

**The Social Science  
Jargon Buster**



## Action research

### Core definition

Research strategies that tackle real-world problems in participatory, collaborative and cyclical ways in order to produce both knowledge and action.

### Longer explanation

The goal here is to improve situations by engaging with others in multiple cycles of learning and doing. There are actually four key principals that make action research (AR) distinct: (1) it addresses real-world problems – AR generally begins by identifying and understanding practical problems within a particular setting in order to seek and implement solutions within that setting; (2) it pursues action and knowledge – AR does not premise knowledge over change. Whether developing skills, changing programmes and policies, or working towards more *radical* (see *critical/radical*) transformation, AR works towards change as knowledge is produced; (3) it is participatory – in a bid to empower stakeholders, AR minimizes the distinction between the researcher and the researched and calls for participation of, and collaboration between, researchers, practitioners, and any other interested parties; (4) it is cyclical – the goal is to learn, do, reflect, learn how to do better, do it better, learn from that, do it better still, so on, and so forth. The idea is to work through a number of cycles that converge towards better situation understanding and improved action.

### Debates and controversies

On a theoretical level, AR literature can be pretty confusing and therefore difficult to get your head around. Perspectives across various disciplines have lead to any number of varieties, offshoots, and approaches, including action inquiry, participative inquiry, cooperative inquiry, participatory rural appraisal, and participatory action research. On a practical level, goals of empowerment, participation and cyclical learning are certainly worthwhile. But it's precisely these goals that can make AR a thorny process. Facilitating rather than directing, keeping project scope manageable, assuring rigour in methods, getting stakeholders together with common purpose, keeping up momentum, managing people, protecting the welfare of participants, ensuring sustainability, and

negotiating ownership of research outcomes are common challenges in the world of AR.

## Practical application

The key principals of AR set it apart from traditional *positivist* research and is often called upon when the goal is to improve professional practice (think educators and healthcare workers); empowerment of the researched is paramount (as in development work); ownership of change is a high priority (e.g. changing the culture in a workplace); and producing knowledge and change are both priorities.

## Key figures

While AR has certainly evolved since his day, Kurt Lewin, the social psychologist who coined the term, believed that social experiments in natural settings could and should enact social change. Other key figures include Chris Argyris, who developed action science, John Heron and Peter Reason, who coined the term cooperative inquiry, and Paulo Freire, who evolved participatory action research.

*An ounce of action is worth a ton of theory.*

**Friedrich Engels** (1820–1895) German  
political/social philosopher –  
in Groves, R. *The Strange*  
*Case of Victor Grayson* (1975)

## Recommended reading

Action research books abound. The ones I've found most practical and accessible include *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization* (Coghlan and Brannick 2004), *Action Research* (Stringer 1999), *Action Research: Principles and Practice* (McNiff and Whitehead 2002), and *Handbook of Action Research* (Reason and Bradbury 2001).



## Aesthetics

### Core definition

The quality and nature of sensory perceptions and emotive feelings related to art, nature, and various cultural products.

### Longer explanation

I'll start here by asking you to think about the antonym of aesthetic, 'anesthetic'. Now something with an anesthetic action dulls your senses, makes you groggy and basically puts you to sleep. So in contrast, something with an aesthetic action should make your senses feel alive. This pretty much sums up philosophical aesthetics. Rather than appeal that relies on an object's material value or cultural worth, aesthetics is about the immediate sensory and emotive appeal that comes from reflecting on the direct experience of an object.

### Debates and controversies

A major question here is whether aesthetic appeal is objective and simply exists in an entity independent of any outside factors (perhaps a sunset), or if it's **subjective** and always tied to cultural, historical (and personal) biases (a portrait of Elvis on black velvet). For those who believe it's objective, the challenge is identifying what it is that creates an appeal that transcends history and culture. For those who believe it's subjective, the challenge is understanding how power is associated with defining and owning what is aesthetically appealing. So are particular examples of say, abstract art, inherently beautiful? Or are they simply defined as such by a powerful art world that some might even call pretentious?

### Practical application

Understanding what gives something aesthetic appeal, whether objective or subjective, is not just a philosophical pastime. It's actually the goal of anyone attempting to capture, create, sell, or capitalize on 'beauty' – and that describes a fair portion of the world. From high art, to *the body*, to advertising, aesthetics can be explored as big business tied to the all-important concepts of power and money. As George Steinbrenner once said, 'Don't talk to me about aesthetics ... talk to me about what sells'.

## Key figures

Those who've contemplated aesthetics reads like a who's who of philosophy. Key figures include ancient Greeks such as Socrates, who contemplated the value of beauty, Plato, who provided a systematic reflection of art, and Aristotle, who attempted to identify beauty's objective principals. Eighteenth-century philosophers include Baumgarten, who introduced the term, Kant, who questioned beauty's objectivity, and Schelling and Hegel, who offered philosophies of art and fine art respectively. More recent thinkers include Bollough and Wittgenstein, who offer reflections and critiques of aesthetics as a philosophical construct.

*Nothing is beautiful, only man ... nothing  
is ugly but degenerate man –  
the domain of aesthetic judgment  
is therewith defined.*

**Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844–1900)

German philosopher – in 'Expeditions of  
an Untimely Man', *Twilight of the Idols* (1889)

## Recommended reading

Because the thoughts of so many theorists are relevant here, anthologies tend to be a good place to start. For coverage of Western philosophies and philosophers, I like *Aesthetics* (Feagin and Maynard 1998), *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts* (Goldblatt and Brown 2004), and *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (Lopes and Gaut 2002). *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics* (Marra 2001) gives a different starting point for exploring the objective/subjective nature of the term.



## Agency

### Core definition

The ability of individuals to affect change, make autonomous and independent choices and act in self-determining ways.

### Longer explanation

We like to think we're free agents who can act with independence and make a difference in the world. But is this the case? Do we have free will? And if so, can we use our free will to affect change? Or are our freedoms and choices constrained by the world around us? Well how much agency we believe we have is a core debate in both academic and everyday life. Think about the following phrases: 'It's in God's hands' – which implies there is no autonomy, God determines your future; 'Sometimes you just have to play the game' – which implies that the world operates by a set of rules that we can choose to play by or ignore; 'Each and every one of us can make a difference' – which implies that we can, indeed, influence the world; and finally, 'I can do whatever the hell I want' – which, on the surface, this implies full agency, but might point to an individual who's completely blind to constraints that dominant **ideologies** can place on free will.

### Debates and controversies

There can be a tendency for philosophers and social scientists to **dichotomize** or divide into camps. In this case, those who believe we can exercise free will and affect change and those who believe the world around us limits our ability to act with independence. Of course, it's worth considering if there just might be an element of truth in both sentiments. Many theorists now recognize the complexity of agency and have begun to explore the interplay, tensions, and balances between free will of the individual and the constraints of the social world to which they belong.

### Practical application

Agency should be of interest to anyone attempting to understand the construction and continuity of social structures, as well as those exploring the tendency for

phenomenon such as **social change**, **social movements**, political upheaval, and **revolutions**. At the level of social psychology, agency (and the lack of) can be an enlightening window for exploring concepts such as empowerment, disempowerment, **alienation**, and **anomie**.

## Key figures

The concept of agency has been a key consideration of many **modern** thinkers. Durkheim believed that agency can be limited since social structures determine social actions. Althusser believed free will to be illusory since social structures and dominant ideologies create an individual's reality. Marx would have agreed but thought oppressed masses should and would exercise agency through revolution. Others, for example **ethnomethodologists** and **symbolic interactionists**, believe individuals have full agency since it is they who create the social world. More contemporary theorists, such as Peter Berger, Thomas Luckman and Anthony Giddens, focus on the tensions and balances that create and constrain agency.

*You must believe in free will; there  
is no choice.*

**Isaac Bashevis Singer** (1902–1991) Nobel  
Prize winning author – in 'Isaac  
Singer's Promised City', *City Journal* (1997)

## Recommended reading

I'd start by looking at Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967), and Giddens' *The Constitution of Society* (1986). To explore how agency manifests across the social landscape try *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation* (Archer 2003), *Making History: Agency, Structure, and Change in Social Theory* (Callinicos 2004) and *Agency, Structure and International Politics* (Friedman 1997).



## Alienation

### Core definition

When individuals feel estranged or cut off from and by *modern* (see *modernity*) society.

### Longer explanation

What is the difference between a cobbler who crafts a pair of shoes and a worker in a shoe factory? Well cobblers have a craft, have pride in their shoes and are likely to have relationships with both customers and any one else they might, work with. What does the factory worker have? According to theorists like Marx, not a lot. When you work in a factory, you become part of a *capitalist* machine that only cares about exploiting your labour. You work on a production line, are isolated from others and no longer have a craft or feel ownership and pride over your end product. You are stripped of your creativity and are left feeling alienated from your craft, your co-workers, and even your essential human nature. This is the traditional meaning of alienation. It's a negative emotional state as well as a description of economic and social realities of capitalism.

### Debates and controversies

While *Marxists* may attribute alienation to capitalism, it's worth considering whether capitalism is truly the root cause of alienation, or whether alienation can be attributed to other aspects of *industrialized* society, such as mass production and high division of labour (a reality that can also exist under *socialism*). It's also worth considering whether alienation is common among professionals and white-collar workers, and if it will continue to have relevance in *post-industrial* societies.

### Practical application

While workers in the developed world may not face the same alienation issues they did at the height of the industrial revolution, *globalization*, in particular the practice of multinational corporations moving into *developing countries* to exploit cheap labour, makes the concept extremely current. It's also worth noting that alienation, as an emotive state, is now often explored without explicit reference to the realities of capitalism, and can be used to explore and explain



things like job satisfaction, the apathy of voters, lack of community **solidarity**, the discontented nature of youth and rising rates of depression.

## Key figures

While Marx is certainly a key figure here, the evolution of alienation as a broader construct can be traced to American sociologists of the mid-1950s, such as Melvin Seeman and Robert Blauner. Seeman identified various dimensions of alienation, while Blauner attempted to link these dimensions to different types of factory work. This saw the focus of the construct move from a critique of capitalism to the wider understanding of emotive states.

*Capitalist production, therefore,  
develops ... only by sapping the  
original sources of all wealth –  
the soil and the labourer.*

**Karl Marx** (1818–1883) German  
political/social philosopher –  
in *Das Kapital* (1867)

## Recommended reading

For a good contemporary take on alienation, I'd recommend *The Future of Alienation* (Schacht 1994) or *Alienation and Freedom* (Schmitt 2002). But I'd also turn to Marx – perhaps start with a third-person introduction, such as *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in a Capitalist Society* (Ollman 1977) and work your way up to Marx's *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1844 1988). Also worth a look is Blauner's seminal work *Alienation and Freedom* (1964).



## Anomie

### Core definition

When the rules that govern behaviour are absent, unclear, confusing or conflicting, leaving individuals feeling 'lost'.

### Longer explanation

It's difficult to play the game when you seem to be the only one playing by the rules, or when you don't know the rules, or when the rules suddenly change. How do you know what to do, how to feel, or where to turn? And what if the game is life itself? Well, as Durkheim will tell you, when you feel lost in the game of life, the stakes can be extraordinarily high. Durkheim believed that societal rules or **norms** help keep an individual's aspirations and desires in check. Without such norms, aspirations can extend beyond the means to achieve them and can leave individuals feeling helpless, lost, and in fact, suicidal. Durkheim attributed the loss of traditional rules and norms of the family and church, and its resultant anomie, to rapid **industrialization** and the move towards norms that value an individual's material-based ambitions and acquisitions. Like **alienation**, anomie is therefore both a structural characteristic of **capitalist** society and a psychological state.

### Debates and controversies

Some social scientists believe the concept of anomie is losing currency. The destabilization caused by rapid industrialization no longer describes the reality of the developed world. Others feel that the concept has been stripped of its societal focus and is now little more than a soft set of personality traits less and less useful to social scientists.

### Practical application

Despite the criticisms above, many would argue that as we move from an **industrial** to **post-industrial** society, a sense of normlessness continues to plague us. Perhaps a sense of destabilization has become a cultural reality, which can help to explain why so many search for meaning and **solidarity** through avenues such as Eastern spirituality, new age philosophies, cults,

sects, and even gangs, who do offer both a sense of **community** and clear rules of the game.

## Key figures

In addition to Durkheim, another key figure here is Robert Merton, who felt that a disparity between societal goals and means to achieve these goals caused anomie. In particular, he believed that the pervasive cultural goals of success and material wealth evident in the USA were not achievable for the masses, leaving them with a sense of anomie and no choice but to innovate (subvert the system), retreat (withdraw from society), rebel (fight the system), or ritualize (blindly follow the rules).

*I used to be with it. Then they changed  
what it was. Now what I'm with isn't it,  
and what's it seems weird and scary to me.*

**Abraham Simpson** (*The Simpsons*)

## Recommended reading

For wide-ranging readings that explore anomie in a contemporary world try *The Future of Anomie Theory* (Passas and Agnew 1997) and *The Legacy of Anomie Theory* (Adler and Laufer 1999). It's also worth exploring Durkheim's *The Division of Labor in Society (1893 1997)* and *Suicide (1897 1997)* as well as Merton's seminal work *Social Theory and Social Structure (1949 1968)*.

## A posteriori/a priori

### Core definition

*A posteriori* – knowledge based on facts derived from personal and societal experience. *A priori* – knowledge that comes before the facts.

### Longer explanation

These terms refer to the basis on which any proposition might be known. *A posteriori* propositions are pretty straightforward since we tend to be comfortable with knowledge based on memories, experiences and data derived from our senses. 'I had breakfast this morning', 'lemons are sour', and 'I have a cold', are all *a posteriori* statements based on factual experience. *A priori* arguments are a bit trickier since they come 'before the facts' and stand without experiential evidence. Truth-value here relies on reason, for example, 'triangles have three sides' and 'a straight line is the shortest distance between two points' (see *rationalism*). On a more colloquial level, *a priori* literally means beliefs that do come 'before the facts' and can refer to propositions based on things like hearsay and folklore, for example the urban myth that colonies of alligators prowl the New York sewer system.

### Debates and controversies

Questions related to *a posteriori* propositions often centre on the nature of 'experience'. Most philosophers go beyond sensory experience and include memory and introspection. You also need to consider who's experience counts, how much experience warrants knowledge, and if there just might be an exception to an *a posteriori* argument that we have yet to come across. 'Dinosaurs are extinct' is only true until we manage to find or clone one.

One of the main critiques of *a priori* propositions is that justifications for knowing can be semantic – a play on words. Take for example, the 'logical' argument: 'Nobody's perfect. I am a nobody, therefore I am perfect.' The other difficulty with *a priori* arguments is being able to divorce experience from faith. For some, belief in God is based on pure faith, and therefore *a priori*. But for others, belief in God must rest on tangible evidence of his existence.

## Practical application

There are a few good reasons to get you head around these terms. First, understanding knowledge creation underpins all the social sciences. Second, it's fascinating to consider the foundations for some of our most core beliefs. Is there experiential, a posteriori evidence that supports mathematics, philosophy, God, even aliens? Or are these concepts built solely on a priori faith and/or reason? Third, professors love to use these terms, particularly a priori, but often without offering clear explanations. And finally, students consistently misuse them.

## Key figures

Questioning the nature of knowledge is taken up by many historical and contemporary philosophers, for example Descartes ('I think, therefore I am') and Wittgenstein, who articulated the foundations of logic. But it's Kant, who argued that although knowledge is derived from experience, it's possible to have knowledge of objects prior to experience, that is most closely associated with these terms.

*Any necessary truth, whether a priori  
or a posteriori, could not  
have turned out otherwise.*

**Saul Kripke** (1940–) US philosopher – in  
*Naming and Necessity* (1980)

## Recommended reading

For contemporary readings, try *In Defence of Pure Reason* (BonJour 1997) and *A Priori Justification* (Casullo 2003). But if you want to jump right into the philosophical heavyweights, try Descartes' *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy (1641 1993)*, Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics (1783 2004)* and Wittgenstein's *On Certainty (1951 1972)*.



# Authority

## Core definition

Power that is seen as legitimate by those who possess it and those who are subjected to it.

## Longer explanation

Why do we listen to the boss? Why do we accept the decisions of the president? Why do we turn to certain people in times of crisis? The answer lies in the notion of authority. Authority is the exercise of power accepted (although sometimes resisted) by those under it. Individuals can have authority over knowledge and be *an* authority on a subject (e.g. academics and doctors). But we generally talk about authority as power over conduct (e.g. a military sergeant). Three types of 'authority over conduct' were offered by Weber: legal rational – where rules, roles, and procedures are publicly and politically accepted (i.e. a US president); traditional – where traditions, customs and rituals legitimize power (i.e. the Queen of England); and charismatic – where power comes directly from the characteristics of the leader (i.e. a cult leader like Charles Manson). In reality, authority figures generally have characteristics of more than one type.

## Debates and controversies

What does it mean to have legitimate power? Is power legitimized by all ruled by it, or are some forced under its rule by default? Is authority a hidden form of coercive power or does authority offer social cohesion that can help protect individual liberty? And what happens if authority is questioned by the masses? Is power lost, or is power maintained through force? Well, the ability to question authority and have a voice in the selection of authority figures is central to our notion of **democracy**.

## Practical application

Some might argue that in contemporary societies authority comes from a legal rational basis and that in modern politics, tradition and charisma have become less important. But I'd argue that Weber's trilogy of authority types is more relevant than you might realize. Look at the media – it's all about image and

spin-doctoring. Yes, authority figures are voted in a rational legal manner, but who gets to the polls is largely about charisma. You can also think of traditional authority in the same way. Our political systems are steeped in history and tradition. Think of how hard it is for someone outside one of the major political parties to get into office. In fact, I'd say that understanding the way authority is created and managed is crucial to understanding any political machine.

### Key figures

While classical theorists such as Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, and John Locke all discuss the nature of authority, power, and leadership, the figure most closely associated with this construct is Max Weber. His trilogy of ideal types has defined the term for almost 100 years.

*I have as much authority as the Pope,  
I just don't have as many  
people who believe it.*

**George Carlin** (1937–) Stand-up  
comedian – attributed

### Recommended reading

Weber's writings on authority are contained in *Economy and Society* (pt 1, ch 3) (1921–22 1978). Also worth a look are the BBC lectures by Bertrand Russell, *Authority and the Individual* (1949 1995). For more contemporary coverage try *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Lincoln 1995) or *Governing Globalization: Power, Authority and Global Governance* (Held and McGrew 2002).