

MULTI-SITE ACTION RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

Classical action research within single organizations has become a well established and differentiated approach since its inception more than six decades ago. Although new larger scale varieties of action research are beginning to develop, there is still a clear need to expand the scope of action research practice (Greenwood, 2002).

Building on previous work, this paper develops multi-site action research (MAR) as a conceptually distinct variant of action research implementation with promising potential to fill the gap between the classical and coalition type varieties of action research. MAR is defined as involving the concurrent implementation of multiple distinct single-site action research processes, with a similar focus, and some level of coordination across sites. From a review of three relevant multi-site initiatives, a conceptual framework for the potential benefits of MAR is derived, and a model of the MAR implementation process is presented and discussed.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Thomas E. Fuller-Rowell is a graduate student in the department of Human Development at Cornell University. He received his B.A. in Psychology and Biochemistry summa cum laude from the University of Colorado in 2003.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Biographical Sketch	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures	vi
Introduction	1
MAR Defined	4
Review of Multi-Site Initiatives	6
Increased Potential for Future Coalition Success	16
The MAR Implementation Process	20
Conclusion	24
References	27

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	The impact of MAR implementation on site-level action research	10
Figure 2.	The impact of MAR implementation on research outcomes, and overall project success	15
Figure 3.	The impact of MAR implementation on the capacity for future coalition type action research	19
Figure 4.	A six stage model of the MAR implementation process as it unfolds over time	21

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MAR	Multi-site Action Research
AR	Action Research
GUiNYC	Growing Up in New York City Project
PTAR	Parent Teacher Action Research Project
ED 2000	Enterprise Development 2000



## Introduction

Although there is some debate around the origins of action research (AR), Kurt Lewin is generally credited with coining the term and bringing the idea to the US in the mid 1940's (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood & Maguire, 2003; Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Stokols, 2006). Since this time, action research has grown, flourished, and developed into its current state as a broadly accepted approach to social science practice (Boog, 2003; Boog, Keune & Tromp, 2003).

Evolving out of Lewin's work (1946, 1947a, 1947b, 1948), the classical variety of action research typically involves an outside action researcher, or group of researchers, partnering with a single organization to understand and improve the organization's functioning in a particular domain of interest through a participatory and cyclical process of action and reflection. Action research of this type has become increasingly well conceptualized and differentiated, and continues to be a widely practiced approach to research, intervention, and development (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, Reason & Bradbury, 2001). While there are a variety of approaches within what I am calling classical, or single-organization, action research (see Reason & Bradbury, 2001 for an overview of approaches), what generally holds all of them together under the umbrella of action research are the defining characteristics of a cyclical collaborative research process, and an emphasis on practical problem solving rather than the generation of knowledge or theory in isolation of its application<sup>1</sup>.

Although classical action research has been a powerful addition to social science, there are, of course, various inherent limitations to working within only one organization at a time. Most fundamentally, the scope of the questions that can be asked and the actions that can be taken are limited to the single-organization level.

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of what distinguishes action research from more traditional research approaches, see Greenwood & Levin, 1998 (chap 5), or Israel et al., 1998.

Additionally, in an increasingly interconnected world it is becoming progressively more important to address issues on a larger scale (Trist, 1983). For these reasons, over the past two decades many have built on the foundational principles of classical action research to develop and implement larger-scale action research approaches (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Stokols, 2006).

One increasingly practiced larger-scale variety of action research takes the form of a coalition<sup>2</sup>. Butterfoss, Goodman, and Wandersman (1993) define coalitions as “inter-organizational, cooperative, and synergistic working alliances” (p.316). They classify coalitions as both diverse and enduring in that they involve a variety of groups coming together to address issues of shared concern over an extended period of time. The inter-organizational nature of coalitions allows them to address larger scale issues and to explore ways to enhance the functioning of particular inter-organizational systems. Whereas classical action research focuses on the functioning of single organizations, the emphasis of coalition type action research is on issues relevant to the functioning of multiple organizations that cannot be fully addressed by any one of them alone. Community coalitions operating in the non-profit human services domain, for example, have often involved a range of stakeholders working to better understand and address a specific set of community issues. Important to note here is that not all coalitions need necessarily be classified as action research. Since action research involves the inclusion of a research component (Greenwood & Levin, 1998), coalitions that are predominantly action focused or do not embody a clear research agenda cannot be classified as action research (see Greenwood, 2002, or Greenwood & Levin, 1998 for a further discussion of what can be classified as action research).

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<sup>2</sup> Coalitions have also been referred to as task forces, multiple stakeholder groups, interagency coordinating councils, and coordinating committees (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001). The distinction between intra and inter-organizational action research has also been made (see, e.g., Stokols, 2006).

Although coalitions have expanded the scope of action research practice and are, both intuitively and theoretically, powerful approaches to systemic change (see, e.g., Lasker & Weiss, 2003), recent reviews of the coalition literature have found that the success of coalitions depends greatly on their ability to effectively manage the complexities of the collaborative process (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allan, 2001; Weiss, Anderson, & Lasker, 2002; Zakocs & Edwards, 2006), and that coalition organizers very often fail to navigate these complexities effectively (McCloughen & O'Brian, 2006). Skilled leadership, formalized operating procedures, and a well-facilitated group process all seem to be essential elements of coalition success (Zakocs & Edwards, 2006). Additionally, there is an increasingly acknowledged tendency to underestimate the capacity and resources necessary to achieve successful implementation (McCloughen & O'Brian, 2006). Overall, it is becoming increasingly clear from the coalition literature that, in addition to requiring significant levels of capacity and commitment from involved parties, coalition type action research also generally necessitates a sizable resource commitment in the form of facilitation.

Coalitions have been an important extension to action research practice, but are clearly, not by themselves, the answer to all challenges of systemic change. Rather, there continues to be a need to expand the scope of action research practice to address a broader range of macro-structural issues in a wider diversity of ways (Greenwood, 2002).

#### *The Purpose and Focus of this Paper*

In this paper, I will develop multi-site action research (MAR) as an alternative project structure with promising potential to fill a gap between the classical and coalition type varieties of action research. I will start by presenting a definition of MAR that distinguishes it from coalitions and other varieties of action research. I will

then review three relevant multi-site projects, including one which I was recently involved in implementing, in order to develop a conceptual framework for understanding the strengths and benefits of MAR above and beyond isolated single-site implementation. I will then describe how MAR can serve as a bridge between single-site and coalition type action research, and explain how MAR builds toward the implementation of more effective coalition type action research. Finally, I will describe the sequence of the MAR implementation process before concluding with some reflections on the conceptual framework as a whole.

### MAR Defined

MAR, as discussed in this paper, is defined as any initiative involving the *concurrent* implementation of *multiple* distinct single-site action research processes, with a *similar focus*, and some level of *coordination across sites*. MAR is distinct from coalition type action research in that it involves multiple separate site-level processes that are networked together, rather than a single centralized action research process. MAR therefore avoids the complexities of inter-organizational collaborative decision making, which have burdened coalition type action research, while still utilizing the benefits of communication and information sharing across sites.

### *Concurrency of Implementation*

Because MAR involves cross-site interactions, a necessary defining characteristic is concurrent implementation. Generally, this means that during an initiative's early stages, a realistic timeframe for a first cycle of implementation is decided upon through dialogue between project initiators and each of the involved sites. Although concurrency does require that all involved organizations are logistically capable of carrying out an action research process over a similar length of time, it does not mean that the respective action research processes are closely yoked together or standardized in any way across sites. In fact, it will become clear from

proceeding sections of this paper that the opposite (a diversity of approaches across sites) is generally optimal.

### *Number of Sites*

One important defining structural consideration in MAR is the number of sites included in an initiative. On the smallest end of the spectrum, the coordinated implementation of just two action research sites could in many instances be an effective project structure. However, although two-site initiatives would almost certainly tap some of the strengths of MAR (described in proceeding sections of this paper), since they lack the diversity of ideas that exist in larger initiatives they would not be expected to optimize these strengths. Furthermore, MAR initiatives with more than seven or eight sites, although containing a rich diversity of elements, generally become difficult to initiate and coordinate in a coherent manner. Earlier Scandinavian initiatives, for example (see, e.g., Engelstad & Gustavsen, 1993), started with the goal of creating networks between very large numbers of enterprises, but quickly adopted a modular form where action research processes were broken down into more manageable clusters<sup>3</sup>.

The optimal size for MAR initiatives (balancing the diversity of participating organizations with the challenges of coordination) is therefore relatively small. That is, MAR projects could reasonably vary in size between two and seven organizations, probably with an optimal of between four and six. In situations where it makes sense

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<sup>3</sup> Additionally, there is a good deal of evidence in the social psychology literature to suggesting that as team sizes grow beyond about five, they become more difficult to manage and more of a negative experience for group members to participate in. Specifically, people who belong to larger groups are less satisfied with group membership, participate less often in group activities, and are less likely to cooperate with one another (Kerr, 1989; Markham, Dansereau, & Alutto, 1982; Pinto & Crow, 1982). In teams of four or more, increases in team sizes have been found to be strongly related with increased levels of dissention and discord (Gentry, 1980), and increases in group size have been related to decreases in member participation (e.g., social loafing; Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979). Also, the number of possible social interactions in a group increase exponentially as a function of team size (Rogers, 2001). Specifically, as group size increases beyond about six, the number interactions increase very rapidly. (The number of possible interactions can be taken as proportional to the resources necessary to coordinate the functioning of the group).

or is essential to include larger numbers of organizations, a modular form could be used, where initiatives would essentially be broken up into multiple linked MAR projects<sup>4</sup>.

#### *Similarity of Substantive Action Research Focus across Sites*

Another important defining characteristic of MAR is the similarity of substantive action research focus across sites. The importance of this aspect of MAR is made clear by the simple fact that when organizations are implementing processes on very different topics with different goals, there is no central theme that holds a project together and therefore little benefit to coordinating an initiative across sites. Alternatively, cross-site interactions are more relevant and useful, and sites are more able to build toward successful cross-site collaborations if site based projects start with a similar domain of interest. For this reason, a defining characteristic of MAR is the identification of a clear substantive focus that all participating organizations are motivated to explore, albeit in a diversity of ways.

#### *Coordination across Sites*

The final defining characteristic of MAR is that MAR initiatives involve some level of networking or coordination across sites. Since MAR does not contain a centralized action research process, cross site interactions are focused on knowledge exchange between sites rather than on collaborative decision making. The structure of cross site coordination will vary based on the particular characteristics of an initiative and its involved organizations. Cross site interactions will be discussed further below.

### Review of Multi-Site Initiatives

Having presented some fundamental defining characteristics of MAR, in this section, I discuss three relevant examples of multi-site projects and develop a

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<sup>4</sup> This would be similar to the form used by Gustavsen and colleagues in the large-scale Scandinavian work reform initiatives which are further discussed below.

conceptual framework for understanding the strengths of MAR. The details of how each project was carried out is emphasized in the descriptions below in order to distinguish important aspects of each projects implementation. Both the Growing Up in New York City Project (GUiNYC; the first project discussed) and the Parent Teacher Action Research Project (PTAR; the third project discussed) represent innovative MAR project structures, and illustrate core strengths of MAR implementation. Large-scale Scandinavian action research on the other hand (discussed second), although also groundbreaking, is included here not because it is itself necessarily a MAR project, but because of important conceptual contributions of direct relevance to the present discussion.

#### *The Growing Up in New York City Project*

The GUiNYC project is part of the global Growing Up in Cities initiative, under the umbrella of the UNESCO Management of Social Transformations program and was undertaken by a group at Cornell University in partnership with six community organizations, each working with adolescent youth. Collaborative partnerships with organizations were initiated in 2004 and the project was implemented eight months later as a network of six youth programs using a particular framework (called Growing Up in Cities) to collaboratively implement an action research process with groups of youth (see Driskell, 2002 for a detailed description of the Growing Up in Cities framework and Chawla, 2002 for examples of other Growing Up in Cities projects worldwide). Although the same planning framework was used across sites, each site implemented a distinct and autonomous action research process.

With respect to project structure, a university based city planner with a background in action research conceived of the initiative, and recruited other researchers, with a background in community work, to initiate project sites. The

project then took a form where the initiating faculty member acted as a project director/coordinator, and each of the other project initiators took the role of site-based action researchers. The site based action researchers and the project director together made up a project-initiating team. This team developed a plan for the initiative as a whole, recruited community partners, and eventually initiated six project sites (each facilitated by one action researcher from the initiating team).

Each of the project sites involved an action research process where organization staff and neighborhood youth worked together to evaluate the local environment from a youth perspective, as well as to identify specific ways that the organization could work with youth to improve it. After the first cycle of implementation, each site presented findings at a culminating event attended by each of the other sites and a broad range of other stakeholders. Additionally, descriptions of core findings were compiled, and distributed to local stakeholders in the form of a project newsletter.

My own involvement in the project was as an action researcher at one of the six project sites. Also, after the first cycle of implementation, I carried out a qualitative process evaluation involving in-depth interviews with each of the other site-based researchers (Fuller-Rowell, 2005). The focus of the evaluation was specifically on understanding the relationship between the larger project structure and the site based action research processes. Evaluation findings pointed to two strong benefits of multi-site implementation to the respective site-based action research processes: improved motivation, and enhanced support structures.

*Improved motivation for site-based action research.* Findings in the domain of motivation suggested that two separate motivational processes were at work in MAR implementation, activating both altruistic and competitive drives to engage in action research at the site level. Firstly, in the domain of altruistic motivation, an awareness



of the larger project structure allowed participants within each of the respective organizations to feel like they were part of a larger initiative with the potential to make a real difference, both within and beyond their own organization, and thus motivated their involvement in site based action research (Fuller-Rowell, 2005). From the perspective of site-based action researchers, the desire to contribute to something that was set up to have a broader impact excited participants at all levels and in turn improved site-based implementation.

Secondly, in addition to enhancing the desire to contribute, evaluation findings also suggested that the multi-site structure was able to activate a healthy competitive motivation across sites (Fuller-Rowell, 2005). As part of the multi-site agenda, each of the sites knew that their action research findings would be communicated across participating organizations and to a wider audience of stakeholders. The knowledge that their work would be immediately visible to a larger audience of their peers, in turn created a desire to achieve something substantial and thus motivated their engagement in site based action research: action researchers wanted their site to be at least as successful as the others, organization staff wanted to represent their organization well in front of other organizations, and participating youth wanted to do a better job than youth from other neighborhoods. From the perspectives of site based action researchers, competition across sites was a natural motivator at all levels of participation. The overall motivational benefits of multi-site implementation (both altruistic and competitive) are summarized by the first pathway in Figure 1.

*Enhanced support structures for site based implementation.* Findings relating to communication structures across sites suggested that the presence of an initiating research team improved the quality of implementation at the respective project sites. The initiating team was formed in the very early stages of the project in order to design the plan the multi-site initiative and to recruit the respective project sites.

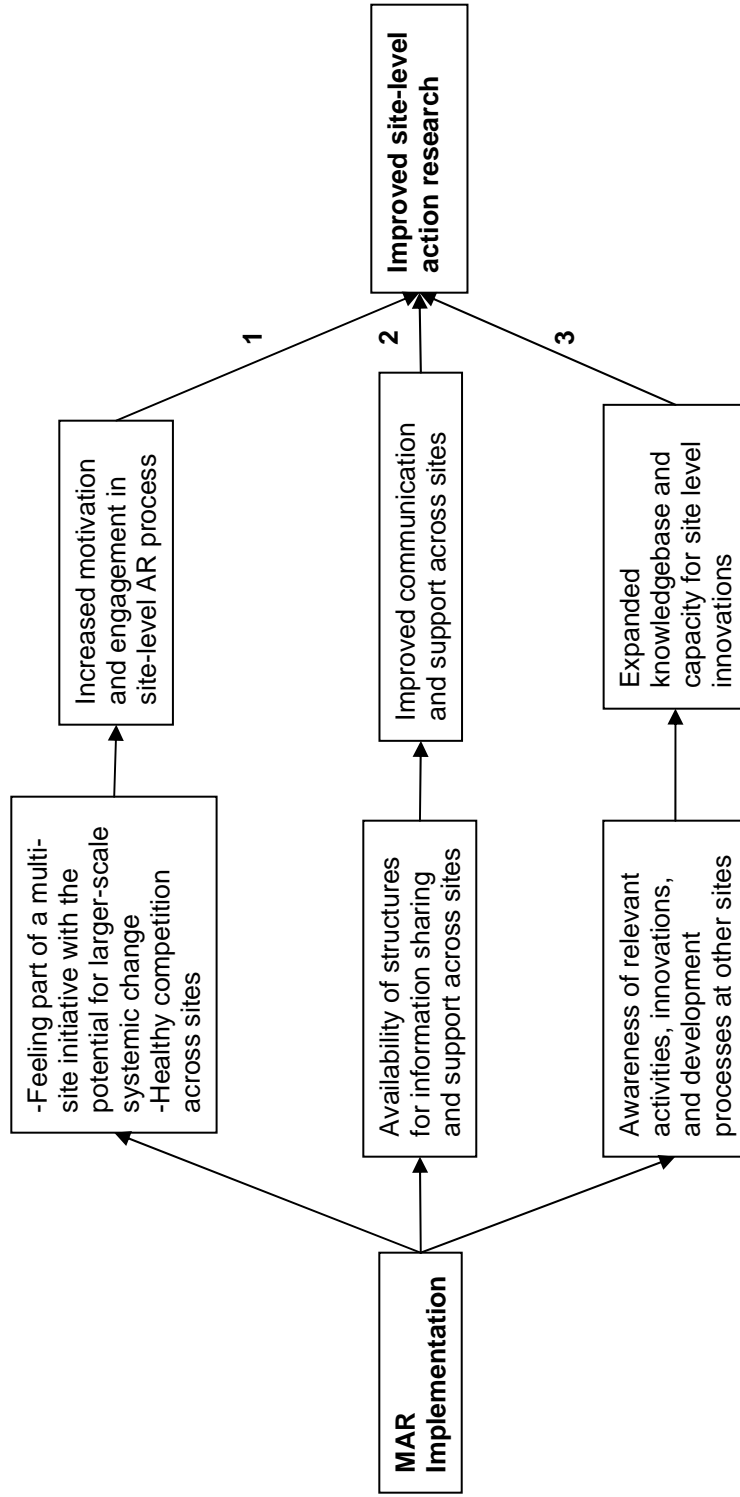


Figure 1. A conceptual framework for understanding the benefits of MAR implementation to site-level action research.

Each team member then moved forward to implement project sites, while also maintaining their involvement in the original initiating team. The initiating team maintained its cohesion throughout all stages of the project, meeting weekly to share insights and ideas, as well as to support the site-based practice of each of the researchers (at each of the respective sites).

Conceptually, the multi-site team can be understood as a second person action research process (Reason & Bradbury, 2001), where each of the researchers could explore aspects of their practice relevant to fine-tuning implementation as it unfolded at each of their respective sites. (Through this theoretical lens, each site-based action research process can be understood as a third person process: where outside action researchers are facilitating and catalyzing development processes within organizations.) The layered action research structures that multi-site projects make possible represents an important conceptual strength of concurrent multi-site implementation and is summarized by the second pathway in Figure 1.

#### *Large-scale Scandinavian Action Research*

The benefits of multi-site action research are further suggested by the work of Gustavsen and colleagues, who have designed and implemented innovative, large-scale action research initiatives for work reform in Scandinavian countries (Gustavsen, Finne, & Oscarsson, 2001; Gustavsen, 2002; Naschold, Cole, Gustavsen, & Beinum, 1993; Engelstad & Gustavsen, 1993). The LOM program (an abbreviation of the Swedish terms for Leadership, Organization and Co-determination) was carried out in Sweden in the late 1980's followed more recently, in Norway, by Enterprise Development 2000 (ED 2000)<sup>5</sup>. LOM and ED 2000 were structured as regional networks of organizations called modules, where each module functioned as a coalition type action research process that was facilitated by a team of researchers.

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<sup>5</sup> Enterprise Development 2000 has evolved into Value Creations 2010, which is currently underway.

Dialogue conferences (Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986) were used at the module or inter-organizational level to build joint platforms and action agendas across enterprise boundaries, as well as to facilitate the exchange of ideas across enterprises. At least some of the involved enterprises simultaneously engaged in their own site-level development processes, with various degrees of involvement from researchers. Although site level development was central to the conception of each module's functioning, since the emphasis of implementation was at the coalition level, site-level processes were in many cases not well defined.

*Benefits of multi-site implementation to capacity for site level innovation.*

Although the emphasis on coalition type action research, and the lack of definition in site level processes, may in some senses distinguish these initiatives from what I am defining to be MAR<sup>6</sup>, Gustavsen's ideas relating to cross-site communication, and the exchange of ideas across enterprises, are important conceptual underpinnings of multi-site implementation. Specifically, Gustavsen (2002) describes how communication or information sharing across sites allows each involved organization to develop an awareness of relevant activities within similar organizations, gaining perspective on its own functioning, and in turn contributing to the development of the organization's functioning. He describes that, since each enterprise is unique, there is no direct replication of ideas, but rather a mixing of external and internal elements to create what have been called hybrids (Latour, 1987, as cited in Gustavsen, 2002). Hybrids are new ideas that take various elements of previous ones, but also add something new to make them work optimally in a particular context. Gustavsen's discussion of how communication across organizations can feed development processes at the

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<sup>6</sup> In contrast to these coalition type projects, researchers in MAR are connected to individual sites rather than multi-site coalitions. The central goal in MAR is site-level development rather than the development of an inter-organizational system.

organization level is a core theoretical strength of MAR and thus is depicted as the third pathway in Figure 1. The figure depicts how an awareness of relevant activities, innovations, and development processes at other sites can expand each site's knowledgebase and therefore enhance capacity for site level innovation.

### *The Parent-Teacher Action Research Project*

The Parent-Teacher Action Research (PTAR) project (Palanki & Burch, 1995) was an eight site school based initiative under the Institute for Responsive Education and the Center for Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning. The project was focused on developing school-community relations at several schools. Participating schools were situated in a diversity of contexts across the US.

Trained facilitators were hired to orchestrate action research processes at each of the school based sites, and the project was initiated with a three day orientation and training conference for the respective school principles and facilitators. After the conference, each school formed a site-based team consisting of parents, teachers, and administrators and began site based action research processes to improve engagement of families and communities with the school. The specific focus was to involve families and other outside community members in ways that have an optimal positive impact on children's learning.

Each site went through a process of defining their specific goals and objectives, taking action to develop family and community involvement initiatives, evaluating these initiatives, and finally writing up a case study of the action research process and findings. The centralized initiating team (the project funding body) worked with sites to provide support, feedback, and technical assistance. In the later stages of the process, the centralized coordinated team asked each site to identify a writing team and held a four day workshop to prepare the teams for drafting a case study of the action research process at each team's site. School based teams also

helped communicate overall project findings through conference presentations, and through their involvement in subsequent publications.

The multi-site project in this case, was developed to advance the functioning of participating schools, as well as to generate knowledge and theory in the domain of school-community relations. No attempt was made, however, to build lasting structures for cross-site information sharing (in fact, the sites were not selected with this in mind), nor were the motivational benefits of multi-site project directly acknowledged.

*Benefits of multi-site implementation to research outcomes.* Although the structure and implementation of this initiative did not optimize the potential motivational and network building benefits of MAR, it does, in addition to being one of few innovative multi-site projects, clearly illustrate the potential benefits of MAR to the research domain. That is, case studies in the PTAR project were developed and written up collaboratively at each of the school-based sites, then compiled and analyzed by a centralized research team in order to contribute to the literature in a particular domain of interest. Although, in this project, a specific content area (school-community relations) was the focus of comparative research, process issues could just as easily have been the emphasis. In other words, the opportunities for comparative research resulting from MAR can improve research outcomes in both process and content domains. Pathway one, at the top of Figure 2, summarizes this process. The figure depicts how the presence of site based researchers (with an in-depth knowledge of the respective sites) combined with the established communication norms between researchers (developed through the implementation process) optimally situate MAR for comparative research.

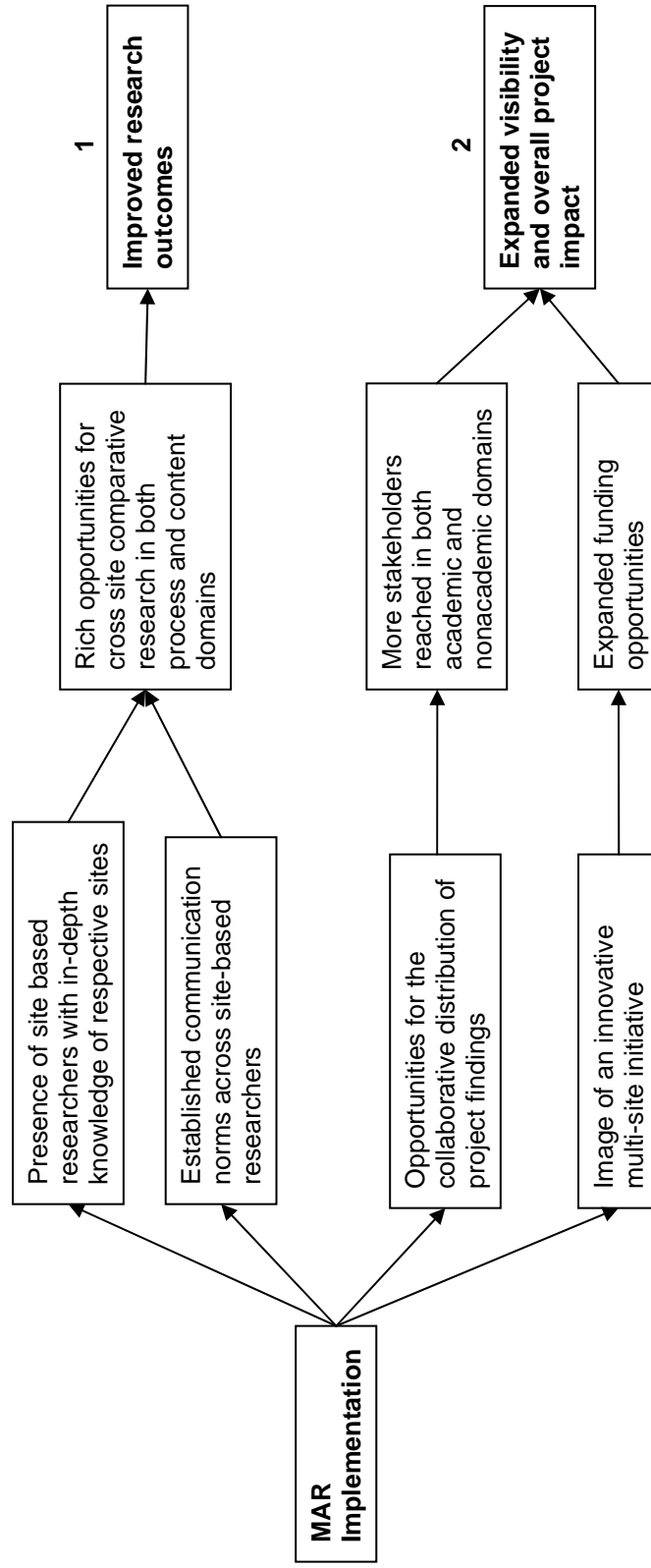


Figure 2. A conceptual framework for understanding the benefits of MAR implementation to research outcomes, and overall project impact.

Important to note here is that comparative research within multi-site action research initiatives is inherently retrospective and inductive, or theory-generating, in nature. Although it can be tempting from a research standpoint to pre-standardize data collection at participating sites in order to address specific cross-site hypotheses, this is a rapid route out of the collaborative process and into a traditional research approach.

*Project impact.* Another closely related strength of MAR is that the overall impact of an initiative can be expanded through the collaborative distribution of findings, and through the potential impact and image of a multi-site initiative. Joint publications and presentations (for audiences inside and outside of the academic domain), have greater potential to gain the attention of stakeholders in related systems and sectors of government. Additionally, the novelty, and expanded potential of coordinated multi-site implementation (in the various ways previously discussed) can make initiatives more attractive to a wide range of stakeholders (including funding institutions) and can generally make possible a level of exposure that would be difficult for a set of isolated single site projects to achieve. The benefits of MAR implementation to the overall exposure and impact of an initiative are summarized by the second pathway in Figure 2.

#### Increased Potential for Future Coalition Success

In addition to the above benefits, MAR can also serve as a method of building toward the implementation of more effective coalitions, and thus has the potential to serve as a bridge between single site and coalition type action research. Specifically, MAR implementation can build three types of capacity that have been consistently linked to coalition success (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Zakocs & Edwards, 2006): *relational capacity* (the capacity for effective relationships between organizations), *programmatic capacity* (the capacity to create focused programs that have a



meaningful impact), and *member capacity* (the capacity of individual organizations to engage in coalition type action research)<sup>7</sup>.

MAR helps to establish communication norms across sites as well as develop a sense of connectedness, trust, and familiarity. These cross-site developments contribute to the *relational capacity* of a coalition (as defined by Foster-Fishman et al., 2001), and therefore strengthen its ability to function effectively and succeed. Additionally, each organization's growing understanding of common challenges and areas of interdependence across sites can lead to the formulation of topics that future coalition type initiatives could address. Clear, focused, programmatic objectives are an important aspect of *programmatic capacity*, which in turn strengthen a coalition's ability to succeed (Foster-Fishman, 2001). The formulation of preliminary ideas and background knowledge, through MAR implementation, can avoid long, drawn-out startup phases in coalition type action research, and thus can be an important contributor to coalition success. Finally, each organization's capacity to contribute effectively to a coalition type process (what Foster-Fishman et al., 2001 refer to as *member capacity*) is potentially improved through the process of MAR implementation; organizations gain exposure to the concept of action research, and gain experience working closely with researchers and communicating with other organizations. The experience gained through MAR implementation situates them well to contribute effectively to coalition type action research processes.

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<sup>7</sup> In an extensive review of qualitative literature on coalitions four aspects of coalition capacity were derived as important precursors to coalition success: *relational, programmatic, organizational, and member* (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001). Additionally, a recent review of the quantitative literature on coalitions, supports these findings, showing that group cohesion and agency collaboration (aspects of relational capacity) as well as active member participation (an aspect of member capacity) have predicted coalition effectiveness in five or more of 26 qualifying studies (Zakocs & Edwards, 2006). *Organizational capacity* is not discussed because it focuses primarily on the way coalitions are run after they have been initiated and is therefore not relevant to the present discussion.

Overall, with potential for increased relational, programmatic, and member capacity, coalition type processes that evolve out of MAR implementation are better situated to succeed. Figure 3 summarizes the manner in which MAR contributes to future coalition success.

Although MAR projects need not necessarily lead to coalition type processes, there is clear potential for an organic transition from MAR to coalitions. Therefore, in situations where the capacity for a successful coalition type processes is initially lacking, MAR should be considered as an implementation option to help move in this direction while also implementing action research at the site level.

Additionally, in situations where coalition type processes are not, initially, a central goal, sites can still be selected with the possibility of later coalition type processes evolving. This leaves open the possibility for action research processes to evolve, thus optimizing the potential impact of an initiative in the long term. Having discussed the theoretical strengths of MAR and its relation to other varieties of action research, the concluding sections of this paper will serve to further define and contextualize the MAR implementation process.

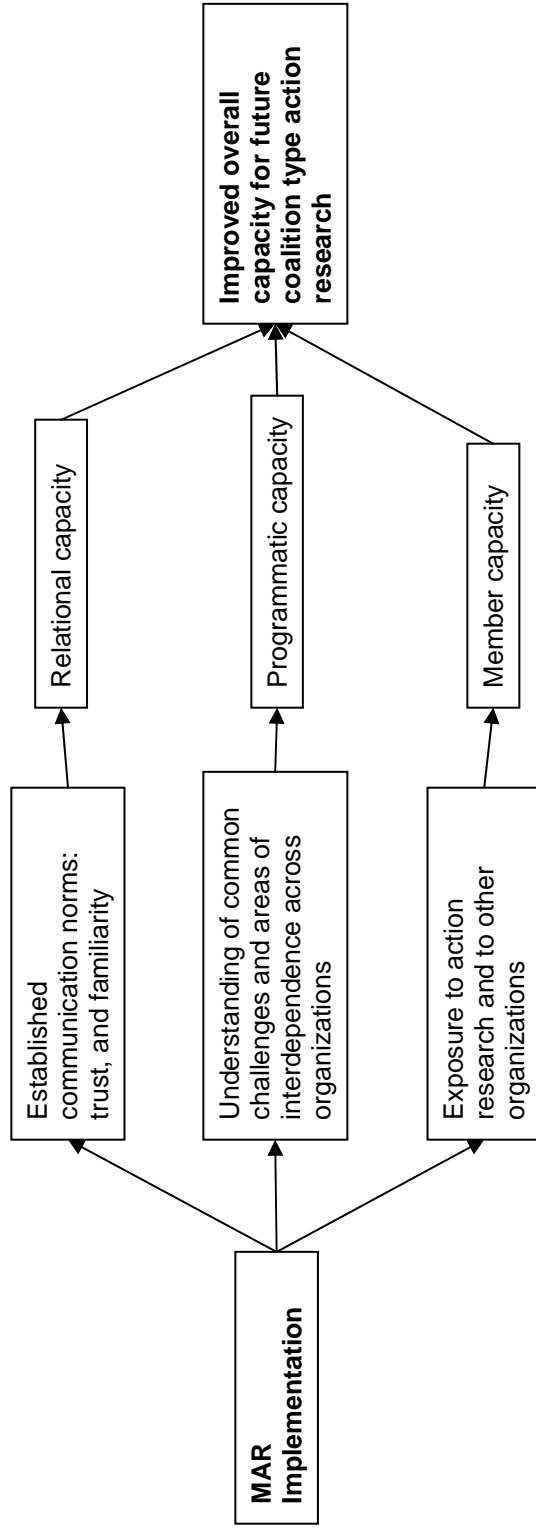


Figure 3. A conceptual framework for understanding how MAR implementation can build capacity for future coalition type action research. *Note.* The figure uses terminology for three different aspects of coalition capacity that was developed by Foster-Fishman and colleagues (2001).

## The MAR Implementation Process

Having discussed the various conceptual strengths of MAR, I will now present a six-stage model of the MAR implementation process (see Figure 4). The model breaks MAR implementation down into its various sub-processes as they unfold over time, and further defines and distinguishes MAR from other varieties of action research. The purpose of this model is to serve as a guideline for the design of future initiatives, and a useful point of departure for studies of MAR implementation. The model also clearly communicates the sequence and logical coherence of MAR implementation and therefore itself represents another conceptual strength of MAR.

The arrows in stages 1, 3, and 5 of the figure represent the coming together of various project teams (i.e. identifying, recruiting, and bringing together team members), and the circles in stages 2, 4, and 6 represent collaborative group processes (i.e. team formation, collaborative planning, role differentiation, and action). Stages 2 and 4 in the middle of Figure 4 represent smaller team planning processes whereas stage 6, on the far right side of the figure, represents full site-based implementation after all identified stakeholders have been incorporated.

### *Stages of Implementation*

*Stage 1 and 2 (Initiating the multi-site initiative).* MAR projects begin when one or more project initiators recruit other action researchers to form a multi-site, project-initiating team (stage 1). This stage is the first of three team formation stages in the implementation process. Since team members will generally move on to initiate the respective project sites, the size of this team will determine the number of project sites.

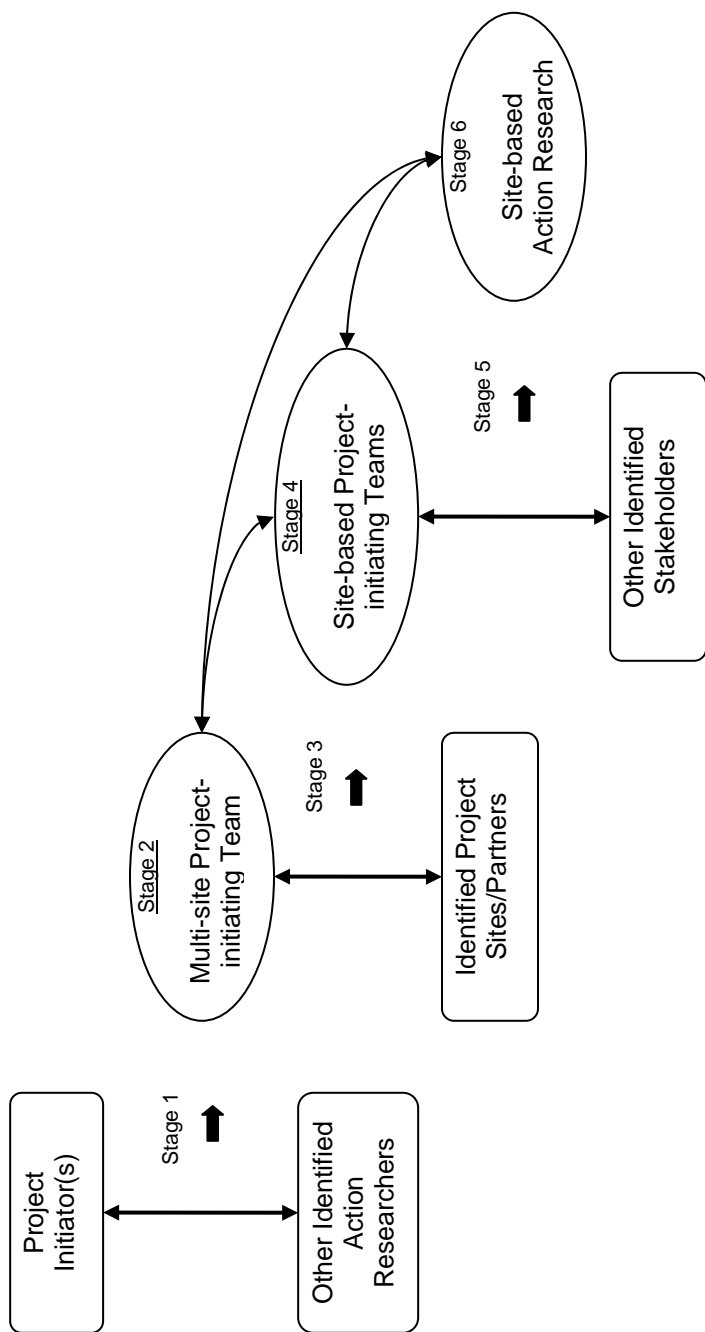


Figure 4. A six stage model of the MAR implementation process as it unfolds over time.

Once formed, this team begins the first and most central collaborative process in MAR implementation (stage 2). Based on their shared interests and experiences, the team develops a focus for the multi-site initiative, a plan for initiating and coordinating implementation across sites, and a list of potential site-based partners (stage 2). Additionally, whether the group process is explicitly acknowledged or not, the team will develop operating norms, a shared vision, and shared goals for the project. After sites have been initiated in stage 3 (discussed below), the multi-site initiating team, under optimal circumstances, will continue to function in several capacities: (1) as a facilitator of communication and knowledge exchange across sites, (2) as a second person action research sub-structure supporting site based implementation, and (3) as an organizer of cross-site comparative research and the collaborative distribution of findings.

*Stages 3 and 4 (Initiating site-based processes).* When the initial planning work has been completed, the next stage of MAR is the initiation of project sites (stage 3). In this stage, the multi-site initiating team makes contact with potential project sites, and moves forward to build relationships with specific organizations. This in turn leads to the formation of site-based project-initiating teams. During this stage, a project begins to take its form as a multi-site initiative.

In stage 4, a collaborative planning process similar to that of the initiating team in stage 2 is undergone by each of the site-based initiating teams: these teams are generally responsible for developing a focus for site-based action research, a plan for initiating and coordinating the process, and a list of potential stakeholders to involve. Important to note here is that the focus of site based action research is determined at the site level and not from above. In the PTAR project, for example, all sites explored how to optimally involve parents and the broader community in school functioning. Although each school took a very different approach, since the basic substantive focus

was the same, each site was able to learn from the findings of other sites, and the researchers were well situated to carry out meaningful comparative research across sites.

*Stages 5 and 6 (Initiating site based action research).* Stage 5 and 6, respectively, involve bringing various identified site-level stakeholders into the process at each of the respective project sites, and initiating site based action research. In the case of the Growing Up in New York City Project, for example, each *site based project-initiating team* recruited groups of local youth into the action research process (stage 5) and implemented action research through a youth-adult partnership (stage 6)<sup>8</sup>.

#### *Feedback between Stages of Implementation*

Since site based action researchers concurrently facilitate cross-site interactions as part of the *multi-site project-initiating team*, a direct connection between site and multi-site level processes is inherent to the MAR implementation process. The details of site based functioning provide a background knowledge from which interactions at the multi-site level can be designed or adjusted by the multi-site team. With the same individuals coordinating multi-site level processes as are facilitating site based action research, there is little danger of a disjointed relationship between levels of a MAR project. The connections between the two site-based processes, and between the site and multi-site levels of a project, are depicted by the arrows on the top right side of Figure 4. Each arrow connects two different levels of project teams, representing the fact that action researchers, and other involved individuals, are moving between and therefore connecting the various layers of MAR implementation in various ways.

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<sup>8</sup> Implementation of action research with youth is an interesting and complex topic in itself. For a discussion of this topic see Camino (2000a, 2000b) and Berg and Schensul (2004).

The model of MAR implementation presented above, when taken as a whole serves to define the coherence and feasibility of the MAR implementation process. Breaking the process down into stages reveals the importance and practical challenges of each stage and therefore serves as a useful tool for the implementation of future initiatives.

### Conclusion

Overall, this paper has presented MAR as a promising new approach to action research, and developed a conceptual framework for understanding its benefits. With respect to the conceptual framework (depicted in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4), the promise of MAR has been shown to be fourfold. Firstly, coordinated multi-site implementation can improve the quality of action research at each involved site through the information sharing, motivational, and support processes that it makes possible (Figure 1, pathways 1, 2, and 3, respectively). Secondly, MAR can expand the overall impact of an initiative through comparative research opportunities, the collaborative distribution of findings, and the attractive image of a multi-site project (Figure 2, pathways 1 and 2). Thirdly, MAR can build toward the implementation of more effective coalition type action research (Figure 3). And lastly, the logical sequence of MAR implementation allows for a coherent, well defined, and feasible implementation process (Figure 4).

Although the benefits of MAR described in this paper are expected to apply broadly across contexts, some contextual considerations are important to note. With respect to organizational context, MAR initiatives can take place in the private and public sector, as well as in the profit and nonprofit domains. The three initiatives discussed in this paper, for example, involve partnerships with private non-profit human service organizations, private for-profit enterprises, and public schools, respectively. Although the conceptual benefits of MAR laid out in Figures 1, 2, and 3



would be expected to apply across all of these contexts, the dynamics of each would likely differ to some extent as a function of organization setting. For example, altruistic motivation (as summarized in Figure 1) could potentially play a stronger role in the nonprofit human services domain, whereas competitive motivation might be of equal strength across all types of organizations. With so few MAR projects having been implemented, however, such contextual distinctions have not yet been made.

Another important contextual consideration in need of further exploration is the geographic scope of sites. In projects where sites are dispersed nationally or internationally, cross-site interactions are limited in the sense that in-person meetings are more difficult and expensive to organize. However, if such barriers can be overcome through the innovative use of electronic communication<sup>9</sup> MAR can create rich opportunities to build connections across state and national boundaries that could significantly advance developments in a wide variety of theoretical and practical domains. As more MAR projects are implemented, the hope will be that comparative studies will define more clearly the effects of various contextual considerations on MAR implementation, and that this growing literature will in turn catalyze the development of increasingly more ambitious MAR initiatives seeking to address the important macro-structural issues of our time.

Although MAR is presented as an approach that can take place across a wide diversity of contexts, it is clear from the model presented that MAR is better suited to some situations than others. Specifically, the conceptual strengths of MAR presented in this paper suggest that MAR is most effective in contexts where the potential participating organizations have a similar interest in developing a particular domain of their functioning. Additionally, since MAR is presented as an approach with the

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<sup>9</sup> There is a growing literature looking at the effective use of electronic communications in the inter-organizational domain (see, e.g., DeSanctis, & Monge, 1999; Dewett, & Jones, 2001; Fulk & DeSanctis, 1995; Rice, 1987).

potential to build relationships across sites, the model also implies that MAR would have a larger positive impact in contexts where the participating organizations are not already highly networked together: or alternatively, where there *is* a need to link similar organizations together.

With the recognition of MAR as a distinct implementation structure, single-site and coalition type action research will both remain essential aspects of action research practice as a whole. The specific contribution of MAR will, as previously stated, be to fill a gap between these two established varieties of action research, and to expand the scope and effectiveness of action research practice. The hope is that this paper will stimulate broader recognition of MAR as a distinct and essential component of action research.

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