients could have been focused within the confines of the hospital and its programs, but instead the researchers' design and process allowed for changes on a societal level. The authors chose to take the perspective of the

**Table 16.1** Comparison of Action Research and Participatory Research Approaches

	<i>Action Research</i>	<i>Participatory Research</i>
Starting place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Critique of mainstream psychological research approaches</i></li> <li>• <i>Change is necessary and positive for efficient and effective environments</i></li> <li>• People within setting will have common interest in solving problems; consensus possible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Critique of mainstream psychological research approaches</i></li> <li>• <i>Change is necessary and positive to enable improvement of situation for oppressed groups</i></li> <li>• There will be conflict between those in power and those without power; empowerment and transformation necessary</li> </ul>
Stance in research setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Focus is on knowledge developed in the specific situation that requires change</i></li> <li>• Problem solving to facilitate efficiency and effectiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Focus is on knowledge developed in the specific situation that requires change</i></li> <li>• Strategies to increase equitable distribution of resources and enhance self-reliance of oppressed groups</li> </ul>
Level of analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual within the group (individual, interpersonal, group)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Societal (community, social structures)</li> </ul>
Participation/Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration will improve longevity of change but is not necessary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation of group most affected is critical</li> </ul>
Research process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spiral process of data gathering, intervention, evaluation of effectiveness, and refocusing research plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No specific process recommended beyond real involvement of members of oppressed group</li> </ul>

NOTE: Italicized items are those that approaches have in common.

SOURCE: Details and analysis of differences and similarities between the approaches are adapted from Brown and Tandon (1983).

people without power seriously. One might have presumed that the researchers, as clinicians internal to the hospital, would want to “balance” the views of the patients with the perspectives of the clinical staff members. However, they made it clear from the beginning of the project that they were going to take the patients’ views as expertise about the problem and possible solutions. In other words, they assumed that the views of the two groups might be in conflict. In this example, the patients were not involved until the data-gathering stage, but that data gathering was done in a very open-ended nondirective way so as to maximize input. The patients were an integral part of the interpretation of the data and of the development and implementation of potential solutions. In fact, participation was

expanded by including former patients (mental health consumers) during the latter parts of the process. This is great participatory research, but it is not action research because it does not have the cycles of intervention and evaluation that are necessary features as defined in this chapter.

We could imagine a continuum of action research and a continuum of participatory research where one end of each continuum is the “pure” form of research (if such a thing exists) that has all of the attributes of its method and none of the other method and where the other end is the place where projects that have only some of the features of the process fit. Those projects at the extreme end of the action research continuum (representing purity) would be the most different from projects at the

extreme end of the participatory research continuum and would be clearly and easily distinguishable. However, for the majority of studies categorized as action or participatory research, the differences are much less clear and would fall somewhere along the two continua. Many successful studies borrow from both traditions, as you will see later.

In all of our discussions to this point, you have seen that the relationship between researchers and participants is not the kind described in your standard research methods course. But it is the kind of relationship that you could foster within your own communities, your own workplaces, and your own social and political action groups.

#### DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TRADITIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND SOCIAL CHANGE RESEARCH

Table 16.1 compares the action research and participatory research approaches. The previous section discussed the *differences* between the two approaches. Now we examine the principles that the approaches have *in common*. These are the features that distinguish them both from mainstream psychological research. For example, both approaches begin with criticisms of traditional research approaches and translate into doing research differently (Wadsworth, 1998). What do you think some of the differences are between the various kinds of research covered in this chapter and the kind of research you are most used to reading about? (Think about this for a minute before you read on.)

One difference between mainstream research and social change research is that in most cases, researchers who are trying to effect social change are not relying on one of the underlying principles of **positivism** (the philosophy driving the standard research method, as detailed in Chapter 3), that is, “objectivity.” This does not mean that researchers do not take a “scientific” approach; rather, it means that they are clear that their values and assumptions matter and do affect their take on the research. How could you want to change the world or any specific situation or environment and not have an idea of

what is wrong with it as it stands now or how you think it should change? This approach is in direct contrast to mainstream psychological research, where researchers are trained to attempt to be objective.

There are many critiques of the concept of objectivity in research (DuBois, 1983; Prilleltensky & Fox, 1997), but consensus among most social researchers is that objectivity is an impossible goal (Pyke & Agnew, 1991). Many community psychologists, feminist psychologists, and critical psychologists believe that the principle of objectivity hides support for the status quo. Who appears to be objective? Usually it is someone who shares our views or the views of the dominant culture. Biases are very obvious when someone is disagreeing with our point of view. On a social issue such as poverty, what would it mean to be objective? Could we ever be objective? Would we want to be? For this reason, social researchers with social change objectives, including feminist researchers across disciplines and critical psychologists, believe that the best way in which to proceed is to state their values and assumptions up front so that consumers of the research can judge for themselves the quality of the research and how it was influenced by values.

Another difference that comes out of critiques of mainstream research and the idea of objectivity is who we mean when we say “the researcher.” Is it the same in research for social change as it is in other areas of social psychology? Not in most cases. In other social psychological research more generally including many applied domains, the researcher has an idea (often from shared activities/collaboration with other colleagues, reading, and/or making observations in daily life) and then plans and carries out the research on his or her own or with the help of research assistants (voluntary or paid) who are usually undergraduate or graduate students in psychology. And you will see examples of social change research that follow this pattern where the trained researcher approaches a group or an organization in the community with his or her idea. But much more commonly, the researcher is approached (or hired) by an employer or members of the community to start a research project that comes from ideas generated within that community or

workplace. Sometimes the researcher himself or herself is a member of that social group and so has additional vested interest in the solution. In many cases in participatory research, the trained researcher is only one of many researchers because the research skills are passed on to the group or team.

Another difference from mainstream research is that research for social change is more concerned about **specificity** (i.e., knowing in-depth what the situation is for a group of people, and for people in similar circumstances, and how their position could be made better) rather than being concerned about **generalizability** (i.e., knowing enough to generalize to all people or to all communities). In Table 16.1, this commonality between action research and participatory research is described as a focus on developing knowledge in the particular situation. Brown and Tandon (1983) called it a focus on “useful knowledge.” If you think about the two main examples you have read so far, the researchers would have had to take very different approaches to the questions or problems they began with if their intent was to generalize the results to all factory workers or to all psychiatric patients. If they had taken approaches that were more appropriate for generalizability, they would have been hampered in their ability to find solutions for these specific people in these specific locations. Of course, this is not to say that sometimes the results of a participatory or action research project are not helpful to another similar situation, just that the research was not focused on that goal.

Similarly, you may have noticed that this focus on specificity or on the local situation or context means that researchers do not tend to talk a lot about testing or developing social psychological theory. But neither is there a neglect of theory. Lewin, the parent of action research, argued strenuously both for a focus on useful knowledge *and* for the development and use of theory. He stressed that good theories are practical. Theories that can be used in specific social situations are critical to our work. Social change researchers do not get their ideas for how change could be implemented by pulling them “out of the air.” They use their social psychological training and knowledge of theories of attitude and belief development, of social

cognition, of social behavior and behavior change, and of group decision making—among many other theories—to assist them. In the process, theories are often refined, discarded, or strengthened.

### MOVING AWAY FROM STRICT DEFINITIONS: RESEARCH THAT INFLUENCES SOCIETY

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This chapter has spent a fair amount of time describing action research, participatory research, and activist research so that you have a clear idea of what they are and are not. To people who have never been exposed to these kinds of approaches previously and who are taking an introductory course on the topic, being sure that the differences and similarities are understood is important. However, as is often the case in the world outside the university classroom, a focus on the goals of the research process is usually more important than the definitions themselves to the researchers who are doing the work. There are many ways in which to influence the world, and to change things for the better, that do not fit strictly into one definition or the other. Researchers do not worry about this so long as they can meet their goals for their projects. So, this section covers some examples of different types of change efforts organized by the type of change that each is trying to effect. These particular examples were chosen because they highlight the breadth of approaches to social change. There are many other excellent examples, but there is insufficient space to discuss all of them here.

### Influencing Policy Directly

**Policies** are plans and procedures that governments have for specific issues to ensure that certain overall goals can be met (Merriam-Webster, 2003). It is not unusual for researchers to want to influence social policy. Many researchers have press conferences or send reports of their findings to government offices in the hope that decision makers will take them into account. Some government officials peruse the scholarly literature for assistance with policy