# The critique of action research in Administration as a way of recovering its potential for transformative action

*A crítica à pesquisa-ação em Administração como uma via de resgate do seu potencial para a ação transformadora*

*La crítica a la investigación-acción en la Administración como una manera de rescatar su potencial para la acción transformadora*

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**ABSTRACT**
This article aimed to analyze how action research has been applied in the field of administration in Brazil. Bibliographical research was carried out, based on the Scientific Periodicals Electronic Library (SPELL). For the research corpus, 22 articles were selected and analyzed based on four categories: intervention, intervention with participation, beneficiaries, and sociopolitical or technical aspects. The findings indicate that most of the analyzed articles use action research in a limited way, reducing it to a technique for managerial problem-solving, and deviating its transformative potentiality. The importance of action research that considers the context of those involved and encourages critical self-reflection is highlighted here, so that ready-made solutions are not applied to the problems of the studied collectivity.
**Keywords:** administration; action research; qualitative research; intervention; participation.

**RESUMO**
Este artigo objetivou analisar como tem sido aplicada a pesquisa-ação no campo da administração no Brasil. Realizou-se uma pesquisa bibliográfica a partir do *Scientific Periodicals Eletronic Library* (SPELL). Para o *corpus* de pesquisa foram selecionados 22 artigos, analisados a partir de quatro categorias: intervenção, intervenção com participação, beneficiários, e aspectos sociopolíticos ou técnicos. Os achados apontam que a maioria dos artigos analisados utiliza a pesquisa-ação de forma limitada, reduzindo-a a uma técnica para a resolução de problemas gerenciais e desviando sua potencialidade transformadora. Destaca-se aqui a importância de uma pesquisa-ação que considere o contexto dos envolvidos e estimule uma autorreflexão crítica, a fim de que não se apliquem soluções prontas aos problemas da coletividade estudada.
**Palavras-chave:** administração; pesquisa-ação; pesquisa qualitativa; intervenção; participação.

**RESUMEN**
Este artículo tuvo como objetivo analizar cómo tiene sido aplicada la investigación-acción en el campo de la administración en Brasil. Se realizó una investigación bibliográfica a partir del *Scientific Periodicals Eletronic Library* (SPELL). Para el corpus de investigación fueron seleccionados 22 artículos, analizados desde cuatro categorías: intervención, intervención con participación, beneficiarios, y aspectos sociopolíticos o técnicos. Los hallazgos indican que la mayoría de los artículos utilizan la investigación-acción de manera limitada, reduciéndola a una técnica para resolver problemas de gestión y desviando su potencialidad transformadora. Aquí se destaca la importancia de una investigación-acción que considere el contexto de los involucrados y estimule la autorreflexión crítica, de modo que no se apliquen soluciones prefabricadas a los problemas de la colectividad estudiada.
**Palabras clave:** administración; investigación-acción; investigación cualitativa; intervención; participación

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

The administrative science has evolved based on the traditional perspective of sciences, strongly marked by positivism, in which the separation between subject and object is a presupposition for maintaining scientific neutrality. A science that involves the active participation of the researcher and that is related to intervention in the studied environment can still cause strangeness to researchers used to the positivist paradigm. According to Santos (2017), such a paradigm has been dominant in administration; however, researchers have sought ways to do science beyond traditional models, encompassing distinctive perspectives and approaches. In this effort, qualitative orientations have been considered as a means to reach the subjectivity of more complex contexts.

Among the qualitative possibilities, action research represents an investigation strategy with features that break with the traditional model of doing science. As Thiollent (2011) - a classic work on this approach - observes, in traditional research, there is no involvement of researchers with the participants, who are treated as informants in the research scope and implementers in the action scope, distancing themselves from the outcomes of possible deriving actions. In action research, on the other hand, the interaction between researcher, actors and the intervention in the reality being studied becomes fundamental, seen as an epistemological innovation applied to the administration field, building a viable possibility to bring academic research closer to society (Menelau et al., 2015).

Action research is an empirically-based methodological strategy that focuses on developing an action that benefits a collectivity. One of its central aspects is the involvement, either collaborative or participatory, of both researcher and research participants. This strategy goes beyond participation and has the action as a fundamental assumption, which should not be trivial, also aiming at the generation of scientific knowledge (Thiollent, 2011). "This action stems from the situation and offers ways out of it. It is community-based and seeks understanding through a dialogical and critical negotiation" (Franco, 2005, p. 492).

Action research starts from a concrete social situation; as it is considered situated research, the context in which the research is developed, as well as the experiences and knowledge of the subjects involved, must be taken into account. "Thus, the aim of employing action research is to bring about change to specific contexts" (Picheth, Cassandre & Thiollent, 2016, p. 4). Such assumptions require a commitment by the researcher to both know and intervene in the reality in which the research is developed, seeking the production of knowledge that is transformative of the subjects and of the situation. (Franco, 2005).

Action research can be applied in various ways and from various perspectives: from a technical perspective, focusing on the resolution of a technical problem, to a sociopolitical perspective, concerning the construction of critical and reflexive knowledge, aiming at the development of a collective consciousness in the political or cultural sphere. (Thiollent, 2011). What differs is the purpose of the intervention, whether aiming at adaptation or emancipation (Novaes & Drummond, 2013). The differences, the deviations in use, the distortions of original purposes have generated uneasiness about to what extent its use is close to or far from the genuine purposes of this approach.

The current context of emergence of serious social problems, of striking differences in economic development among nations, of discussion about the role of organizations in a society dominated by them makes it even more relevant, not to say imperative, to rediscuss scientific methods that are engaged with the context. Thus, discussing the role of science in its environment and its transformative potential for society constitutes the background of this article.

At this point, it should be noted that the understanding adopted in this paper is based primarily on the theoretical background of Thiollent (2011), without, nevertheless, being limited to the author. The ideas discussed by the author represent a starting point, both because he is one of the most widely cited authors on the subject of action research in administration in Brazil, as well as for the density of his arguments. The present article sought to answer the following research question: to what extent has the use of action research in administrative science been following its fundamental assumptions? These assumptions were listed by taking into consideration the main characteristics presented by authors such as Barbier (2004), Tripp (2005), Greenwood and Levin (2007), Reason and Bradbury (2008), Macke (2010), and Thiollent (2011). The initial objective of this article is to critically analyze how action research has been applied in the field of administration in Brazil, based on articles indexed in the *Scientific Periodicals Electronic Library* (SPELL). As from the analysis that was developed, we seek to present some points in the sense of rescuing the political-social potential of action research for the production of an action contextualized with the problems of our time, not limited to a process of professional intervention. In this way, there will be an investigation of whether researchers have favored the technical or the sociopolitical perspective in their field research, in addition to analyzing whether, in fact, there has been an intervention with the effective involvement of the participating actors.

The relevance of this work is justified by the fact that it goes beyond description and promotes critical reflection in order to broaden knowledge about the uses of action research in the organizational context. In addition, we point out, as a contribution, the fact that this article promotes a discussion about how we can advance in the use of action research in administration beyond the technical perspective not in the prescriptive sense, but as a way to contribute to the advancement in the ways the strategy is applied in the field of administration in order to expand its potential and broaden our view to other actors and organizational phenomena that are not always evidenced in the research

in the field. In this paper, the effort to provoke reflection on the need to think and build methodological alternatives beyond the consolidated models, committed to social transformation and adequate to the context, is emphasized.

Other than this section, this article is divided as follows: contextualization of action research, its main characteristics and assumptions, as well as its theoretical lens. Next, the methodological path followed to compose the corpus is addressed, specifying the criteria and the selection process. Then, the main results and their critical analysis are presented, where the possibilities of expanding action research in administration beyond the technical application are discussed. Finally, the final considerations are added, seeking to encourage the debate on the production of research that is committed to social transformation.

## 2 ACTION RESEARCH: EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ASPECTS, CHARACTERISTICS AND PERSPECTIVES

Epistemologically, action research involves participatory and dialogical ways of generating knowledge and empowering those involved by building their capacity to solve their local problems (Chambers, 2015). One of its fundamental principles involves doing research "with" people and not "about" people (Bradbury, 2015). It is situated research, which takes into account the context of those involved to collaboratively elaborate an action that solves a certain problem or situation (Shani & Coghlan, 2019). Two principles substantiate the action research: the first, epistemological, is related to the fact that knowledge in this type of research emerges from the researcher's immersion in the context of those involved and from a personal involvement in the experience; the second principle is political, which starts from the premise that the participation of all involved is a voluntary decision and that the real interests of the collectivity being studied are involved (Yorks, 2015).

According to Macke (2010), action research is a qualitative research strategy that aims to find a collective resolution for a given problem-situation in a context of planned change. It is not indicated for the macro-social level, being more suitable for small and medium-sized collectivities. Action research is speculated to have arisen in the United States as from the work of Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, being based on an experimental type of research whose actions were aimed at the development of company employees.

Such an approach is in line with a sociotechnical perspective (Vergara, 2005; Menelau et al., 2015). "This approach sometimes had the objective of reducing resistance to organizational change and of making workers increase their workload themselves." (Novaes & Drummond, 2013, p. 2). In management, action research has traditionally been used in the context of organizational development, a trend that is gaining strength in the northern hemisphere (Coghlan, 2011). In Latin America, action research has emerged in a context of social revolt and of fight for re-democratization, which has influenced in building an approach focused on sociopolitical engagement (Thiollent, 2011).

The authors Greenwood and Levin (2007), Reason and Bradbury (2008), Macke (2010), and Greenwood (2020) understand that action research is closer to a participatory research strategy than to a method in itself. For Greenwood and Levin (2007), action research is a research strategy from which knowledge claims arise, aiming to generate social change. Such change is not trivial and is based on enhancing the ability of the organizational actors involved to control their own destinies more effectively. Greenwood (2020) states that action research is not a theory or a technique, but rather several approaches that share some epistemological and ethical principles, presupposing a reciprocity between research and action. In this sense, the importance of action research as a research strategy for the production of participatory investigations which address concrete problems and promote social impact associated with the production of knowledge in the area of administration is emphasized. From a critical perspective, McTaggart, Nixon and Kemmis (2017) point out that action research is not about applying a correct set of techniques aiming at generalization, but rather research that seeks to help people understand the reality in order to transform it.

Its application arises in areas such as education, rural development, social service, university extension, and organizations. In the organizational area, especially within companies, the ambiguities surrounding power structures become even more evident, since research and any related action depend on the consent of the directors of the organization. Thiollent (2011) proposes that action research applied to the organizational context must produce and disseminate knowledge, so as to collectively benefit all the organization's actors. In this sense, there should be "ample demystification of the technical solutions that, traditionally, are given to economic and social problems in disregard of those concerned" (Thiollent, 2011, p. 94).

Action research applied to administration has sometimes been compared to professional intervention activities, but as Macke (2010) points out, the two activities are different. According to the author, in professional intervention the expected results are defined a priori and not necessarily with the participation of those involved. The main focus is to achieve results efficiently and effectively. In action research, on the other hand, the main focus is on the path followed, which must be built collaboratively, in addition to the interrelation with scientific knowledge. Tripp (2005) and Eden and Huxham (2009) argue that the term action research has been inaccurately and indiscriminately applied to any research that involves some kind of intervention; however, it must meet the criteria of scientific research and not only be associated with some kind of action.

Among the main characteristics, we highlight: interaction between researchers and research participants; its object of investigation is based on the social situation and

on the problems encountered; it aims at solving, or at least clarifying, the problems encountered; there is a follow-up of actions and decisions during the whole process; relationship between scientific knowledge and action; future-oriented; the action takes place on a limited scale; "coming and going" between research and action and the process of elaboration and theoretical development must be constant (Thiollent, 2011; Macke, 2010; Eden & Huxham, 2009). As the aim of action research revolves around promoting social transformations and changes, it is essential that the researcher specifies the level of achievement of these changes, and in order not to promote illusions about revolutionary transformations, the question of action must be addressed in realistic terms (Thiollent, 2011).

**Table 1**
Characteristics of action research

| Characteristics |
| --- |
| Participative |
| Interventionist |
| Emergent |
| Socially situated |
| Researcher's active role |
| Constant interrelation between scientific knowledge and action |
| Implementation and monitoring of actions |
| Collaborative and dialogical reflexive nature |
| Continuous process of theoretical development |
| The action is limited in scope |
| Relationship between research objectives and action objectives |
| Production of socially relevant knowledge |

Source: Tripp (2005); Greenwood and Levin (2007); Eden and Huxham (2009); Macke (2010); Thiollent (2011); Bradbury (2015).

Thiollent (2011) presents two orientations that action research can assume, the first one being directed towards an emancipatory perspective that involves the autonomy of those involved, towards a "sociopolitical engagement", which will be here referred to as a sociopolitical perspective. The second orientation is directed towards an instrumental and adaptive perspective, characteristic of sociotechnical approaches, which will be here referred to as technical perspective. In both perspectives, the "object of investigation is not made up of people, but of the social situation and the problems of different natures encountered in this situation" (Thiollent, 2011, p. 22).

The importance of taking into account the context in which the action research is developed is emphasized here. In order not to apply ready-made solutions to the problems of the studied collectivity, the context must be the target of critical reflection by both the researchers and, mainly, the actors involved in the situation. In this sense, Thiollent (2011) presents a direction for the development of action research, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**
Action research development

| Phases | Description |
| --- | --- |
| Exploratory | Diagnosis of the situation with the participation of all involved; analysis of the feasibility of the intervention; definition of roles and conditions for collaboration; establishment of the main objectives, which must be related to the problems considered priority. |
| In-depth Research | Data collection by means of techniques: individual and collective interviews, observation, documents, and mainly by seminars where meetings are held with all those involved, with the objective of analyzing, discussing and making decisions concerning the development of the action. |
| Action | As from the action plan elaborated collectively, the implementation is started. |
| Disclosure | Evaluation: monitoring and analysis of results; disclosure: diffusion of the research outcomes through feedback to those involved, both at the academic level and in the community. |

Source: Thiollent (2011).

The dynamic process that the method brings to evidence must be emphasized, moved by the simultaneity within its phases. Moreover, the generation of knowledge is present in each one of them. In this process, no change may occur, or it might not happen as planned; even so, its active feature is the basic assumption of this type of research (Macke, 2010). Furthermore, the produced knowledge is expected to be used in the daily lives of the participants (Lebesby & Benders, 2020).

The interpretation and analysis of the data result from group discussions. This construction tends to create shared and validated results through the interactions between the subjects. Thus, a language that is accessible to all involved is required. In addition to the discussion, the data that emerge from the research must be communicated to the entire collectivity involved (Barbier, 2004). In order to ensure validity and reliability, it is essential that in the research writing a detailed description of the intervention context and of the research context is made.

## 3 METHODOLOGY

This study is a critical review that uses bibliographic research as its methodological procedure. In order to achieve the objective proposed in this paper, a research corpus was built from the database available in the Scientific Periodicals Eletronic Library (SPELL). The data were interpreted from pre-defined categories based on the basic assumptions of action research, as well as on the theoretical framework by Thiollent (2011). Thus, four categories were created: **intervention (1); intervention with participation (2); beneficiaries (3) and sociopolitical or technical aspects (4).**

In order to better understand the categories listed above, it is necessary to comment on each one. The first category, **"intervention"**, presupposes an effective action; it cannot be limited to planning an action. In this sense, it is necessary that the action is put into practice or at least that an attempt is made. As pointed out by researchers Barbier

(2004), Tripp (2005). Macke (2010), and Thiollent (2011), the action is one of the constitutive dimensions of action research. It is important to highlight the characteristics that distinguish the action related to action research from other actions: it must not be trivial, it is not individualistic, and it demands the total commitment of the researcher in an attempt to promote changes in the organization. It is not limited only to planning or to a professional intervention, but must be associated with deepening the scientific knowledge (Franco, 2005; Thiollent, 2011).

There is no single model for conducting action research; however, one point in common amongst most authors is that the intervention must be carried out with the participation or cooperation of those involved in the situation. The second category, **"intervention with participation"**, refers to the fact that the implementation of an action by the researcher is not sufficient, the participation of those involved being essential. The action must be co-produced by the researcher and the research participants. Thus, this category presupposes the active participation of the researched subjects in the diagnosis, construction, implementation, and evaluation of the action. No transformation can be assumed without the consent and interest of those involved.

The third category, **"beneficiaries"**, seeks to understand who the actors that benefited from the solutions related to the action are. The fourth category **"sociopolitical or technical aspects"** aims to verify if the articles analyzed focused on aspects that were essentially technical and limited to the resolution of a specific problem (such as implementing a new technology in the company), or if in the intervention that was carried out there were concerns related to social transformation, search for autonomy of the participating subjects, promotion of awareness and critical reflection. In this category, we seek to understand which of those aspects have been more emphasized in the application of action research in the administration field. When based solely on technical aspects, the objectives are characterized as instrumental, being limited to solving an operational problem (Thiollent, 2011). Action research can also focus on sociopolitical aspects, when there is a concern with the development of a sociopolitical awareness associated with an emancipatory vision (Thiollent, 2011). Thus, "the action must be conducted in a collective, consensual, critical, and dialogical-reflexive manner". (Bertolin, Zwick & Vilas Boas, 2011, p. 6).

## 3.1 Building the Corpus

The data were collected from the SPELL database, based on articles that claimed to use action research. The search was carried out based on keywords "*pesquisa-ação*" and "*pesquisa ação*" ("*action research*") in the search tool available on the SPELL website; the area of knowledge was defined as "administration", and the time cut was the period from January 2010 to October 2020. The terms were used both in the cases where they appeared in the title of the document and/or in the keywords related to the articles.

In the first stage, 47 articles were found, 19 with the term "*pesquisa-ação*" in the title and 28 in the keywords of the related articles. However, 14 articles appeared in both searches, both in the title and in the keywords, and in view of this, the repeated articles were excluded. In this step, a total of 33 articles in which the term "*pesquisa-ação*" appeared in the title and/or in the keywords were selected for further analysis. It is noteworthy that when typing the term "*pesquisa ação*", no results were found either in the title of the document or in the keywords related.

In the second stage, all the abstracts of the selected documents were read. Out of the 33 documents initially selected, 11 were eliminated as these were not empirical studies, but theoretical essays and bibliographic research. Thus, 22 articles remained to compose our research corpus.

In the third stage, the articles were coded according to the following logic: 1. AR.01,02,03...: identification of the term action research + numerical sequence of the articles; 2. Next, the articles were divided according to the identified administration area, the acronyms being based on the academic divisions of the National Association of Postgraduate Studies and Research in Administration (ANPAD), as follows: Organizational Studies (EOR); Public Administration (APB); Strategy in Organizations (ESO); Innovation, Technology and Entrepreneurship (ITE); Marketing (MKT); People Management and Work Relations (GPR); Operations Management and Logistics (GOL); Finance (FIN) and Teaching and Research in Administration (EPQ); 3. The year of publication of the article. An article in the Organizational Studies area was coded as follows, AR.01-EOR-20, whereby: AR.01 - (base identification and numerical sequence) EOR - (area) - 20 (year of publication), a logic applied to all the articles that comprised the research corpus.

In the fourth stage, a detailed reading of all articles was carried out, followed by a classification based on the previously defined categories. The epistemological posture adopted by the researchers was also observed, as well as the type of organization (public, private or third sector) in which the action research had been developed. Those were the markers that guided the perspective of the research and that promoted the elements of reflection and critique as from a theoretical lens.

**Table 3**
Search system and number of articles found per year

| Database: SPELL | | | | | Period: January 2010 to October 2020 | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Area of knowledge: Administration | | | | | Search field: Document title and/or keyword | | | | | |
| Keywords: "*pesquisa-ação*" and "*pesquisa ação*" ("action research") | | | | | | | | | | |
| Year | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
| No of articles found | 5 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 5 | 6 | 1 |
| Total: | | | | | 33 | | | | | | |

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

# 4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

## 4.1 Analysis of the articles: key aspects

An overview of the articles analyzed is presented here. It is noteworthy that out of the 22 articles, five were developed in organizations of the third sector, eight of the public sector, and nine of the private sector. Based on Thiollent's (1999) reflection that the structure of action research is influenced by the context of its implementation, and that, in companies, the development of action research may be limited due to the heteronomy of social relations, a first element of reflection was raised here. The fact that our corpus shows that action research was mostly developed in the third sector or public organizations may lead us to reflect on whether the method applied in a private organization becomes limited due to a vision of controlled change present in companies. Therefore, heteronomy may suggest a barrier to its use in business-type organizations to the extent that aspects related to the empowerment of subjects, as well as to reciprocal and dialogical processes are scarce elements in this type of organization. Table 4 shows the overview of the analyzed articles.

**Table 4**

Overview of the analyzed articles

| Organization Type | Articles |
|---|---|
| Third Sector | AR.01-EOR-20; AR.05-ESO-18; AR.09-ITE-16; AR.10-EOR-16; AR.12-ESO-15. |
| Public Sector | AR.02-APB-19; AR.04-ESO-19; AR.06-APB-18; AR.11-ESO-15; AR.13-EPQ-14; AR.14-ESO-14; AR.18-EPQ-12; AR.22-EOR-10. |
| Private Sector | AR.03-ITE-19; AR.07-MKT-18; AR.08-MKT-16; AR.15-GOL-14; AR.16-ESO-13; AR.17-GOL-12; AR.19-FIN-10; AR.20-ESO-10; AR.21-GPR-10. |
| Areas | Strategy in Organizations (7); Organizational Studies (3); Public Administration (2) Teaching in Administration (2); Operations Management and Logistics (2); Innovation and Entrepreneurship (2); Marketing (2); Finance (1); People Management and Work Relations (1). |

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Here it is worth noting that in articles AR.01-EOR-20, AR.06-APB-18, AR.09-ITE-16, AR.10-EOR-16, AR.17-GOL-12 and AR.18-EPQ-12, a detailed description of all the way through the research was offered, detailing the phases of the action research and the context of the intervention. The others were limited to describing related concepts, or else the way covered was not clearly evidenced. This report is extremely important to highlight how the dialogical process between research and intervention takes place in research of this nature. This element may reveal the "secret recipe" for the use of action research to be extended to the administration field.

Regarding the authors most often cited in the articles as references for the development of action research, Michael Thiollent, Janaína Macke and David Tripp stand out. The predominance of the former has naturally reinforced the choice of this article for the centrality of this author to the theme.

As regards the epistemological orientation, 14 articles presented positions aligned with functionalism, four with constructivism, two with critical perspectives and two were not made evident. According to Thiollent (1999), the fact of using action research does not mean in itself a rupture with functionalism. As indicated by Lodi, Thiollent and Sauerbronn (2017), there is a certain distancing from the action research developed in the field of administration and the axiological positioning of this type of research. According to the authors, intervention focusing solely on solving organizational problems, disregarding other organizational actors, is fundamentally functionalist and "could be considered a distortion of action research" (Lodi, Thiollent & Sauerbronn, 2017, p. 66). Indeed, the inconsistency between functionalism and the action research strategy should be pointed out, emphasizing the importance of an episteme that recognizes and favors collectively perceived knowledge.

In view of the aforementioned, one of the basic criteria for a study to be considered action research refers to the need for an intervention that is collectively constructed, with a focus on transforming the studied context, and associated with the production of scientific knowledge. The collaboratively constructed intervention was evidenced as an emblematic mark of the method, and one that should be better acknowledged by social researchers, notably in the field of administration, in the sense of giving new meaning to its transforming potential, in addition to preserving its contribution to the transformation of reality.

## 4.2 "Intervention" Category

Out of the 22 articles analyzed, 17 carried out some kind of intervention, while in five of them, despite showing the intention to use action research, it can be seen that the intervention was not performed. In these five cases there was no effective action and the process amounted to the elaboration of action plans, as the following cases illustrate.

Article AR.02-APB-19 had the objective of analyzing the procurement planning process of a public organization. The authors proposed to create a series of actions, aiming to optimize the Institution's planning process. However, even though the objective was achieved, the researchers did not follow the basic assumption of action research since there was no intervention, only the elaboration of an action plan.

Article AR.12-ESO-15 proposed to test a theory to explain the performance and behavior of a third sector organization; however, there was no evidence of how the intervention was developed. It was not clear what the proposed action would be, nor if it was carried out.

Articles AR.04-ESO-19, AR.11-ESO-15 and AR.14-ESO-14 involved similar objectives, with two of them (AR.04-ESO-19 and AR.11-ESO-15) having the objective of developing a strategic plan for departments in the public organizations being studied, while article AR.14-ESO-14 sought to analyze the viability of implementing the Balanced Scorecard tool. It is noteworthy that in the three articles there was no intervention. There were meetings and discussions to develop the action plan, but there was no implementation of such plan, perhaps because of the specificities of the organizations and their dependence on external factors for implementing the action.

As Thiollent (2011) argues, one of the starting points for conducting action research is the ability to analyze the feasibility of an intervention in the context under consideration, surveying possible points that might make the research unfeasible and only then the research can begin. It is noteworthy that, in some cases, the researcher may need a longer period of time for the implementation and evaluation of the action; perhaps one of the reasons for not carrying out the intervention may be related to the time limitation imposed by the institutional rules of Postgraduate Programs and their evaluation agencies. In this case, the time available is a limiting factor and should be central to deciding on its use. If it is known that the intervention can hardly be implemented or will not be able to generate any kind of change, choosing another more appropriate research strategy is recommended.

Article AR.03-ITE-19 aimed to identify the aspects that influence the development of entrepreneurial competencies. In the aforementioned article, there was the implementation of an action; however, the action had more similarities to a professional intervention process than to the characteristics of action research. This study was in line with Vergara (2005) and Macke (2010) when they state that action research has sometimes been mistaken for professional intervention or consultancy. These processes have their own marks, such as the unidimensionality of research practice.

Considering what was exposed above, it was noticed that out of the 22 articles analyzed, five did not conduct an intervention, but only elaborated action plans. In the other 17 articles, on the other hand, there was some kind of intervention. This kind of "verification" seems to be stripping away the conceptual pillars of the method. We shall continue on this path, so that in the next topic we can evaluate if this intervention was carried out with or without the involvement of the actors representing the situation.

### 4.3 "Intervention with Participation" Category

Among the articles analyzed, nine were noted not to have conducted intervention with participation; out of those, five were the ones reported in the previous topic, in which the action had not been carried out. In articles AR.07-MKT-18; AR.08-MKT-16; AR.13-EPQ-14, and AR.15- GOL-14, there was intervention; however, the related action was not elaborated collectively. In these cases, those involved participated only in the execution of the plan, but there was no engaged construction on the part of the subjects involved. It is noteworthy that articles AR.07-MKT-18 and AR.08-MKT-16 involved the development of a marketing plan, and, in both, only the owners of the companies were heard, there was no participation of other employees or people related to the department in the elaboration stage of the plan. Article AR.08-MKT-16 resembled the description of a consultancy service. In this case, the implementation of the marketing actions occurred with resistance, including among the directors, perhaps because the problem and the action plan had been defined in isolation and without taking into account the context and the opinion of those involved. The intervention process carried out in isolation contradicts the assumptions of action research. Santos, Calíope and Barros (2017) analyzed fifty-four articles that used action research and found similar results by identifying that in most cases there was no involvement between researchers and research participants. Lebesby and Benders (2020) aimed to explore the reasons why employees do not become involved in the intervention process and in the proposed changes. Amongst the identified reasons, employees reported a feeling of false autonomy. According to them, managers ask them to give suggestions and actively participate in the intervention process and in problem-solving, but the decision has already been made and their opinions are never taken into consideration. In other words, this participation does not always benefit the employee, which can generate a resistance to the participation process in action research. Other reasons identified by the authors were lack of time, employees not seeing benefits in their participation, and the perception that participating would involve a greater workload. If those involved do not perceive the intervention and solutions as significantly useful to their daily lives, or if there is no room for this to take place, it is unlikely that they will be interested in participating and in actively building actions, since such actions will not change their realities.

It should be noted that in articles AR.01-EOR-20, AR.09-ITE-16 and AR.10-EOR-16, the action research was carried out in a dynamic and interactive way, and, in some moments, the objectives were redefined, given the new needs presented by the listed groups. Some actions were also revised to fit the reality of those involved; all this was only possible through an intervention process with the full participation and cooperation of those involved. It is worth noting, as pointed out by Menelau et al. (2015, p. 48), that changes in objectives and new insights are common in this type of research; however, the researcher cannot go into "the field without considering at least a scientific intent in the intervention". The initial contact with research participants is fundamental, not only to comply with a protocol, but as a way to establish relationships of trust, without which action research would hardly be successful. As Reason and Bradbury (2008) point out, action research is only possible with and for the people and community involved.

### 4.4 "Beneficiaries" and "sociopolitical or technical aspects" category

Regarding the beneficiaries, nine articles had the directors of the respective organizations as the main

beneficiaries. In the case of articles AR.12-ESO-15 and AR.14-ESO-14, if the action had been developed, the beneficiaries would have been the directors and organizational managers. In article AR.16-ESO-13, the beneficiaries were the organization's management. Three articles, AR.09-ITE-16, AR.10-EOR-16 and AR.22-EOR-10, had the main stakeholders involved in the situation as beneficiaries.

Articles AR.13-EPQ-14 and PA.18-EPQ-12 had the students of the institution as beneficiaries. In article AR.06-APB-18, the action benefited the students and the investigated institution as a whole, since the action put into practice involved the process of water reuse, aiming both at promoting sustainability and at saving public money. Three articles, AR.01-EOR-20, AR.09-ITE-16 and AR.10-EOR-16, had the various actors involved in the situation as beneficiaries, not being limited to the organizational level or to an exclusive group. It can be seen that the beneficiaries listed in this paragraph did not involve only the main leaders, a fact that can be explained due to these organizations being public ones or from the third sector, where they have objectives beyond economic rationality.

In relation to the sociopolitical and technical aspects, it can be seen that the great majority (17) focused on technical aspects, as expected to the area of administration. In these cases, the focus was primarily on solving some organizational problem by implementing the planning process, by promoting organizational development, or by implementing managerial tools. Silveira, Palassi and Paes de Paula (2019) found similar results when they analyzed the implementation of action research in 64 dissertations and theses in the area of administration defended between 2011 and 2018. The authors identified that the sociopolitical and emancipatory perspectives have been underused in the papers in the area. Elg et al. (2020), in their analysis, also highlight a greater focus on technical and practical actions, but fewer studies that aim to generate emancipatory knowledge. According to the authors, although the analyzed studies claim to follow a certain action research approach, a lack of adherence to its fundamental principles and practices was noticed. It should be emphasized that the action should not be limited to actions aimed solely at increasing productivity and the search for efficiency. When applied in this way, the focus of action research is transferred only to the result and the process and learning derived from the construction of the intervention are ignored. As pointed out by Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon (2015), the intervention proposed in action research should involve not only a change in individuals, but also mainly in organizational, cultural, sociopolitical and economic arrangements associated with the context of those involved. In this sense, action research can be understood as a social and political practice.

Five articles, AR.01-EOR-20, AR.06-APB-18, AR.09-ITE-16, AR.10-EOR-16 and AR.18-EPQ-12, focused on sociopolitical aspects. Article AR.01-EOR-20 associated action research with critical organizational studies and, throughout the development of the research, the concern with the group's learning and awareness was clearly evident. The research team sought to stimulate the autonomy of the group through a collaboratively built process. Article AR.18-EPQ-12 highlights the need to build other forms of teaching and learning in administration, seeking to promote critical knowledge, in which students have an active role. Article AR.10-EOR-16, on the other hand, aimed at the empowerment and learning of the actors involved in family agriculture in the São Francisco Valley region.

Table 5 presents a summary of the analysis developed here.

**Table 5**
Critical review summary

| Articles | Intervention | Intervention with participation | Beneficiaries | Sociopolitical or technical aspects |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| AR.01-EOR-20 | x | x | Cooperative members | Sociopolitical |
| AR.02-APB-19 | | | Management and Staff * | Technical |
| AR.03-ITE-19 | x | x | Directors | Technical |
| AR.04-ESO-19 | | | Stakeholders * | Technical |
| AR.05-ESO-18 | x | x | Directors | Technical |
| AR.06-APB-18 | x | x | Students and the Institution | Sociopolitical |
| AR.07-MKT-18 | x | | Directors | Technical |
| AR.08-MKT-16 | x | | Directors | Technical |
| AR.09-ITE-16 | x | x | Stakeholders | Sociopolitical |
| AR.10-EOR-16 | x | x | Stakeholders | Sociopolitical |
| AR.11-ESO-15 | | | Management and Staff * | Technical |
| AR.12-ESO-15 | | | Directors, Managers* | Technical |
| AR.13-EPQ-14 | x | | Students and the Institution | Technical |
| AR.14-ESO-14 | | | Directors* | Technical |
| AR.15-GOL-14 | x | | Directors | Technical |
| AR.16-ESO-13 | x | x | Management | Technical |
| AR.17-GOL-12 | x | x | Directors | Technical |
| AR.18-EPQ-12 | x | x | Students and the Institution | Sociopolitical |
| AR.19-FIN-10 | x | x | Directors | Technical |
| AR.20-ESO-10 | x | x | Directors | Technical |
| AR.21-GPR-10 | x | x | Directors | Technical |
| AR.22-EOR-10 | x | x | Stakeholders | Technical |

Source: Elaborated by the authors.
Legend: * They would have been beneficiaries had the intervention been carried out.

It should be noted that in some articles (AR.03.ITE-19, AR.12-ESO-15) the research participants resembled mere informants. In others (AR.07-MKT-18, AR.08-MKT-16, AR.15-GOL-14, AR.20-ESO-10, AR.21-GPR-10), it was not evident how research and action were related since they were more like a professional intervention process than action research. Some authors pointed out the impossibility of generalization as a limitation to the research. It is important to emphasize that this is a characteristic of the method and not a limitation in itself.

**4.5 Critical analysis**

Although action research is not restricted to a particular paradigm or field of action, it emerges as an innovative methodological proposal that aims to break with the positivist logic. As Reason and Bradbury (2008) point out, action research challenges the knowledge produced both in academia and among social change and development professionals, since it involves, in a co-participatory way, those who are usually treated only as research subjects or targets of a planned change. Based on the articles evaluated, it can be seen that the majority use action research in a utilitarian way, developing research "about" and not "with" those involved, who only carry out the actions without their experiences being considered. Such action limits the transformative potential of action research and distances itself from its epistemological assumptions. As Thiollent (2011, p. 105) points out, action research applied to the organizational context, "[...] has a more accommodating orientation, seeking satisfactory transformations compatible with the adaptation and operation of existing organizations; in this context, the radical content of action research is obliterated, making it only a problem-solving technique".

In order to conduct research "with" and "for" people, rather than "about" people, Machado, Barbuto and Croft (2021) used the collaborative tool of Dragon Dreaming projects in order to assist in the dialogicity and inclusion of all community actors in the process of structuring ecological sanitation. Furthermore, it is worth reflecting on the need for the researcher to build instruments for data collection and analysis beyond the commonly used techniques. A contextualized action also demands contextualized instruments, requiring the researcher to think creatively. The opening of communicative spaces (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) through the use of online forums and/or social networks, theater, drawings, storytelling are some examples aiming to promote greater interaction and dialogue in building solutions, which can be used as a way to give centrality and to involve the organizational actors in developing actions that are useful for those involved.

The objective look used in this article to indicate "majorities" and "minorities" in the movements of articles on action research should be justified only as keys to "markers" whereby questions were raised about the consistency in the use of the method, with its assumptions, with its characteristics and, above all, with its purposes. Thus, we chose the terms to highlight the fundamental features of the method with a view to restoring it to its roots and re-signifying its use.

Thus, we notice that most of the analyzed articles developed action research focused on improvements and punctual organizational changes that did not necessarily benefit the other organizational actors. The action related to the research should refer to an action that benefits the collectivity and not only a restricted group. Thiollent (2011) argues that where there is an evident division between directors and those directed, action research can become fraught with uncertainty and its potential can be limited in a utilitarian way by managers who prioritize problems of their sole interest. Along the same line, Silveira, Palassi and Paes de Paula (2019) state that the mechanical use of action research limits participation and the capacity for change. Restricting the intervention to a small group of beneficiaries reduces the potential of action research. For Coghlan and Shani (2020), action research produces knowledge that relates to a specific situation and should be developed in a way that contributes to organizational members being able to solve their own problems, that is, the generated knowledge is ideally expected to produce greater autonomy and critical self-learning of their context.

The minority of articles described the path taken in detail; as pointed out by Menelau et al. (2015, p. 51), "the concept of action research is recognized and internalized by the authors, but the reports of its application are still deficient". This fact could be minimized from a clear and dense description, as proposed by Paiva-Júnior et al. (2011), both of the academic aspects and the aspects related to the intervention, so that other researchers would be able to understand how the development of action research took place. Dick, Stringer and Huxham (2009) identified a lack of description of how theory integrates with action research. Theorizing in this case does not aim to provide normative models, but to enhance an existing theory (Elg et al., 2020) and assist in the translation of a given reality (Santos, 2003). Still on the need for a detailed description, the reports could make the difficulties and resistance encountered in the participation process evident in order to guide other researchers and promote reflection on how we can move forward. "Participation can o000000000nly be stimulated if the barriers that limit it are understood" (Lebesby & Benders, 2020, p. 626). Article AR.01-EOR-20 stands out, in which action research was developed in a contextualized way by being used along with other collaborative methodologies in order to obtain greater involvement, participation and adaptation to the context of that organization. It must be considered that the a priori desired changes are not always possible; in this sense, Thiollent (2011, p. 106) states that "the proposed transformations take into account the norms of adaptation to the context that is favorable to ruptures or limited adaptations. In all circumstances, researchers cannot apply a pre-established norm of action and must be attentive to negotiating what is actually transformable".

At this point, it is important to identify and describe the context in which the action takes place, enabling the reader to understand this reality and the actions that were developed. Shani and Coghlan (2019) highlight the importance of a broad and systematic description of the context, of the actions developed, and of the results and impacts caused by the implemented actions. Only six of the analyzed articles made this description in a detailed way. Action research represents situated research, which considers the social reality of those involved in the process of constructing the intervention. Some articles (AR.03-ITE-19, AR.08-MKT-16, AR.11-ESO-15, AR.15-GOL-14 and AR.19-FIN-10) applied ready-made intervention models, apparently without reflecting or questioning whether that model was adequate for the context. The application of ready-made intervention models and actions that are incompatible with the reality of those involved is not appropriate for action research. In article AR.15-GOL-14, the action objectives were defined a priori, which possibly limited the participation of organizational members. Action research involves an emergent process, the scenario that develops in the research being unpredictable, with the data changing because of the action taken (Coghlan & Shani, 2020). Diagnosing a problem and then proposing a course of action is not action research, but rather professional intervention or consulting.

According to Picheth, Cassandre and Thiollent (2016), proposing an action must take into account the situation experienced by the actors involved. Before proposing any solution, it is fundamental for the researcher to be inserted and involved in a given reality in order to understand how the participants understand their own context. The diagnosis and mapping of the situation must involve a collective and horizontal process in order to build actions and knowledge that produce transformations to the studied reality. McTaggart, Nixon and Kemmis (2017, p. 28) urge us to think of action as a social practice that involves a process of critique and self-critique that seeks changes and transformations "through individual and collective self-transformation: transformation of our practices, transformation of how we understand our practices, and transformation of the conditions that enable and constrain our practices".

An expansion of action research in administration beyond the technical aspects is advocated here. Among the possibilities, the increase in the number of beneficiaries and an effective involvement of the other company employees are recommended, seeking the development of solutions in a collaborative way, not only as a way to create administrative harmony, in the sense set forth by Tragtenberg (2006), but in the sense of promoting critical reflection and transformations that bring significant impacts to the workers as well. The actors involved in action research cannot be seen as prior data with the sole objective of producing results for the research (Novaes & Drummond, 2013).

Another possibility to broaden the critical and political dimension in the administration area is to apply action research with other collaborative methods, such as the worker´s inquiry (Thiollent, 2011). The worker´s inquiry can be applied as a way to learn about the working conditions and social reality of workers. Such a method associated with action research can promote an intervention aimed at the transformation of working conditions and the political background of those involved. "Possible emancipatory movements must come from the group itself and not by any kind of militancy of the researcher" (Novaes & Drummond, 2013, p. 3).

Another way of enhancing action research in administration beyond instrumentalism involves the articulation between scientific and artisanal knowledge, seeking, in a dialogical and collaborative way, to solve the real problems of the subjects through an interrelation between local knowledge and scientific knowledge. The knowledge of those involved is an essential part in the development of action research, based on the premise that human beings are experts in their own lives and experiences; in this sense, taking local knowledge into account is a fundamental aspect for an effective and lasting social transformation process (Greenwood, 2007). The context in which action research emerged is certainly different from the current context. This leads us to the need to think of action research in a globalized situation, in which new forms of production and work organization, with more subtle control tools emerge, within a digital-informational scenario where data are the new petroleum, in a context of commodification of work and deterioration of social rights. The generated knowledge cannot be dissociated from the social, political and economic context.

Action research in the organizational context may not always assume emancipatory outlines, given the divergence of objectives between owners and employees´. However, should the researcher decide that action research is the most appropriate method, it is up to him to reflect on how his intervention and the generated knowledge can bring benefits to the collectivity and not only to a restricted group. This is not about activism or miraculous propositions, but about looking at other organizational actors and building objectives collectively beyond organizational efficiency, taking into account the reality of those involved.

As much as there are limitations related to the implementation of action research in the organizational context due to asymmetric power relations that limit actions, it is necessary that researchers broaden their view to other possibilities within the organizational context. Thus, we must ask ourselves: what is our role as researchers and whom will the generated knowledge serve? What kind of values and power relations will it reinforce? These questions are inherent to any scientific research, but they are amplified in the case of action research, since it is not just a data collection process, but rather research built in a co-participatory way. As Carrasco and Aguirre (2018) point out, action research is a relational and socially committed

investigation; therefore, it is necessary that reciprocal relationships are formed between the researcher and those involved.

Action research is influenced by the historical and social context in which it emerges (Santos, Calíope & Barros, 2017). If this context is oppressive and marked by asymmetric power relations and little autonomy, we as researchers need to question ourselves about how our research can contribute to change this reality.

How can we think and do research in a different way? How can we go beyond the status quo? How can we rethink action research and other research methodologies for our current reality, for the South-American context, for the context of technological transformations that have transformed our daily lives? How to rethink engagement and participation in the current context? Action without reflection and participation alone do not change the status quo. Action research was used here as a starting point to think about research methodologies and strategies committed to social transformation that do not end after data analysis and understanding the phenomenon. We do not claim here that action research or any other research strategy will solve all society's problems. We do not have ready and homogeneous answers to the questions raised here, that is why we understand that this is not an outdated subject, but a starting point to discuss and rethink our research methods and strategies. Thus, the researcher's implication in the development of research committed to the actors and to the social and organizational problems that provoke our investigations has become increasingly urgent. It is necessary to think of our research as social and political practices in order to produce knowledge that is capable not only of provoking reflections and uneasiness, but that also stimulates intervention in the observed reality by means of a network articulation with other actors.

## 5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article proposed to understand how action research has been applied in the field of administration, seeking to analyze, among other issues, whether its basic assumptions have been followed. By means of the analyzed articles, we sought to reflect on how we can expand on the use of action research in the organizational context. The intention was to instigate other researchers who would leave the position of spectators to become engaged researchers. We realized that the great majority of the analyzed articles focus exclusively on technical aspects that aim to solve managerial problems. The results generated in action research are not limited to solutions to immediate problems, but involve the learning of those involved and of the researcher, in addition to the contribution to scientific knowledge and the theory advancement (Coughlan & Coghlan, 2002). The action should not be solely limited by the pursuit of productivity and organizational enhancement without considering how this affects everyone involved. This process involves constant reflection by the researcher about

his role and the limitations in the transformation of a given reality.

When used only as an instrument, the potential of action research for transformation and change becomes limited and distances itself from its epistemological and methodological assumptions. In this study, it is proposed that the use of action research in the organizational context can be expanded beyond the technical aspects in order to promote critical reflection and action on the organizational reality. It would be appropriate for researchers to observe the needs that emerge from other groups beyond owners and managers. In this sense, it is necessary to consider the experience and knowledge that emerge from the shop floor and from other organizational contexts, taking into account the voices that are omitted within the organizations. This imposes the challenge of thinking of non-extractivist methodologies as a way to echo the marginalized voices, going beyond extracting data for the research. The use of action research is proposed as a way to promote critical and emancipatory knowledge, so as to engage all actors involved in the investigated situation; if this is not possible, it will be up to the researcher to investigate the impediments to an effective participation.

Researchers who wish to extend action research in the organizational context beyond the technical aspects can benefit from the sociological reduction proposed by Ramos (1996). By practicing sociological reduction in the development of action research, one seeks to collaboratively build actions that fit the reality of those involved, in addition to promoting a critical awareness of the context. This positioning involves critical thinking in relation to the transposition of models and ready-made solutions to a given reality. Such an initiative demands an engaged position of the researcher in order to understand the needs that emerge from the group and that promote autonomy "and collective re-significations of the group's understandings articulated with the socio-historical conditions" (Franco, 2005, p. 488). Both the knowledge generated and the action employed must be the result of a collective and participative process of collaboration between researchers and groups. We highlight the potential of action research as situated research to promote changes that benefit various organizational actors. The regional context demands research that is committed to its transformation. As an investigation that articulates research interests with social interests, it can be applied as a way to echo the voice of the workers, to assist in the construction of more horizontal relationships, to improve the work environment based on solutions built by those involved, and to build management models beyond the immediate economic rationality.

As a research limitation, there was the fact that the analysis was restricted to articles available in the SPELL database; furthermore, only those articles in which the term action research appeared in their titles and/or keywords were selected. As a suggestion for future studies, it is recommended to further investigate how the evaluation and

reflection phase of the action research outcomes has been developed, as well as to investigate how the involved actors evaluate the generated results and how the scientific knowledge is democratized. Such a point deserves to be highlighted, considering that the means of scientific diffusion are hermetic in the academy itself. The democratization and socialization of scientific knowledge transcends action research and should not be limited to the diffusion of results, but should offer the possibility of a reflexive dialogue with the community in order to promote a discussion about the impact of the knowledge and of the actions built in the local context, besides leading to a critical self-reflection that stimulates the development of solutions and fosters what Mills (1982) called sociological imagination.

By means of bibliographical research, the action-research strategy was adopted as a starting point in order to promote broader reflections that instigate us to think about how we can contribute to generating knowledge associated with concrete social practices. In this sense, the articles analyzed were used as illustrations and the path taken contributes to stimulating the debate about the implications of generated knowledge and action, as well as to think about different research strategies and methodologies; or, maybe, we can make the effort to re-signify methods and approaches that have lost their potential to engage and transform the collective, as discussed above in the case of action research.

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