

THE RUTH & TED BRAUN AWARDS FOR WRITING EXCELLENCE  
AT SAGINAW VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

## Action Research: Establishing Ethics

Kayleen A. Schumacher

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

*Nominated by Dr. Francis C. Dane*

*Finkbeiner Endowed Chair in Ethics*



Kayleen Schumacher, from Munger, graduated summa cum laude in May 2007 with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English Education. Additionally, Kayleen completed the Honors Program and a minor in both Psychology and Geography. Kayleen was actively involved in a number of campus organizations including being President of the Alpha Chi National Honors Society and a member of SVSU's Forensics Team. She is pursuing a Masters Degree in English at Central Michigan University.

---

### Introduction

For several decades, the field of science has recognized both the necessity and the importance of a standardized code of ethics for research methods. When conducting experiments involving human subjects, traditional forms of scientific research now conform to the ethics established in the Code of Federal Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects—also known as 45 CFR 46. However, researchers conducting certain forms of social research involving human subjects have pulled away from these widely accepted ethical guidelines. This approach is exemplified in a style of educational research known as “action research.”

Although there is no concrete definition for action research, practitioners working with this method share the view that “action research depends upon a collaborative problem solving relationship between the researcher and the client which aims to both solve a problem, and generate new knowledge” (Rowley 3). An underlying goal of action research (as well as most traditional scientific research) is the objective collection of data for the purpose of creating generalizable knowledge. This common objective can serve to unite these two spheres of research. In order for action

research to be truly viewed as a legitimate approach to research, investigators in this field should adopt the scientific ethical guidelines that have been accepted by traditional areas of scientific experimentation.

### Action Research is Research

The central reason why action research should be considered under the jurisdiction of 45 CFR 46 is the simple fact that it is research. In order for any form of research to be covered under 45 CFR 46, it must fit the code's definition of “research.” According to the code, research “means a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge” (45 CFR 46.102 D).

First, the concept of action research does fulfill the portion of the definition that details the “systematic investigation.” Despite claims that “action research relies chiefly on observation and behavioral data,” action research is not strictly observational research, because the teacher/researcher is manipulating a variable (Cohen & Manion 192). The process of action research is more than a process of the teacher constructing a self-reflective narrative. Action research involves the

systematic application of independent instructional variables into the controlled setting of the classroom. The effects of the independent variable are then measured against the dependent variable—the students' achievement. For this measurement to occur and be known, the students need to be systematically tested with some form of formal (i.e., exam) or informal (i.e., discussion) evaluation. In other words, "the researcher is seeking to generate as objective a story as possible" (Rowley 9). This process is an experiment; this process is research.

Second, the information obtained in action research is routinely considered for generalizable purposes. Yet, some supporters of action research claim that their research activities are not designed for the purposes of producing generalizable knowledge. They claim that investigations are intended to inform only their teaching practices for the "improvement of practice" (Cohen & Manion 192). Therefore, these researchers view their activities as not being research. In other words, action research would be "the antithesis of true experimentation" (Cohen & Manion 193). However, when emphasizing collaboration with and sharing among students, parents and colleagues, the methodology of action research has the idea of generalizability inherently incorporated within it. In fact, one action researcher goes so far as to claim that action research involves "more systematic documentation and data gathering, more self-reflection in writing, and a wider audience" than traditional sciences (Zeni 206). Also, in the words of one promoter of action research, action research "should always lead to learning and knowledge creation that is of benefit to both the individual and the organization" (Rowley 2). Furthermore, one of the aims of action research is "to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people" (Nieuwenhuys 210). In essence, if an action research project is not able to be generalized in order to create change in a specific way, "then it has failed to achieve its objective" (Stringer 11). Often, results from action research are "sucked into a general knowledge base, which is then used to support various public inferences and interventions" (Morton 221). Action research has, in fact, become one of the essential methods of data collection that influences curriculum development, affects the methodological practice, and creates public policy for the entire American educational system.

## Action Research Involves Human Subjects

Action research should conform to the ethical guidelines stipulated by 45 CFR 46 to benefit those most directly affected by the research: the human subjects. These guidelines would ensure that the subjects in action research would be extended an important element of traditional research—the assent/consent procedure—which they have previously been denied in most forms of social research.

However, before the assent/consent procedure can be adopted, an ideological shift needs to occur in the theory of action research. As it stands, "voluntary informed consent is conceived as an exceptionless principle in the natural sciences, [but] it is conceived in the social sciences (under which description the bulk of educational research falls) rather more weakly as a standard procedure to protect subjects or participants" (McNamee, "Introduction" 3). In action research, the subject of study is often viewed as being the teachers or instructors themselves—not the students in the classrooms. The students are not viewed as "subjects"; instead, action researchers use the word "participants" to describe them, because it "is seen as a less loaded and more benign term and denotes a shift in thinking amongst researchers" (Wolfendale 123). However, even though the label has changed, the function of students in action research has not. It is important to note that the teacher is only the presenter of the independent variable of the instructional method used in a lesson. The students and their levels of achievement then become the dependent variables upon which the effectiveness of the instruction is measured. The students, who are usually minors, become an integral part of the research process. These students are a vulnerable population that can be subject to harm when they are in such a research experiment. Because of this level of involvement, students and their parents should be extended the courtesy of assent/consent procedures.

Students and their parents should be able to give assent/consent as part of standard procedure so that they realize that participation in the action research is a voluntary effort that may elicit consequences. Students should recognize that they have the option to decide whether they will participate in research at all. If they do consent, students should also know that they can withdraw from the research without their grades being affected. Too often, teacher-researchers have to ask themselves the question, "When does good teaching become research?" (Zeni 206). Students, as well as the

teacher-researcher, should be able to see a clear division between what is standard curriculum and what is a part of the experiment. Even though action researchers believe “The line may be hard to draw until the study is well underway,” such a distinction should not be a methodological afterthought (Zeni 206). A student needs to willingly assent/consent to partake in an action research experiment and should not be penalized with poor grades for not learning effectively under experimental instruction.

In addition, students must realize that their participation in research creates a risk because “if children contribute and reveal more about themselves than they intended, they might later feel greater regret, shame or anger if researchers produce disrespectful reports” (Alderson 100). Action research can have costs that “include injury or psychological difficulties, such as anxiety, shame, loss of self-esteem, and affronts to human dignity, or they may involve infringement on human rights” (Owen 2). Also, students should know the goals of the research because in some studies, “The implicit aim may be to show children’s weakness, failings, faults, and deficits” (Alderson 103). Additionally, students should understand how the information collected in the study will be used and the levels of confidentiality that are expected. Action research and any form of “education research is unethical when it misrepresents or misidentifies” information to students (Enslin & Pendlebury 59). In action research, information from participants “may be needed to take effective action, or even to act at all in some circumstances;” thus, “issues of access, consent, and the use of real names . . . are complex and problematic” (Tickle 46). All of these shortcomings of action research create risks for the students, risks that should be known by the student-subjects.

## **Action Researchers Choose to Function Under No Standardized Ethics**

By rejecting 45 CFR 46, action researchers choose to conduct research on human subjects with no standardized approach to research protocol. In the ethical vacuum left by this decision, there is no formal standardization of ethical guidelines specific to action research. The rationale behind the decision to reject 45 CFR 46 is as follows. First, in general, the majority of action researchers believe that “it is hard, if not impossible, to design ethics into Action Research

completely” (Morton 221). This reason is based on the premise that one of the main purposes of action research is self-reflection. Thus, the perception is that when a teacher is studying “his or her own practice, many of the traditional guidelines collapse” (Zeni 205). However, the fact is that the results of action research often extend beyond one particular classroom. Data gained from action research often has a broad spectrum of applications. Therefore, since action researchers are creating generalizable knowledge, they need to recognize the necessity of a standardized system of ethics.

Second, some action researchers hold the position that “Such principled ethics allow no degree of freedom” (Cohen & Manion 362). Those who conduct action research often view scientific ethical guidelines as “irrelevant or problematic” to their goals as researchers because these scientific ethics are viewed as preventing the flexibility that subjectivity could provide in action research (Zeni 206). In general, ethics are viewed by action researchers as a hindrance to the science of action research. When challenged about their stance on ethics, action researchers “take pains to distinguish our work from traditional qualitative research: We [action researchers] explain that we don’t deal with big numbers, random samples or manipulated variables, but with the human drama as lived by self-conscious actors” (Zeni 205). Action researchers emphasize the fact that they must deal with human beings (i.e., students) and have to adapt to their needs in any situation as well as create open dialogue between students, parents, and colleagues (Zeni 206). In other words, action research strives to “promote the capabilities of those whom you research in terms of those things necessary for the quality of life” (McNamee, “Introduction” 5). As a result of this human component, “the decisions about ethical behavior are constantly negotiated rather than contracted at the beginning of the research as is done in more traditional research” (Walker & Haslett 525). However, the main goal of all action research is to create generalizable knowledge—which is the same goal of the majority of research conducted in other scientific settings. Furthermore, since the presence of ethical guidelines in traditional scientific research does not impede/compromise the results of the research (when dealing with human subjects), the flexibility touted by action researchers is not a valid or necessary conclusion.

Third, action researchers reject the 45 CFR 46 ethical guidelines because “Social scientists often hold the view that universalistic ethics is no more than a hangover from the preconceptions of modernity” (McNamee, “Introduction” 5). Social science research

(including action research) is often viewed as being fundamentally different, and some believe the very nature of this style of research prevents a distinct set of methods from being needed (Nieuwenhuys 211). In general, action research is sometimes perceived as “more of an inspiring and challenging philosophy of research than a clear method” (Nieuwenhuys 209). Action research is viewed as a highly collaborative and reflexive process whereby a teacher examines his/her own practices. By defining action research in this manner, the purpose of this elaborate research method is self reflection.

Even though the rationale for rejecting the ethics of traditional scientific research may be rooted in realistic concerns regarding applicability and general hindrance, it is important to realize that the application of ethics will not impede action research or skew its results. Instead, it would only cause the methodology of action research to change, because the application of traditional ethics would force the practice of action research to become more objective—especially when dealing with a human component in the research. Traditional science also deals with a human component in its research—which is the reason for the creation of 45 CFR 46 and the other preceding ethical guidelines. Another benefit of the application of standard ethical guidelines would be the acceleration of the acceptance of data from action research inquiries in larger scientific spheres. Currently, because of the loosely defined scientific methods, action research “has yet to be accepted by many academic researchers as a legitimate form of inquiry” (Stringer 190).

## **Action Researchers Advocate for Ethics in Action Research**

Even though the general concept of standardized ethics is rejected by the majority of action researchers, the value of ethical principles is recognized by some practitioners of this form of research. Some action researchers believe that “Ethics can strengthen scientific method” (Alderson 110). More specifically, “Ethics are about helping researchers to be more aware of hidden problems and questions in research, and ways of dealing with these, though they do not provide simple answers” (Alderson 99). A number of action researchers further believe that any ethical principles that are applied to action research should be used to ask hard, searching questions about the research, instead of being used as a checklist of obligations (Alderson 102).

However, these action researchers who support the inclusion of ethics often believe that a **personal** code of ethics should suffice. There is a heavy reliance on an individual’s personal interpretations and assumptions about “good ethical practice.” The action researchers’ view is predominantly that “both codes of ethics and committees of ethical review take over the moral responsibility that each researcher should have for his or her behaviour” (Small 93). Also, many action researchers believe that standardized ethics cause the “surrender [of] the moral conscience to a professional consensus” (Small 94). Although ethical procedures of traditional science are subject to a degree of individual researcher interpretation, traditional scientists do have a standardized ethical starting point as well as review boards to ensure that these criteria are met. Such measures ensure scientific validity and decrease unnecessary variability in the scientific outcomes. Furthermore, the concept of ethical guidelines is too important to be left to the decision of one researcher. Also, the recognition of ethics equates to researchers realizing and/or acknowledging their own emotional investment in their research (McNamee, “Guilt” 147).

Since 45 CFR 46 (or any other standardized form of ethics) may be viewed as too restricting, some practitioners of action research have made “suggestions” or proposed informal “guides” for ethical procedures in action research. Currently, however, many of these guides are inaccurate and incomplete because they wrongly equate ethics with morals, as well as ignore basic elements of traditional research (such as voluntary informed consent).

For a guide or code to be effective, certain principles need to be observed. In regard to morality, ethics are more than informal moral obligations established by a societal content. The medical and research sciences, prior to subscribing to a standardized system of ethics, based their practices on individual moral principles as well as the Hippocratic Oath. Later, the horrors of World War II shed light on the need for a more concretely defined code of ethics, causing traditional science to move away from strictly moral integrity principles. The atrocities of war rose from an ideology that “caused a twisting of the fundamental anthropological and metaphysical concepts” of the value of an individual, illustrating how morality is subject to the sway of societal levels of acceptance (van Leeuwen 17). Due to the transient and overall subjectivity of moral principles, ethics should be used to reinforce the meaning and integrity of basic humanistic principles, as well as set standards for research procedure.

Without such standardized regulation, action research is vulnerable to moral misinterpretations and unwanted research practices. Essentially, action research becomes “charged with the moral imperative of improving the life chances of learners” (Edwards 260). Such aspirations act to insert the feelings, beliefs, wants, and other general biases of the action researcher into the research. For instance, one action researcher indicated that “good research” subjects’ ethical rights would include providing for basic needs, protection, and ensuring participation (Alderson 98). Such a definition leaves one with lingering questions: What are basic needs? What is protection? Why should participation matter? Individual action researchers shouldn’t be left to guess at these answers. Another example of an action research ethical code that is left open for misinterpretation is a six-fold step of personal questioning concerning the research project: the goal, methods and setting, research subjects, risks and benefits, “insider” research (researching in your own classroom), and consequences (Zeni 207-213). Even though the essence of such questioning runs parallel to the ideas within 45 CFR 46, it again emphasizes personal moral interpretations and unlimited choice within ethical guidelines.

When personal morals become the sole referent for action research, important research principles may be neglected. The protocol that has been developed under 45 CFR 46 has been developed in order to protect researchers as well as subjects themselves. Action research should strive to fully incorporate the basic elements of ethical practice instead of treating such elements as unnecessary or inapplicable. One such neglected element is informed consent. Overall, “consent, and the value of autonomy that it seeks to safeguard, is often overridden” in action research (McNamee, “Introduction” 3). These limitations are best exemplified in a list of “Ethical Principles for the Guidance of Action Researchers,” as detailed by Louis Cohen and Lawrence Manion’s text *Research Methods in Education*. The text provides an extensive list of guidelines: observe protocol, involve participants, negotiate with those affected by the research, report progress, obtain explicit authorizations, negotiate descriptions of people’s work, negotiate accounts of others’ points of view, obtain explicit authorization before using quotations, negotiate reports for various levels of release, accept responsibility for maintaining confidentiality, retain the right to report your work, and make your principles of procedure binding and known (375). However, out of all these detailed rules, none offer provisions for informed consent or really offer

guidance to the researcher when including subjects in action research.

## **Action Research Protocol Should be Reviewed by an Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

With the acceptance of the ethical guidelines in 45 CFR 46, action research would be subject to review by an Institutional Review Board (IRB), an essential step to ensure proper ethical procedure. In general, the IRB is designed to protect both the subjects of research and the researchers conducting the research, as well as to uphold ethical procedures. If action research operates without an initial review from an IRB, the practice could be considered unethical because there is no system of checks and balances to assure that students are not unnecessarily exposed to research. Few of those in the field of action research recognize that “The safeguards of research ethics, such as applying to an ethics committee for approval, take time, but they can protect the people who take part in research, and also the researchers” (Alderson 94). Most teacher-researchers “view the ethics review process as one that does not benefit the research participants but instead hinders the research and researcher” (Owen 4). Currently, the ethics of action research are judged by the individual conducting the research. It seems skewed for the individual conducting the research to be the only person to weigh the costs/risks and benefits of his/her own research study. It is only logical that the individuals who created the research protocol would have a biased view that their own study is a worthwhile endeavor. This is why an independent third party review is needed for action research. A review by an IRB would ensure that the research to be conducted is purposeful, focused, and ethical. The IRBs are necessary because “not everything that is legal is ethical” (Masson 43).

Even though some forms of action research may be classified under the educational exemption of the code, such an exemption cannot be automatically assumed. In 45 CFR 46, the exemption includes the following: “Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as (i) research on regular and special educational instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods” (46.101 B). Unfortunately, this exemption is continually misunderstood to mean that any protocols involving educational application are

immediately exempt from 45 CFR 46. To comply, new educational procedures should be reviewed at least once by an IRB to justify that the method does qualify for the exemption. When a procedure does qualify, then no further review from an IRB is needed.

Action researchers have often shied away from IRB review because they feel that IRBs do not see the value of action research as “a dynamic and cyclical enterprise, suffused with uncertainty” (Morton 221). Also, action researchers believe that “An IRB that is primarily bioclinical in its orientation cannot be expected to assess research protocols emerging from educational practice” (Owen 8). In fact, the ethics approval process can “highlight the tensions between traditional researchers and action researchers” (Walker & Haslett 526). For example, while serving on an IRB, Dr. Michael Owen (a professor at Brock University) noted in a recent article that in the review of 100 action research protocols, “the concerns the IRB identified were data collection, voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality of participant’s data and images during and after data collection” (Owen 5). These concerns of an IRB should not be viewed as a researcher’s burden, but as insurance against unethical practices and upholding of the integrity of the research.

## Conclusions

Action research should be guided by the ethical protocols outlined in the Code of Federal Regulation for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) which guides traditional forms of scientific research. Such a measure is necessary because practitioners of action research are conducting research on human subjects and need to utilize a standardized approach to ethical and procedural concerns. The “ethical guidelines” created by action researchers thus far have been inadequate and incomplete for standardization across the whole field of study. Action research is research, and the adoption of 45 CFR 46 would benefit the subjects of research in numerous ways—such as requiring informed consent. Additionally, research would be subject to an Institutional Review Board review to further ensure the implementation of proper ethical practices. The application of 45 CFR 46 is a necessary component for improvement of the methodology of action research and would serve to promote action research as education’s true science.

## Works Cited

- Alderson, Priscilla. “Ethics.” Doing Research with Children and Young People. Sandy Fraser, et al., eds. London: Sage Publications, 2004.
- Cohen, Louis, and Lawrence Manion. Research Methods in Education. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Edwards, Anne. “Education.” Doing Research with Children and Young People. Sandy Fraser, et al., eds. London: Sage Publications, 2004.
- Enslin, Penny, and Shirley Pendlebury. “Representation, Identification and Trust: Towards an Ethics of Educational Research.” The Ethics of Educational Research. Mike McNamee and David Bridges, eds. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.
- Masson, Judith. “The Legal Context.” Doing Research with Children and Young People. Sandy Fraser, et al., eds. London: Sage Publications, 2004.
- McNamee, Mike. “The Guilt of Whistle-blowing: Conflicts in Action Research and Educational Ethnography.” The Ethics of Educational Research. Mike McNamee and David Bridges, eds. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.
- McNamee, Mike. “Introduction: Whose Ethics, Which Research?” The Ethics of Educational Research. Mike McNamee and David Bridges, eds. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.
- Morton, Alec. “Ethics in Action Research.” Systematic Practice and Action Research 12.2 Apr. 1999: 219-222. JSTOR. Melvin J. Zahnow Library, Saginaw Valley State University, Saginaw, MI. 28 Feb. 2006 <<http://0-www.jstor.org>>.
- Nieuwenhuys, Olga. “Participatory Action Research in the Majority World.” Doing Research with Children and Young People. Sandy Fraser, et al., eds. London: Sage Publications, 2004.
- Owen, Michael. “Conflict and Convergence: The Ethics Review of Action Research.” Journal of Research Administration 35.2, 2004: 21-32. Proquest. Melvin J. Zahnow Library, Saginaw Valley State University, Saginaw, MI. 28 Feb. 2006 <<http://proquest.umi.com>>.
- Rowley, Jennifer. “Action Research: An Approach to Student Work-Based Learning.” Education & Training 45.2/3, 2003: 131-139. Proquest. Melvin J. Zahnow Library, Saginaw Valley State University, Saginaw, MI. 28 Feb. 2006 <<http://proquest.umi.com>>.

- Small, Robin. "Codes Are Not Enough: What Philosophy Can Contribute to the Ethics of Educational Research." The Ethics of Educational Research. Mike McNamee and David Bridges, eds. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.
- Stringer, Ernest T. Action Research. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999.
- Tickle, Les. "Opening Windows, Closing Doors: Ethical Dilemmas in Educational Action Research." The Ethics of Educational Research. Mike McNamee and David Bridges, eds. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.
- United States Dept. of Health and Human Services. Code of Federal Regulations of the Protection of Human Subjects. 23 Jun. 2005. 04 Apr. 2006 <<http://www.nihtraining.com/ohsrsite/guidelines/45cfr46.html>>.
- Walker, Beverly, and Tim Haslett. "Action Research in Management—Ethical Dilemmas." *Systematic Practice and Action Research* 15.6, Dec. 2002: 523-533. JSTOR. Melvin J. Zahnow Library, Saginaw Valley State University, Saginaw, MI. 28 Feb. 2006 <<http://0-www.jstor.org>>.
- Wolfendale, Sheila. "'Parents as Partners' in Research and Evaluation: Methodological and Ethical Issues and Solutions." Ethics and Research in Inclusive Education: Values into Practice. Kieron Sheehy, et al., eds. London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2005.
- Van Leeuwen, Evert. "The Anthropological Dimension of Biomedical Research." The Ethics of Animal and Human Experimentation. Peter P. De Deyn, et al., eds. London: John Libbey, 1994.
- Zeni, Jane. "A Guide to Ethical Issues and Action Research." Ethics and Research in Inclusive Education: Values into Practice. Kieron Sheehy, et al., eds. London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2005.