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## **Abstract**

### Design/methodology/approach

The paper is a Literature review and resulting thematic discussion of methodological and practical issues involved in Action research in Organisations through the lens of CRA approach.

### Purpose

The paper provides an exposition of the Constructive research approach (CRA) to show the potential utility of CRA in transcending or mitigating the methodological and practical issues involved in researching organisations.

### Findings

The paper identifies that CRA has benefits in orientation to a practical outcome grounded in a theoretical domain but with leeway to facilitate creativity which can also potentially improve the quality of the collaborative relationships. The centrality of the construction within the method provides a 'vantage point' to manage the emic (inside) and etic (outside) positionality concerns of action researchers working within organisational settings.

### Practical implications

CRA has multiple practical benefits for action researchers and their collaborators in terms of time, risk and collaborative commitment.

### Originality/value

The paper develops a useful tactical framework for discussing the practical and methodological issues when considering action research in organisations, and highlights how CRA can be utilised in wider organisational scholarship outside its roots in management accounting.

## **Key words**

Action research, Constructive research approach, Intervention research

## 1.0 Introduction

Since the 1940s, Action Research (AR) has served as an approach to allow collaboration between those who practice in the midst of organisational problems and those who seek to understand and develop practice through researching it. These defining features have informed AR for more than 70 years but there remain difficulties in generating knowledge which can be actioned (Bradbury et al, 2019) and which is theoretically robust (Shani and Coghlan, 2021). The accumulated body of knowledge on dealing with these twin imperatives is significant (Dickens and Watson, 1999, Reason et al 2006, Lake & Wendland 2018) but Shani & Coghlan (2019, p. 13) claim that in the field of business & management within organisations AR “has failed to realize its potential for generating robust actionable knowledge”. Coghlan & Shani (2019) argue that a core determinant for this is the lack of rigorous” reflection on choices as “contextual analysis, design, purposes, degrees of collaboration, planning, implementation, etc (Coghlan & Shani, 2005). Guerci et al. (2019) implicitly identifies these choices as ‘tactics’ to navigate the meta – methodological issues in AR but there are also practical and pragmatic challenges (Gustavason, 2008), particularly in organisations where the researcher is initially an outsider (Roth et al., 2007).

AR has spawned many variations, driven in part by the need to address these issues; these have been characterised by various authors as varieties, flavours as well as modalities (Dick, 2015) but McNiff and Whitehead (2009) conceive AR as a ‘family’ of approaches and Baard (2010) classes Interventionist Research (IR) as a subset of the AR family. IR researchers aim to engage in purposive action to stimulate and evaluate change (Fraser et al, 2009), which has obvious relevance to those working in business organisations.

The aim of this paper is to review one particular IR approach, the Constructive Research Approach (CRA) as an approach to IR, assessing its suitability in Business and Management organisational AR by discussing how CRA addresses the methodological and practical ‘tactical’ considerations. In doing so the paper is also able to provide an underpinning framework by which an AR researcher can consider these methodological and practical issues at a more tactical level, as a counterpoint to Shani & Passmore’s (2016/1985) high level factors in AR design. [Our research question is “Can CRA assist Action Researchers in](#)

addressing the tactical issues involved in AR projects?”. The approach to answering the question is a thematic literature review to ascertain the apposite tactical issues, which are then utilised to consider how these can be addressed with CRA.

The paper starts with tracing the development of CRA from its management accounting roots and provide a precis of the method itself. This is followed by a description of the protocols used for the literature search and the development of the thematic framework of the methodological and practical issues. The core of the paper is a critical discussion of the resulting tactical themes and the utility of why and how CRA could assist in transcending and mitigating the issues within each theme. The paper concludes with a summary of the main advantages of using CRA and suggestions for further adoption of this method in organisational research.

## **2.0 Constructive Research Approach (CRA)**

CRA was developed by Finnish researchers notably Kasanen, (1993) and Labro and Tuomela (2003) chronicled by authors such as Baard (2010), Jonsson and Lukka (2005) and Piirainen and Gonzalez (2014). CRA was initially developed to abet research in management accounting but has been used in management information systems and logistics (Piirainen and Gonzalez 2014) and in the field of project management (Oyegoke 2007; Oyegoke and Juhani 2009). Jonsson and Lukka (2005, p.11) argue that CRA is close to the original ideas of Lewin and describe it thus: “[a stream of] research [that] seeks to find a balance between the problem-solving oriented practical starting point ..... and their potential for theoretical contribution. Through strong intervention, the researcher – jointly with members of the target organisation – develops a new construction, tests its usability, and draws theoretical conclusions based on this process”. The term construction comes from the Finnish word ”konstruktio”, literally “construction”, Constructions refers to “entities which produce solutions to explicit problems” ( Kasanen et al 1993) .and has no connection to constructivism or constructionism.

## 2.1 CRA Position and Precipis

Jonsson and Lukka (2005) and Baard (2010) place CRA within the cluster of Intervention Research approaches, which in turn is part of the wider AR Family (McNiff and Whitehead 2009), and these relationships are illustrated in Figure 1;

### **Insert Figure 1: CRA positioning**

Jonsson and Lukka (2005) and Baard (2010) also include Action Science, Design Science and clinical research within their perception of IR. Jonsson and Lukka (2005, p.8) elaborate further on the nature of intervention research; “Typically an interventionist researcher participates in a change process, which may lead to a new bundling of things together – construction of new realities – jointly with people working in the case organisation. It is clear from the literature (Jonsson and Lukka 2005; Baard 2010; Savell and Zardet 2014) that IR differentiates itself from AR by the notion that it occurs around insular interventions, rather than requiring two or more research cycles with dependency. IR is typically composed of methodological steps configured around the design and deployment of an intervention and subsequent analysis. CRA differentiates itself from other IR approaches, in that it explicitly requires the construction of an entity to form the basis of the intervention. This entity can be

It is worth noting that the entity, sometimes refereed to as the artefact can include “all human-made artefacts, such as models, charts, plans and strategies, organizational structures, commercial products and information systems” Piirainen & Gonzalez (2014, p. 8).

CRA has three major phases, Baard (2010). These phases are;

1. Preparatory Phase
2. Field work Phase
3. Theorizing phase

Contained within the phases are several distinct steps which vary from one project to another. They have been refined by both Labro and Tuomela (2003) and Oyegoke (2011) and even the

originator Kasanen (1983, p. 246) envisaged the order of these being varied in a case-by-case basis.

The basic steps are as follows:

- Find a practical problem that has a potential to make a theoretical contribution
- Reviewing the client organisations capacity for intervention and co-operation.
- Obtain a general and comprehensive understanding of the topic
- Create a novel construct
- Implement and test the construct
- Identifying and showing the theoretical connections and contribution
- Examine the scope of general applicability of the construct.

Having established the nature of CRA, the paper now discusses the potential utility of CRA with regard to the methodological and practical issues involved when considering AR in an organisational context which were invoked in the introduction. This is achieved by reviewing the CRA method against the backdrop of a thematic literature review on the methodological and practical considerations.

### 3.0 Method Search

To conduct a meaningful and targeted search a potential bank of search terms for AR (sub) methodologies was identified using the latest available edition of Sage Encyclopaedia of Action Research (Coghlan & Miller 2014). This resulted in a set of 62 terms. This was then refined to those methodologies applicable to an organisational setting, and not primarily concerned with first person practice. This resulted in the search terms [which notably did not include CRA collated into similar groups shown in Table 1.](#)

**Table 1: Search Terms**

Collaborative Action Research	Evaluative Inquiry	Intervention Research in Management	Action Design Science* <sup>1</sup>
Collaborative Management Research	Clinical Inquiry	Intervention Research	Action Science*
			Action Design Research*
Soft Systems Methodology	Action Learning Research	Process Consultation	
Systemic Action Research			

These terms, alongside additional search strings of ‘Action research, management, organisation’ was used to collect scholarly articles using a period between 2000 and 2022, using the Ebsco & Emerald databases This resulted in 81 relevant references which were then pared down to those which contained discussions of methodological or practical issues – resulting in 35 articles. These were then thematically analysed using the literature review principles outlined in Booth et al. (2012) resulting in the following applied method: Firstly, all papers were free coded for types of methodological and practical issues. The results were

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<sup>1</sup> (\* grouped together based on similarity overlap)

reviewed, and some codes consolidated. The resulting remaining free codes were themselves thematically coded resulting in a number of *thematic groups*, and appropriate names were induced for these groups; the results of this analysis are shown below in Table 2.

**Table 2: Thematic Groups for Methodological and practical issues.**

	<b>Thematic groups</b>				
	<b>Nature</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Contextual</b>	<b>Modality</b>	<b>Rigour and Relevance</b>
<b>Practical and methodological Themes</b>	Duality-purpose	Cycle(s)	Positionality	Collaboration	Validity
	(Theory and Practice)	Time	Reflexivity	Emancipation	Transferability
	Problem solving	Risk		Participation	
	Creativity-innovation	Complexity		Power	

The paper now utilises this analytical frame to discuss the utilisation of CRA in relation to the potential methodological and practical issues.



## 4.0 Thematic Discussion

### 4.1 Nature

#### 4.1.1 Duality-purpose: Theory & Practice

The duality of outcomes (theory and practice) referred to in AR (Coghlan and Shani, 2019) partly stems from the discourse on mode 1 and mode 2 research (Gibbons et al. 1994). In ‘mode 1 research’, knowledge is externally validated, managed and transposed to other contexts, where ‘mode 2’ has rootedness in the research context, trans-disciplinarity and a diversity of sites where both the inquiry approach and the knowledge itself is encoded in the researchers and participants. This perspective leads to the concept of two types of knowledge – that of theoretical knowledge and practitioner knowledge (Brannick and Coghlan 2007), the latter is also referred to as ‘Actionable knowledge’ (Argyris 1996). However, Lofthouse et al. (2016) identifies that often this duality is not recognised or understood, particular by the actors and collaborators in the research context, indeed Bolouri *et al* (2017) found that it was not ‘fruitful’ to involve the collaborators in the research outcome discussions. Some researchers like Zuber Skerritt (1996) have two very distinct processes for separating the two outcomes whilst others see them as more entwined (Guerci et al 2019).

CRA typically takes a helpfully transparent directive path through the overall duality: Firstly, there is a definitive step to find a practical issue that has *potential* to lead to a theoretical solution. Secondly, the step which explicitly requires for theoretical connections and contribution, and finally, the step looking for generalizability is the platform by both a contribution to wider practice could be identified as well as ‘transferability’ (Labro & Tuomela, 2003) in the theoretical domain.

Huxham and Vangen (2003) argue that the theory and practice gap (Collato et al 2017) is brought closer together by theory informing the AR process and utilising the outcome analysis for theory development. Foss and Moldenaies (2007) give prominence to the researcher as a translator of theory into practice, acting as the main conduit in ‘engaged scholarship’ (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006; Van de Ven, 2007). CRA embeds this approach in the defined step; “obtain a general and comprehensive understanding of the topic”, which as Okeyoke (2011) clearly states, is a literature review, so that the researcher can assist in developing ‘informed interventions (Labro and Tuomela 2003), which also acts as the

‘conduit’ to the actors in the field. In this the literature review is informing, not constraining, the research domain.

Radelli et al. (2014) outline the difficulties all researchers face in producing relevance and practical outcomes for practitioners, even those involved in an AR project. The dichotomy between a research outcome, and a practical outcome and the difficulties experienced by real life actors often means that practical outcomes are often framed through the theoretical lens. This may be particularly where a literature review has set a theoretical foundation. This type of unintended obfuscation is apparent when researchers, via a rigorous research process, can determine that an outcome has been achieved in a setting, but the actual practitioners may find it harder to discern the *practical* outcomes, or that their *practice* has changed. For example, in Roth et al. (2007)’s work, where dynamic capabilities, a theoretical outcome, was posited as practical outcomes, without clear identification of the actionable knowledge. As CRA takes its lead from the organisational field and directs that it is the practical issue or problem that exists a priori hence a greater potential for the outcomes in relation to that practical issue to be visible to the actors. CRA also defines that a definitive construction of some kind be deployed, a human-made artefact designed in conjunction with the actors; this visibility of the artefact increases the probability that the practical outcomes related to testing the artefact are more accessible to the actors. As noted previously the wide scope definition of an artefact can provides opportunity for divergent and diverse organisational constructions to be investigated, for example Jones et al (2019) develop a construct of a sequence of coaching meetings in their CRA project.

#### **4.1.2 Problem Solving**

Much intervention research (IR) (Spiel et al, 2018), similar to AR (Coghlan, 2003) is prevaricated on the notion of solving a problem, and CRA was conceived as an interventionist approach to solving problems in management accounting (Kasanen, 1993). This problem-solving emphasis in CRA also gives strength to the development of practical outcomes; if an attempt is made to address a problem, regardless of the overall success, a practical outcome is more likely to occur from the intervention. Hence CRA is more akin to what Coghlan (2003) research terms ‘Mechanistic AR’; an approach in which the problem in the context is the locus for the research project, rather than organistic where the research is encompassed with the researcher or the actors.

Jonsson and Lukka (2003) identify examples of where a construction is not wholly or even partially successful in solving the defined problem but can lead to a theoretical contribution. Suomala et al (2014) show that examining reasons for failure, can also lead to a practical outcome, either by a recommended revised construction or practical recommendations based on the theoretical examination, a vivification of the notion of actionable knowledge.

### **4.1.3 Creativity-innovation**

Creativity and innovation have long been closely linked with problem solving (Clarke et al. 1998), and the developers of CRA saw innovation as a key discriminator from other forms of applied research. Kasanen (1983) and Lukka (2003) both indicate that in CRA creating the construct can be relatively unstructured and occurs serendipitously through examination of both the problem and the literature, rather than being directly constructed from the literature. Hence CRA is distinct from Design Research (Carlsson et al.2007) or Action Design Research (Collato et al. 2017). The step of creating the construct is done by researchers and actors, and as such is the direct interface between theory and practice. Oyegoke (2011: 592) recommends this clearly by stating “It is advisable that the people and the organisation that will eventually use the solution(s) should be involved both in its design and strategy for practical application. The constructive research approach therefore [embeds] the principle of co-production”. CRA, therefore, offers both flexibility for action for addressing a problem and opportunity for a theoretical harvest.

## **4.2 Design**

### **4.2.1 Cycles**

Traditional AR has, as a foundation, a cycle of action and reflection, (Masters 1995; Altrichter et al. 2002; McNiff and Whitehead 2011). Typically Researchers and participants “take actions that are planned to make a difference and whose impact will be evaluated.....that evaluation will often set off a further round of research, leading to the analogy that action research is a spiral of activity” (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p. 47). This leads to the commonly asserted characterisation that AR is both ongoing (Shani et al. 2011) and emergent (Shani and Pasmore 1985) and iterative (Guerci et al. 2013)

There is a range of views on the number of cycles, some assert (Mckay and Marhsall 2001) that one is sufficient, whilst others identify that one should continue until the problem is solved (Collatto et al. 2017) , and there are instances of research being concluded mid cycle (Canterino 2016).

Zuber–Skerritt and Perry (2002) and Mckay and Marshall (2001) suggest that action research has two dimensions of action research cycles, one related to the organisational actions, and the other based on theoretical development. These cycles are sometimes portrayed in complex configurations, either occurring in parallel, or with the organisational cycle, sometimes referred to as the ‘conduction cycle’ (Collatto 2017) being nested within an overall research cycle.

IR, in general, and CRA have similarities to this type of configuration as it is composed of methodological steps within ‘phases’ configured around the construction of an intervention and the subsequent analysis. Some forms of IR, such as the variant of Action Design Research have pre-defined ‘testing’ cycles within them (Sein et al, 2014; Goldenhar et al 2001), but CRA is characterised by the evaluation of a singular intervention rather than open-ended ongoing iterative and emergent cycles. (Jonsson and Lukka 2005; Baard 2010; Savell and Zardet 2014). In this sense CRA allows a degree of relative simplicity and clarity for researchers and actors, both in terms of the approach itself, but also a more certain, bounded nature of the endeavour, which has benefits in terms of stakeholder engagement and management in relation to securing and maintaining agreement in conducting the research.

#### **4.2.2 Time, Complexity and Risk**

AR being collaborative and contextual means that time and resource demands of the actors and their organisation are predominant in the research (Shani et al. 2011). However, because of the cyclic nature of AR, and the potential discrepancy between research and organisational timespans, progress over time becomes a key issue (Houston 2008). Bolouri et al (2017) identify the tension between the time and resources required for analytical rigour within the reflective part of the cycle(s) being at odds with the organisational timeline to press on with action aspect of the next action cycle.

AR provides opportunity to engage in research that is both informed by the past, but to shape the future (Shani et al.2011), but as Chandler and Tobert (2003) identify, conducting AR is about being ‘present in the present’. However, as Guerci et al. (2019) this is not straightforward, as the opportunity ‘window’ for relevant and appropriate interventions can be intermittent. Guerci et al. (2019) define these opportunities as ‘interruptive’ events, which can be a combination of planned and unplanned events.

CRA can provide some succour to these issues of time and speed, because of several design factors. Firstly, some of the lengthy expositions of the research process, such as the literature review and intervention design, and analysis are done prior to the singular implementation or testing phase, rather than as with AR as part of an ongoing cycle. Lofthouse et al. (2016) define this as proximal activity, occurring separately in time and space from *direct* collaborative activity.

Secondly, the initial phase involves the consideration of where and when to ‘test’ the construct in the client organisation, this parallel processing affords some flexibility and delay to facilitate the choosing or seizing of an appropriate interruptive event to deploy the construct, as this can be relatively short aspect of the overall research timeline.

Thirdly, the theoretical development and research analysis is delineated from the clients’ adoption or utilisation of the construct, so the client organisation can ‘move on’ with the construct if they wish, without being held up by the research work (Bolouri et al. 2019). Researchers are likely to share some form of the testing analysis with the clients at some point towards the end of the phase, but no party is tied to the timeline by the CRA methodology.

In situations where the factors such as the researcher’s period of involvement [with](#) the client is unclear, or the project context is complex and uncertain and independent of both the researcher’s and actors’ control, CRA can provide a stable anchorage point with which to conduct a focused form of AR and reduce the risk to both the researchers’ and organisational actors.

### **4.3 Contextual**

The Action mode of research is often identified as being messy and complex (Radford 2007; Westhues et al.2008), because practitioner worlds are inherently complex (Schön, 1983), and the inherent interference of the researcher in the research field (Ottosson, 2003). CRA can provide a potential aide to navigate the arena of the researcher's positionality and modality of the research context

#### **4.3.1 Positionality**

McNiff (2013) argues that the researcher must be explicitly clear as to their 'positionality' which is often navigated by reference to first, second and third person accounts; (McNiff, 2013 p.55)

- First person action research occurs when an individual practitioner reflects on their personal practice and offers an account of what they are doing and thinking.
- Second person action research is when people enquire with others about how they can address issues of mutual concern.
- Third person action research aims to connect individual researchers with wider communities, whether face to face or virtually at a distance.”

However, McNiff and Whitehead (2011) report that often action researchers do not take a definitive stance, because the nature of the actors' involvement in the research context is often complex. In fact, Eden and Huxham (2006) argue that focusing on the individual or the organisation are not distinct or mutually exclusive.

Coghlan and Brannick (2014) argue that for authentic collaborative research all these accounts must be integrated but give primacy to the 2nd person account. However, this frame continues to have deeper complexity in terms of the positionality of the researcher with the research field, and each individual research project will have nuances within this. The modality of CRA is aligned to these aspects; Jonsson and Lukka (2005: 4) identify intervention research where “the researcher herself is more or less deeply immersed with the object of study “and Jonsson (2010) stresses the ‘uniqueness’ of the combination of intervention and context. This is amplified by the potential nature of the researcher's positioning within CRA where they have a degree of expertise in the area being investigated.

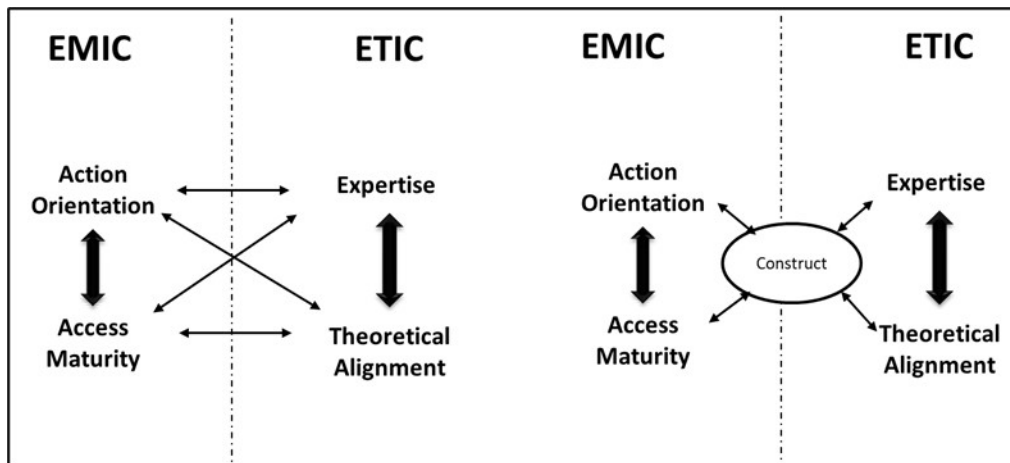
This leads to what Eden and Huxham (2006) and Coughlan and Shani (2014) refer to as involvement in a 'client system' or what Ottoson (2003) defines as the researcher participating, a differing nuance from a researching participant.

Roth et al. (2007, p. 51) identified how action researchers can have three roles of "insider, outside researcher and an outside consultant" and suggested that successfully navigating these can be an asset rather than a burden. IR and CRA, in particular, provide an approach to the complexity of any situation where the researcher has access to expertise or relevant knowledge. As a result the potential for the role of consultant to be present and locate themselves within a context. One of the drivers for the development of CRA is the need and opportunity to generate theory from consulting events which influence practice (Kasanen et al. 1993). Jonsson and Lukka (2005), like Roth (2007) and Ospina et al. (2008), identify similar roles in a CRA project; that of 'team member', 'expert' and 'comrade'. The team member role shares responsibilities for outcomes, the expert provides useful knowledge to the problem-solving process, whilst the comrade is a socially trusted outsider.

Building on this role delineation, Jonsson and Lukka (2005) identify the two different perspectives the CRA researcher must adopt and cross between, the insider (emic) and outsider (etic). Suomela et al. (2014) identify the different dimensions and interplay, in what they term the 'battlefield', between the emic and etic domains. In the emic domain the researcher must consider what actions they should participate in whilst deriving what maturity of access they are privy to, based on their current and future location within the field. In the etic domain the researcher must align the theoretical aspect being studied using their expertise. However, all these four aspects are entwined with each other; for example, the expertise of the researcher affects their action orientation in the field, and the maturity of the access. This is illustrated in the left hand aspect of Figure 2.

**Insert Figure 2. EMIC and ETC domains with Construct alignment**

The ‘construct’ in CRA can helpfully provide a focal point where these tensions can be more discernible, debated and ultimately managed and this is illustrated the right-hand aspect of Figure 2.



**4.3.2 Reflexivity**

In AR, and CRA the researcher is a definitive part of the research context, amplifying the need which exists in all social research, for reflexivity (Cunliffe 2003). As the CRA researcher must move between the emic (outsider) and etic (insider) perspectives, reflexivity is both a requirement but also a means by which this can more easily be accomplished and explicated. Nickelsen (2009) identifies that in many cases, a construct does not, either through design or fate, necessarily result in a definitive intervention, rather that it causes ‘interference’ in the context, and that this forms a core element of the research field. Hence CRA researchers need to foster reflexivity within the collaborator-actors. One can utilise the concept of what Shotter (2010:278) refers to as ‘Situated Dialogic Action Research’ in which a researcher “must be able to orient our activities and responses to previous actions and words and to the surrounding circumstances”. According to Ripamonti et al (2016: 57), this means “participant-researchers and researcher-participants are not just reflecting on issues from an objective distant stance but recognizing reflexively their role as embedded in the flow of events and in constituting social and organizational realities in ways that they may be unaware of.” In this way the core construct can act as ‘vantage point’ by which researchers



and actors can use reflectivity to explicate the construction of the construct itself, but also its interaction with the field of which they are a constituent part.

## **4.4 Modality**

### **4.4.1 Collaboration, participation and emancipation**

AR has deep traditions of co-operative and collaborative inquiry (Heron and Reason 2008), and the critical theory perspective (Kemmis 2008) which informs the modalities (Coghlan and Shani 2013) of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (McTaggart, 1994) and co-operative action research (Heron and Bradbury 2008). In these modalities the researchers and actors must be equally engaged in research and action, in a shared democratic endeavour with an emancipatory aim. However, Eden and Huxham (1996) ponder, in certain AR projects, how much these ideals can realistically be achieved, particularly in an organisational context. Huxham and Vangen (2003) argue that participation is not necessarily required and can lie with the discretion of the researcher. Collaborative action research is more pragmatic (Coghlan and Miller 2014) and utilises the collaboration as means of achieving a shared purpose, recognising the presence of power differentials and the limits of emancipation and distributed decision making, whilst striving to maintain the ‘spirit’ of collaborative inquiry (Canterino et al, 2016). Guerci et al. (2019, p. 6) defines the base level of collaboration within collaborative research as “the engagement of practitioners at some point in the research process”.

CRA explicitly calls for collaboration, particularly on the locus of the problem and the construct to be tested, and therefore sits closer to the aspiration that practitioners should be engaged from the beginning to the end of the knowledge-creation process (Guerci et al. 2016). However, collaboration activity can diminish after the testing of the construct, according to the needs of the organisation.

The quality of the collaborative relationship is often important to AR project outcomes, (Guerci et al. 2016) but also the validity of the research outcome (Shani and Coughlin, 2014). Lofthouse et al. (2016) have three useful aspects of relationship quality in collaborative research, that of authenticity, co-construction, and inclusivity. These are now discussed in relation to CRA.

**Authenticity** is the attempt to ensure that the work is relevant to both parties in the collaborative relationship. CRA facilitates this by firstly defining a step for the research partner to identify a practical problem which the researcher considers has an opportunity to make a theoretical contribution. This is a deliberate weaker duality, in which the location of a practical issue has primacy, which then enables the next step of finding a collaborative partner. The research authenticity is assured by the first step, but also then in the second step of the literature review, whilst the authenticity of the practical field is upheld by the securing of the agreement of the problem.

**Co-construction** is obviously at the heart of CRA, where the ‘construction’ is both a platform for this, and a generative mechanism for the collaboration. Guerci et al. (2016) identify the need for ‘separate’ and ‘collaborative’ activity within the overall collaborative programme. CRA is helpful to separation as it defines the requirement for relevant literature search but does not constrain the construction to be directly deduced from this process, but to influence the how it occurs in dialogue practitioner partners. Conversely their influence on the construction will stem from their experience and their commercial and organisational needs (Lukka 2005). CRA aligns to Guerci’s (2016) utilisation of the relative importance of nominal groups, research and practitioner, rather than hybrid groups as the antecedent for the conception of the construction.

**Inclusivity** is attempted within CRA, by the presence of ‘teamwork’: Labro and Tuomela (2003) identify that this is an integral part of developing the construction, and Suomela et al. (2014) illustrate the multiple teams that both researchers and practitioners are members of both before, during and after the research project. Labro and Tuomela (2003) stress the importance of developing the ‘social feasibility’ of the construction, which includes generating acceptance for the construct based on a shared meaning as well as the practical and technical feasibility of the construct. This is important for CRA, as the construct does not necessarily have to work to generate theoretical and practical outcomes, but the social and practical feasibility is a prerequisite for this to occur.

#### **4.4.2 Power**

Collaboration enablers, obstacles and difficulties (Shani and Coughlin 2014) are deeply contextual dependant but are heavily influenced by existing and developing power differentials. Warren (2003) and Coghlan and Shani (2005) both stress the need to identify and manage the power relationships within an AR context. Within a collaborative AR project there are distinctive power relationships related to the divergent agendas of the researchers and the practitioners (Jones and Stanley 2010). Power and emancipation are intrinsically linked (McCabe and Holmes 2009) and IR and CRA adoptees accept the retreat from emancipatory ideals, but some authors eg Guerci et al (2019) call for a ‘backstop’ position that these projects should not enhance unequal power differentials. Midgley and Ochoa-Arias (2001) invoke Foucault’s ideas that power develops through knowledge formation, and AR projects that construct new knowledge present an opportunity to interfere with the power relationships within an organisation, as a minimum to expose and explore them. CRA provides an opportunity to bring these power relationships to the fore, not by attempting to suspend or suppress power relationships, as often called for in AR (Altrichter et al. 2002) but by providing a locus, in the platform of the construct development and deployment for the power relationships to be exposed. Suomala et al. (2014) in their CRA project describe this as a ‘battlefield’ and identify that the duality of purpose and the differing agendas are linked to the power relationships; but processes of negotiations in the construct development provide a constructive (sic) forum for power to be illuminated and exercised towards a common goal, compatible with each groups’ interests.

#### **4.5 Rigour and Relevance**

A number of authors argue that the quality of AR research, including validity and transferability should be judged differently than other types of research (Coghlan and Brannick 2013; McNiff and Whitehead 2011) and this should also apply to CRA (Jonsson and Lukka 2005). In terms of rigour within the validity domain, Oyegoke (2011:591) states that “Constructive research passes the objectiveness and criticalness of applied research”, providing the steps are followed, in particular the explicit applied link between the construct and the literature review, and a suitable methodology is followed. This echoed by (Jonsson and Lukka, 2005, p. 25), who identify that “a rather more orthodox notion of validity enters the picture after the empirical phases of the study”. Frameworks such as Eden and Huxham’s

(2006) Research Oriented Action Research can be simply adapted to achieve internal validity as in Jones (2017).

CRA has a need to consider transferability – or generalisability in the final step, starting with the pragmatic, as Jonsson and Lukka (2005: 25) succinctly put it; “whether the construction can be made to work, or not, in practice”. This stems from the concept first identified by Labro and Tuomela (2003) which is the idea of a range of ‘market tests’. The weak market test is passed when the participant organisation adopts the construct to their context, the semi-strong market test is where the concept is adopted elsewhere, and the strong market test is where adoption can be shown to have delivered value in different contexts, typically as CRA originated in accounting actual financial value.

However, as management accounting scholars (Rautiainen et al. 2017; Piirainen and Gonzalez, 2013) have identified, these tests are inherently problematic. For example, the construct may be adopted for many reasons, and does not necessarily identify the value of the construct. Non adoption of the construct Tuomela (2011) might provide valuable insight for the organisation, as well as a useful theoretical contribution, or the construct might be adopted in a modified form. The semi-strong market test depends on the nature of the knowledge transfer of the original construct and therefore is subject to many more variables, and the same argumentation can be applied to the strong market test. Rautiainen et al (2017) also identify the issue of time within this consideration, initial adoption may differ from actual long-term usage and utility. Rautiainen et al. (2017) go on to develop an alternative to the market tests, based on a four-dimensional model of *relevance* on two axes of value and decision utility. The former is split into two; practical, and academic value, with the practical centred around the market test ideology. The decision dimension has at one end the short-term utilisation and utility of the construct in making business decisions, whilst the other end the notion of relevance is based on the long-term legitimacy of the construct. Although this helps in some respects, it is perhaps too grounded in the management accounting context, and would need more adaptation for wider application, and, as the authors suggest, the dimensions are potentially closely interdependent in many situations, rendering the concept less useful.

The strong versions of a market test are an attempt to achieve what Eden and Huxham (2006) discuss as the lack of potential wider repeatability in AR in general. They go on to state that

the research “must have some implications beyond those required for the action or generation of knowledge in the domain of the project”. However, they make the helpful point that theory is the link from which some degree of external validity can be drawn, viz it “must be possible to envisage talking about the theories developed in relation to other situations” (Eden and Huxham, 2006:78), and as such Piirainen and Gonzalez (2014) argue that the pragmatic notion of validity may result in a weaker addition to knowledge, if there is less link to underlying theories.

To provide academic value, as suggested by Rautinenen et al, (2017) the researchers must not just be interested if the construct works or not, or if it delivers value in some form, or if it is legitimised and adopted for other reasons, i.e. the pragmatic and relevance dimensions, but should focus on *how* the construct works. If this work is done within the CRA step of identifying and showing the theoretical connections and contribution’, then this can be instrumental in step 6 which is to ‘examine the scope of general applicability of the construct’. CRA is usually an intervention in a single system, this also means a better understanding of how this works in relation to the context of the system. This is resonant with the notion of ‘context’, ‘mechanisms’ and ‘outcome’, a core element of the abduction process within critical realism (Ackroyd and Karlsson 2014). This use of critical realism as an “under-labourer” (Bhaskar 2014) in CRA projects is supported by Piirainen and Gonzalez (2014) and Oyegoke (2011) respectively and adopted by Jones (2017) to deliver a degree of transferability and external validity.

## 5.0 Findings and Discussion

The research question for the paper is “Can CRA assist Action Researchers in addressing the tactical issues involved in Action research projects?”

The resulting answers to the research question from the thematic discussion of CRA to each of the tactical issues from the literature review frame are summarised in Tables 3 -7

**Table 3: Answers to the Nature theme issues**

Nature		Results from Thematic discussion
Practical and methodological Themes	Duality-purpose (Theory and Practice)	<p>CRA addresses the duality by both insisting the practical issue or problem exists a priori, but interventions should be <i>informed</i> by a literature review</p> <p>CRA has also <b>definitive</b> steps for the following three areas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sourcing practical issue that has theoretical potential</li> <li>• Explicitly determining the theoretical contribution,</li> <li>• Generalizability and transferability</li> </ul> <p>The visibility of the construct itself increases the probability that the practical outcomes are more accessible</p>
	Problem solving	<p>In CRA the problem in the context is the locus for the research project, rather than other aspects such as the participants or researchers</p>
	Creativity-innovation	<p>Creating the construct in CRA is via examination of both the problem and the literature, rather than being directly constructed from the literature or from practice. This activity is also a collaborative activity by researchers and actors. These two aspects therefore facilitate a proportional degree of individual and group creativity,</p>

**Table 4: Answers to the Design theme issues**

	<b>Design</b>	<b>Results from Thematic discussion</b>
<b>Practical and methodological Themes</b>	Cycle(s)	CRA is characterised by the evaluation of a singular intervention rather than open-ended ongoing iterative and emergent cycles. .
	Time	<p>The singular bounded intervention approach of CRA is more likely to reduce the overall timeline for the AR projects.</p> <p>A substantial amount of the initial ‘proximal’ activities can be conducted ‘offline’ from the participating organisation reducing their effective overall timeline.</p> <p>The client organisation can ‘move on’ with the construct once the results phase of the post intervention is complete, prior to theorizing phase.</p>
	Risk	<p>The bounded nature of a CRA project, the relative clarity of a construct, the development prior to the intervention, and ability to choose an appropriate deployment window all contribute reducing the overall risk to both the researchers’ and organisations.</p> <p>These factors also increase the potential for positive stakeholder engagement towards securing and maintaining agreement in conducting the research.</p>
	Complexity	CRA allows a degree of relative simplicity and clarity for researchers and participants /organisations, in contrast to some other AR approaches.

**Table 5: Answers to the Contextual theme issues**



	Contextual	<b>Results from Thematic discussion</b>
Practical and methodological Themes	Positionality	<p>CRA demonstrates a clarity aligned to 2<sup>nd</sup> person accounts and a primacy to the researcher participating rather than a participant researcher. The construct itself provides a suitable ‘vantage point’ by which the researcher can delineate the different roles and perspectives inherent in the ‘interference’ of the intervention in the research field.</p> <p>This paper develops a simple framework (Figure 2) to identify this vantage point in relation to the four perspectives/roles in the two domains of outsider (etic) and insider (emic)</p> <p><b>Etic:</b>  Individual discipline expertise  Theoretical navigation and alignment</p> <p><b>Emic:</b>  What access to data researcher will access to  What actions the researcher should participate in.</p>
	Reflexivity	<p>The above framework provides a vantage point to assist action researchers in their quest for reflexivity. In addition, the concept of the construct in CRA interfering in the research field provides organisational actors with a more accessible route to reflection, which in turn provides suitable data for the research accounts.</p>

**Table 6: Answers to the Modality theme issues**

	<b>Modality</b>	<b>Results from Thematic discussion</b>
Practical and methodological Themes	Collaboration	<p>CRA explicitly calls for collaboration, particularly on the locus of the problem and the development and deployment of the construct.</p> <p>CRA has embedded the means to improve the quality of the collaborative relationship: <b>Authenticity</b> by assuring the achievement of both the theoretical and practical needs of the project; <b>Co-construction</b> is a central aspect of the construct development; <b>Inclusivity</b> is achieved via teamwork and assessment of ‘social feasibility’ of the construct</p>
	Participation Emancipation	CRA requires collaboration rather than mere participation (in the simple sense), but adopts a position of acknowledging and negotiating with the power differentials in the field and the research relationship itself (in the PAR sense)
	Power	The development and deployment of the construct provides a platform for power relationships to be illuminated and exercised towards a common goal, compatible with stakeholder groups’ interests.

**Table 7: Answers to the Modality theme issues**

	<b>Rigour and Relevance</b>	<b>Results from Thematic discussion</b>
Practical and methodological Themes	Validity	<p>The relevant steps before and after construct deployment within CRA have the requisite linkage between theoretical and empirical domains to deliver validity – provided suitable methodologies are followed as with all AR.</p> <p>Existing models for AR validity can be easily applied to CRA projects ( eg ROAR)</p>
	Transferability	<p>CRA has two potential avenues to address this</p> <p>Firstly the opportunity to explore how the construct works in the field, and secondly the possible utilisation of ‘market tests’</p>

The summary tables clearly indicate that CRA has the means by which to address common tactical issues that can occur when conducting AR in organisations.

## 6.0 Conclusion

The primary aim and consequential contribution of the paper is to first showcase the Constructive Research Approach (CRA) and show how it can assist in navigating the practical and methodological issues facing Action Researchers.

This showed that CRA has a particular benefit in terms of the orientation to a practical outcome grounded in a theoretical domain but has some leeway to facilitate creativity. The notion of an ‘applied construct’ [where theoretical concepts are transposed into the context domain, but subsequent theorizing allows the theory to be developed from practice](#). The construct itself provides a more definitive means by which visible and actionable knowledge can be generated for the actors. The nature of the construction allows a useful ‘vantage point’ to manage the insider and outsider positionality concerns of action researchers, as well as the extant power relationships by means of their relationship to the construct and its potential ‘interference’ in the organisational field. CRA has the merit of being able to be based on a single, rather than multiple interventions, in terms of both time but also the extent of the collaborative commitment. This and the resultant flexibility of the construct deployment can reduce the outcome risk for researchers and actors. The bounded nature of the collaboration and the locus of construct building can aid the quality of the collaborative relationships.

[Therefore, the conclusion is that CRA can provide a means by which tactical considerations of AR researchers can be addressed, and the primary contribution is the summary of the thematic discussions by which this can be achieved](#). The secondary contribution of the paper is the thematic tactical framework developed within the literature review which is a small contribution to the ongoing dialogue about the practical and methodological issues facing Action Researchers in general.

[The paper has a limitation; although the discussion on the themes is well grounded in the substantial amount of pertinent literature for conducting AR in organisations, but there are limited studies that use CRA outside the management accounting field, however this is mitigated in the fact that most of these are conducted in business organisations](#).

Apart from the obvious need for more accounts of CRA applications in non-accounting management fields more research is required to develop the possibility 'market' tests transferability tool, but which are more relevant to other management fields.

In terms of the wider issue of validity and transferability the authors also suggest further work on the use of the critical realism dimensions of 'context', 'mechanisms' and 'outcome', within the final two phases of CRA in order to embed the identification of how the construct works in the field. Finally more work could be continued to outline potential synergy and alignment of the 'tactical' thematic framework developed in this paper to Shani & Passmore's (2016/1985 ) 'high level' framework.

### **Implications for research, practice and/or society**

CRA originated and is mostly widely applied in the field of management accounting but the exposition of CRA and the examples considered such as Oyegoke et al (2011) and Jones (2019) show the applicability in the wider field of business and management AR. Therefore the key implications for research and practice is that CRA can enhance and increase the utilisation of AR in organisations within society, and provide more opportunity for researchers and practitioners to collaborate, by the utility of the CRA method for affectation of collaborative relationships, as well as reducing the risk, time and resource requirements for organisations and practitioners and researchers to engage in AR projects. The CRA method also has capability to enhance and enrich the overlap between theory and practice. The authors wish to conclude the paper with an encouragement to others to utilise the CRA approach in the organisational fields outside management accounting to achieve their AR goals and to further enhance and develop the method itself.

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