

Marianne Kristiansen  
Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen

# Action Research in Organizations

Participation in Change Processes

Verlag Barbara Budrich



Marianne Kristiansen • Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen  
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Participation in Change Processes

Translated from Danish by Asher Ariel

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# Table of Contents

<b>Preface</b> by Werner Fricke.....	<b>9</b>
<b>Foreword</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>Part I: Participation in organizational changes</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	
<b>An example of tensions and dilemmas in organizational action research ‘On the infinitely large in the infinitely small’ in Team Product Support.</b> .....	<b>32</b>
What and why .....	32
1. Tensions between participation as involvement and/or as co-determination .....	34
2. Tensions, positionings and the exercising of power .....	40
3. Experimental change of communication patterns in Team Product Support .....	43
4. Tensions between the smaller project context and larger organizational, societal and global agendas .....	47
5. Tensions in the management of organizational difference through dissensus .....	54
Reflections .....	61
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
<b>A historical view of employee participation: four understandings</b> .....	<b>64</b>
What and why .....	64
1. Participation in working life: a mixed bag .....	65
2. Participation as industrial democracy .....	69
3. Two phases of participation as individualized involvement .....	70
4. Participation as autonomy .....	80
5. Some conclusions .....	81
Reflections .....	81

<b>Part II: An empathetic-critical view of participation in organizational action research in the twentieth century— From self-managing groups to co-generation of practical and theoretical change? .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	
<b>Change-oriented social science: Early organizational action research in the USA in the 1940s.....</b>	<b>84</b>
What and why .....	84
1. Aims and perspectives.....	85
2. The Harwood studies: Action research at Harwood .....	86
3. The Harwood Experiments.....	89
4. Discussion of Lewin’s view of participation .....	93
5. Discussion of Lewin’s theory of change.....	101
6. Lewin’s view of action research: A philosophy of science perspective .....	103
7. Some conclusions.....	107
Reflections .....	108
<b>Chapter 4</b>	
<b>The origin of socio-technical systems thinking— Studies at British coal mines in the 1950s.....</b>	<b>110</b>
What and why .....	110
1. Introduction and aims.....	111
2. The Tavistock group’s experiences before, during and after the Second World War .....	114
3. Initial studies at the Haighmoor mine .....	118
4. Follow-up studies in the Durham collieries .....	129
5. The new paradigm .....	137
6. Socially engaged accompanying research: between research ‘on’ and research ‘with’.....	146
7. Conclusion .....	151
Reflections .....	152
<b>Chapter 5</b>	
<b>Industrial democracy: Experiments in Norway in the 1960s .....</b>	<b>154</b>
What and why .....	154
1. Introduction.....	155
2. Background: the democratic endeavour.....	157
3. Analysis of two field studies.....	163
4. A democratic paradox? .....	174
5. Discussion of NIDP as applied research.....	182
6. Conclusions .....	184
Reflections .....	186

<b>Chapter 6</b>	
<b>Democratic dialogues—Dialogue conferences in Norway and Sweden in the 1980s. . . . .</b>	<b>188</b>
What and why . . . . .	188
1. Background . . . . .	189
2. Aims and structure . . . . .	193
3. The organization of democratic dialogic development processes . . . . .	195
4. An example of democratic dialogue. . . . .	199
5. Participation in the practical dimension of the research process: deliberation and decision . . . . .	207
6. Deliberative democracy and democratic dialogues in organizations. . . . .	210
7. Participation and exclusion . . . . .	218
8. Exclusion of research from democratic dialogues? . . . . .	226
9. Conclusions . . . . .	231
Reflections . . . . .	234
<b>Chapter 7</b>	
<b>Pragmatic action research—Projects in Spanish cooperatives in the latter half of the 1980s . . . . .</b>	<b>238</b>
What and why . . . . .	238
1. Background . . . . .	239
2. Aims and perspectives . . . . .	241
3. A characterization of pragmatic action research . . . . .	243
4. Organization of participatory action research in Fagor . . . . .	251
5. Pragmatic action research as co-generative research . . . . .	259
6. Is pragmatic action research a participatory, conventional, applied and/or phronetic science? . . . . .	271
7. Conclusions . . . . .	276
Reflections . . . . .	278
<b>Chapter 8</b>	
<b>Participation, past and future. . . . .</b>	<b>280</b>
1. Introduction. . . . .	280
2. Differences and similarities between change-oriented social science, STS, NIDP, democratic dialogues and pragmatic action research . . . . .	280
3. Action researchers' exercising of power as silent discourse . . . . .	288
4. Participation in the future? . . . . .	290
5. A child of the Enlightenment? . . . . .	304
<b>Bibliography . . . . .</b>	<b>307</b>
<b>Index. . . . .</b>	<b>327</b>





# Preface

“Action Research in Organizations. Participation in Change Processes”. It is my pleasure and honour to present this book by Marianne Kristiansen and Joergen Bloch-Poulsen. It is an important book for all those who are working scientifically and/or politically and practically on a transformation of society and thus dare more democracy.

Marianne and Joergen do this by means of a systematic-critical analysis of the development of democratic participation through action research. In doing so, they also present a history of action research in organizations in the second half of the last century in Western Europe.

According to their analyses, the following innovations have shaped the development of action research in organizations during this period:

- In the English coal mine Haighmoore, a group of miners together with their local managers combined their experiences with self-managing groups with a new mining technique (long wall method of coal getting) in the late 1940s and thus independently developed a new socio-technical system.
- Following the British model, semi-autonomous groups were introduced in a number of Norwegian companies in the 1960s as part of the “industrial democracy” programme. Action research and participation were limited to single cases, and an extension to a process of democratisation of the economy (industrial democracy) was planned, but failed.
- The concept of democratic dialogue, developed in the Swedish LOM (Leadership, Organization, Co-determination) programme in the 1970s and 1980s, is regarded as a major innovation in the theoretical and practical development of action research. The previous institutional conception of participation is being replaced by a processual understanding: participation in the form of taking part in democratic dialogues is an open, evolving process.
- Finally, the concept of participatory action research: employees are to be involved more than before in the development of theoretical and practical knowledge in the research process. (“co-generative research”).

The authors consistently analyse the concepts mentioned above with regard to the difference between claim (espoused values) and actual practice. A cen-

tral question here is to what extent the presence of power in all participatory relations hinders the realisation of the respective claim of the concepts. “Participation is the enactment of power”, the authors pointedly express this issue; they cite as examples: The introduction of the semi-autonomous groups in the Norwegian programme “industrial democracy” is based on a decision of the labour market parties and action researchers; the employees were not asked about their willingness to participate or about alternative ideas. Correspondingly, they offered strong resistance to the plans in the beginning, as the two action researchers Emery and Thorsrud openly report. What the authors criticise about the concept of democratic dialogue is that its rules and criteria were formulated by the researchers – albeit, as they argue, based on their experience in participation processes. Finally, the authors also encounter the exercise of power, limiting and sometimes preventing the participation of workers, in the reports on the co-generative Mondragon projects in Northern Spain: The “research team” steering the action research process includes not only the researchers but above all the personnel managers of the companies. The authors eventually express doubts about the claim of “co-generative research”; they rightly emphasise that this claim is the Achilles’ heel of action research, because it usually cannot be fulfilled through equal cooperation between researchers and practical actors in the research process.

The authors’ criticism – often decisive and fundamental, but never arrogant or dogmatic – is based on their many years of research experience, which they have documented in their book “Midwifery and Dialogue in Organizations”, published in 2005, and in numerous publications in specialist journals (*International Journal of Action Research*, *Action Research Journal*). There they describe their encounters with power structures in dialogues; impressive is the high degree of reflection and self-criticism as well as their sensitivity in dealing with personal and structural power in the dialogues. The source of their reflective approach to practical actors is their appreciation of the employees’ creative potential. In their above-mentioned book, they compare the work of the action researcher with that of an obstetrician: In action research it is important to discover and bring to light the creative abilities of the workers without dominating them by the presumptuous power of scientific knowledge.\*

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\* As the above-mentioned example of the socio-technical system in the mining company, which was developed independently by miners and local management, shows, the creative power of the workers sometimes comes to light without the involvement of action research. „I went into

It is no exaggeration to say that the longstanding research work of the two authors is characterised by their respect for the employees' need for independence, recognition and democratic participation. This respect is the source of the demanding requirements for future action researchers formulated in the final chapter of the book. Marianne and Joergen demand a higher degree of self-reflection from future action researchers. So far, they found that action researchers too seldom reflect on their handling of personal and structural power in participation processes. Moreover, they often fail to actually practice the equivalence of scientific and practical knowledge, i.e. to avoid a dominant position in the dialogue process. Finally, the authors suggest that action researchers should in future make their methods, the scientific basis of their work and their handling of power in participation processes the subject of dialogues with actors in practice. Only then will dialogues take place on an equal footing. The book concludes that this could improve both the theory and practice of action research.

I do agree. In addition, I would like to add a few remarks on the future of action research, to which this book has also inspired me.

In their research practice, Marianne and Joergen have developed a great sensitivity for the presence and impact of power in participation and dialogue processes. They have focused on the micro-level of relationships between project actors in corporate power structures. In this respect, their work is not different from the Western European action research of past decades. However, power, especially structural power, also exists at the societal level. Just think of the power of the big digital companies. Action research wants to enable people to (co-)shape their world, their working conditions and living conditions in a self-determined way by discovering, promoting and activating their often hidden, unused, because suppressed, abilities. The eminent action researcher Björn Gustavsen already pointed out at the end of the last century that this will only succeed in the future if action research overcomes the limitation to single cases. How can this be achieved?

In Latin America, participatory action research in the tradition of Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals Borda and Alfonso Torres Carrillo practices cooperation with social movements, such as in Colombia, and with broad sections of the population (such as the participatory budgets movement in Brazil, especially

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the mine and came back as a different person," commented Eric Trist, director of the Tavistock Institute, on his reaction to the surprising discovery

in Porto Alegre). In Western Europe, Extinction Rebellion and the movement "Fridays for Future" are among the possible cooperation partners, initially at local/regional level. Björn Gustavsen has tried to initiate a social movement of participatory democracy with the funds of the Swedish Action Research Programme (LOM); this has not succeeded. But it is certain that action research can only effectively promote the self-determination of people in business and society today if it overcomes the limitations of the single-case approach in view of the increasing complexity and anonymity of social and economic relations (platform society and its algorithms, global value chains). In the publications of the above-mentioned and other authors from Latin America, there are many suggestions for organising cooperation with social movements.

If this is also successful in Western Europe, the experience of seventy years of action research and participation in corporate transformation processes will be preserved and further developed in an expanded concept of action research. With their systematic-critical analysis, Marianne Kristiansen and Joergen Bloch-Poulsen have created an important prerequisite for this. One can build on this; there is much in the history of social science.

I wish their book many interested readers. It is easy to read, very stimulating, full of ideas and grown from a rich research experience.

Werner Fricke, August 2020

# Foreword

## Involvement and participation

We live in a world of constant change. Changes are taking place in citizens' relationship to politicians and public authorities, in employees' relationship to their managers, in patients' relationship to doctors and nurses, in 'ordinary people's' relationship to experts, in children's relationship to their parents, in pupils' and students' relationship to their teachers—and so on.

'You have to learn that everyone has something to contribute', an employee at the Danish company Danfoss told us during a change process. There seems to be a growing perception that the best results can be achieved in change processes if all relevant parties have influence. One party—the politician, the civil servant, the manager, the doctor, the expert, the parent or the teacher—no longer has an automatic monopoly on the truth or on the right solution. Expressions such as 'involvement', 'participation', 'co-creation', 'co-production', 'co-generation' and 'partnerships' are therefore being used more and more. In the political decision-making process, one speaks of governance; in international development, of involvement; in organizations, of employee participation. Private companies co-create new products together with their customers. Public-sector institutions co-produce new welfare services together with citizens. Partnerships are set up straddling public-sector and private-sector organizations; and so on.

We have chosen to use the relatively neutral term 'participation' as a catch-all designation for all of these endeavours. The book asks what it means to participate in change processes and examines what is contained in the prefix 'co-'. Does it mean that all relevant parties are equal? Is everyone included? Who decides who the relevant parties are? Are the processes co-generated? This is not the first time that buzzwords such as involvement, participation, co-production and democratization have been on the agenda. They have been there since the Second World War in areas such as action research, which combines research, participation and action.

We ourselves have encountered an interest in involvement in a variety of settings. In June 2015, Jørgen gave a presentation at a conference on 'Participatory Action Research: A Tribute to Orlando Fals-Borda' (Investigación Acción Participativa. Homenaje a Orlando Fals-Borda) in Bogotá, Colombia. His

problematization of what is contained in the prefix ‘co-’ prompted similar assessments from participants—whether they were working participatorily with street children in Colombia, or with involvement of university students in Argentina, or with citizen involvement in Brazil. Across these different contexts, we discussed examples of how involvement might create hierarchies between project participants.

In December 2014, Marianne and a group of colleagues from the Dialogic Communication research group at Roskilde University, Denmark held a PhD course on ‘Dialogic Communication, Participation and Collaboration in Research’. Here, she found PhD students from a number of universities engaging with participation and involvement in a broad spectrum of subject areas and from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives. One topic discussed on the course was how participation is understood in research projects. Is it just a means to an end and a method of inquiry, or a positive, pre-set goal? Can the other—the citizen, the employee, the user, the child or the pupil—participate in research processes otherwise than as a respondent or informant? Does it make sense to speak of the other as a co-investigator or co-researcher?

These and other experiences suggest that there is a growing need to discuss what participation in change processes means in many fields, both in Denmark and abroad. The book takes a historical perspective. It focuses on certain change processes that took place in organizations in the latter half of the twentieth century in the USA and Europe (the UK, Norway, Sweden and Spain). Those processes were characterized by concepts such as participation, democracy, dialogue, involvement and empowerment. The change processes were also action research processes in which managers, workers, researchers and other stakeholders together attempted to bring about practical improvements in the organization and a better theoretical understanding of those changes.

We have striven to use the original concepts when discussing historical change processes. Participation, in particular, is much used in action research within organizations. At the same time, we believe that experiences from that time are relevant today outside organizations, too, wherever concepts like involvement or partnership are used.

We believe there is much to be learned from these participatory processes, which we hope can make us wiser about some of the challenges and dilemmas facing us today when we involve others or become involved in change processes. Is involvement about efficiency and/or democratization? Is it just a new management tool? Must one just participate as a pawn in the researcher’s ex-

periment? Can different types of knowledge be involved in more equal ways that can create new shared understandings, more sustainable outcomes, etc.?

We have ourselves worked as action researchers in private and public sector organizations over the last 25 years. In that sense, therefore, we are writing about our predecessors or colleagues. The book is based on many of their reports, articles and books. We have striven to read them in a spirit of empathetic criticism. We attempt both to understand them on their own terms and to ask critical questions. We are not in possession of the correct interpretation of participation in organizational change processes.

It is our hope that the book can be read by anyone interested in change processes from a theoretical and/or practical point of view. The book addresses two kinds of reader. The first group consists of students and scholars in universities and colleges. The book is written for senior undergraduates, for postgraduate (master's and doctoral) students and for scholars at universities, colleges and other higher educational institutions across the social sciences and humanities who are engaged or interested in collaborative research dealing with change processes in general and action research in particular. In the second group are persons outside academia working practically with change processes as professionals, citizens, NGO members etc. who try to involve relevant parties.

We would also like to thank: the students we have taught at various Danish universities since the early 1970s for their critical dialogues with us; the employees and managers we have collaborated with as action researchers since the mid-1990s; our colleagues in the SEAL (Social Exclusion and Learning) research group at the Institute for Learning and Philosophy, Aalborg University Copenhagen for constructive comments on the structure of several chapters of the book; our colleagues in the Dialogic Communication research group at Roskilde University, Denmark, who provided valuable critical feedback on drafts of several chapters; our colleagues at the Institute for Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University Copenhagen; and to our Latin American colleagues in the international Participatory Action Research network centred on the International Journal of Action Research.

Thank you to the staff of the Rare Material Room at the Wellcome Library, London, which houses the archive of the Tavistock Institute. The library was founded by the aptly named Henry Wellcome. We grew fond of the library's credo, which reads like this:



Wellcome.

We're not your ordinary museum and library. We're different.

We're about what it means to be human. And that's a question with 7.5 billion answers and counting—including yours.

Here, you can unleash your curiosity. And it's free! So come on in and start asking questions.

Lastly, a big thank-you to our translator Asher Ariel, Danish-English.com Translation Service, for a brilliant translation and co-operation, and to our colleague, associate professor, Ph.D. and research manager, Gorm Larsen at the Institute of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University, Cph, who has helped to fund the translation of the book into English.

# Introduction

## A participatory turn?

In the last three decades, a trend has been observable in many areas, both in Denmark and internationally. It seems to be more and more widely accepted that citizens, users, customers, employees etc. should not simply be told what to do, what is to happen to them or what is best for them. They should be involved to a greater extent. They should be asked, have co-influence or be outright participants in decisions. It is not just a matter of dignity, of people having as much influence as possible over their own lives. It is also a matter of the most durable results being those achievable through dialogue. Perhaps this trend is a new paradigm—a new fundamental understanding, in other words? The terms most frequently used to denote this trend include participation, involvement, democratization and co-generation.

We are not blind to the fact that there are many examples of the opposite (Zuboff, 2019), but the involvement of users, citizens, customers, patients, employees, pupils, local communities and population groups in third-world countries has come onto the agenda (Carpentier, 2011; Cornwall, 2011; Wilkinson, Gollan, Marchington & Lewin, 2010). One speaks of public or participatory governance (Fischer, 2009; Gaventa, 2001; Osmani, 2001) or of citizen assemblies (OECD, 2020). This can encompass citizens' influence on the local or regional economy (participatory budgeting) (Streck, 2014; Waglé & Shah, 2003). It can mean participatory urban planning (Society for Participatory Research in Asia, 2012), participation in environmental issues (Coenen, 2010) or co-production of welfare services, particularly in the social field (Agger & Tortzen, 2015; Carr, 2007; Durose, Justice & Skelcher, 2013; Tortzen, 2017). Public-private partnerships are being set up concerning collaboration between public institutions and private companies (Bovaird, 2004). There also seems to be a greater tendency for people to be involved as customers, creating products and services jointly with companies. This is often described as co-creation (Gouillart, 2014).

People are also increasingly becoming involved as users—of information technology (participatory design programming) (Sanoff, 2000), for example, or of the health service (Jønsson, Nyborg, Pedersen, Pedersen, Wandel, & Freil, 2013; Lindell, 2017); as users or co-creators of theatrical performances

(participatory theatre) (Boon & Plastow, 2004), museum visits (Bradbourne, 1998) and much more.

In international development work, involvement of local stakeholders has been going on since the 1990s (Chambers, 1995; Cornwall, 2014; Hickey & Mohan, 2004). This can be seen, for example, in the work of the World Bank (Mosse, 2001).

In research, there is a growing trend in many areas for the people whose situation is being researched to participate in the research process. One speaks of participatory action research (Whyte, 1991), participatory learning and action (Pretty, Guijt, Thompson, & Scoones, 1995), participatory evaluation (Estrella & Gaventa, 1998) etc.

Participation has become a buzzword for any research that ventures out of the ivory tower (Chambers, 1995; Phillips, 2011; Thorpe, 2010). Mode II research, with its striving for involvement and practical results, now seems to have become a real complement to the more traditional and distanced Mode I research (Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons, 2001). There seems to be an effort to conduct research ‘with’ rather than ‘on’—and not just among researchers (Heron & Reason, 2001, 2008; Phillips, Kristiansen, Vehviläinen & Gunnarsson, 2013), but also in political quarters (European Research Advisory Board, 2007; Ministry of Science, Technology and Development, 2003). The participatory trend thus seems also to have spread to research policy (Cohen, McAuley & Duberley, 2001; Jørgensen, 2008). This development has been termed the ‘collaborative’ (Gershon, 2009) or ‘participatory’ (Jasanoff, 2003) turn.

The trend seems to have become so widespread that some are sounding an outright warning, speaking of the danger of a participatory tyranny or nightmare (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Miessen, 2011).

## **What is participation in organizational change processes?**

We hope this book can be an inspiration to anyone working with change processes who wants to take the plunge into increased involvement, both practically and theoretically. The book therefore examines what participation in change processes means and how it is practised. The book illuminates this question via a historical investigation of organizational action research processes in the twentieth century. It focuses on participation in both the practical and the theoretical dimension of the processes. ‘Organizational’ means that the change processes examined in the book are taking place at workplaces.

‘Action research’ in organizations means, ideally, that employees, managers, researchers and other stakeholders together organize certain change processes and seek to bring about the desired practical improvements in the organization and thereby a better theoretical understanding as well. Action research, then, is ideally a special kind of science. It is not about explaining or interpreting, not about speaking, thinking and writing about reality, not about running courses for practitioners or disseminating research results, but about helping to bring about changes. Kurt Lewin is often said to be the father of action research. He emphasizes that one gains knowledge about an organization when one starts to change it. Action research is thus an integrated change and research process.

How does participation take place in such an action research process? The book presents a number of different understandings. Participation can mean:

1. that the researchers move their laboratories out into the field, i.e. into the organizations, and apply predetermined theories and methods in the experiments they conduct with their new partners;
2. that employees and managers bring about changes that the researchers follow and seek to understand;
3. that the researchers act as experts, advising employees and managers how to organize their work;
4. that the researchers act as facilitators for a number of organizational processes that managers and employees choose to initiate in their organizations;
5. that managers, employees and researchers co-produce/co-generate a number of practical and theoretical results on the basis of their different knowledge and interests.

The first conception could be seen as an example of applied research in which the researchers test theories and methods they have developed beforehand, e.g. the theory that changes in the direction of increased participation reduce sickness absence and staff turnover. The second conception could be seen as an example of ‘accompanying research’ in which the researchers study the changes being undertaken by the employees themselves. The third conception, too, could be seen as an example of applied research in which the researchers give advice on the others’ work organization—that participation means they must introduce self-managing groups, for example. The fourth could be seen as a more processual understanding in which participation entails employees and

managers deciding together what is best for the organization, while the researchers take a more distant/facilitating role. The fifth conception could be seen as an understanding of participation as co-production/co-generation of new practical and theoretical knowledge with employees and managers taking part as co-researchers.

The book presents these five understandings particularly, but it is not intended as advocating any one of them over the others. Our own projects have included elements of all the understandings to varying degrees, both from one project to another, but also within the individual project. At the same time, we want, here at the outset, to spell out our own conception of participation in action research, as it will inevitably affect our ongoing analysis of others' conceptions. We want to emphasize that this is our ideal understanding, as practice is complex and always seems to entail participatory dilemmas and paradoxes.

## **What is action research in organizations?**

The point of departure for our ideal understanding of action research is Habermas's (1968) distinction between three scientific knowledge interests. The natural science knowledge interest is technical-rational in the sense that it aims to produce explanations of the type 'if x, then y'. In the humanities, the knowledge interest is hermeneutic-practical in that it seeks to produce interpretations of the meanings of people's actions and texts. Critical social science seeks to produce emancipation or changes; that is, to improve our insight into the fact that what we perhaps take for granted is merely human-made and serves particular interests. History is rarely nature.

For us, action research is a critical social science. This means that action research is distinct from accompanying research. Accompanying research, in an organizational context, means that the employees and managers in one entity or another decide on some changes and bring them about while the researchers look on. Accompanying research thus has an explanatory or interpretive character. It is research *on* managers and employees (Heron & Reason, 2001). On the other hand, as we will show in Chapter 4, accompanying research can be a part of action research.

Nor, ideally, is action research in our view merely applied research, where researchers bring with them an already-developed theory and method which they apply in practice. Action research is an ongoing dialogue between practice

and theory that should preferably develop both. As we will show in Chapter 5, however, applied research may be a part of action research.

We understand action research as research with managers and employees in organizations. The research process does not proceed alongside the change process. The two processes are integrated. Employees, managers and researchers each contribute skills and interests. They work together to see whether they can manage to create a better practice in the organization—a practice that they have all, to one extent or another, been involved in determining and co-producing. This is the practical dimension of the action research process.

There should ideally emerge a better theoretical understanding, one that all parties have been involved in determining and co-producing. This is the theoretical dimension of action research.

The crucial question raised in the book is what participation in the practical and theoretical dimensions of the action research process comprises. As we shall see in the chapters to follow, there are many answers to this, depending on the historical setting and the complex contexts in which different change and research processes play out.

Employees, managers and researchers are not equal. Employees and managers know more about their workplace than we as outside researchers do; we, on the other hand, usually know more about research than they do. We are not co-engineers, in the case of a technical organization, nor do we regard them as co-researchers. We once asked permission to see the test laboratory at a high-technology company we were collaborating with. We hoped to learn a bit more about their work. When we entered the lab, which was developed by highly qualified software engineers, we were unable to get our bearings and understood absolutely nothing. A similar thing happened with regard to passport and driving licence staff in a municipality, where we were all at sea with their ruleset. We collaborate as professionals, each with our different skills. We add this as the book's sixth view of participation.

Across the six conceptions, there seems to be an agreement that action research in organizations, or organizational action research, ideally means two things. Managers, employees, researchers and other stakeholders (if any) together decide to initiate a change and research process in the organization(s). Together, they continually evaluate results and study the conditions for bringing about the desired changes or improvements. Ideally, then, organizational action research is the antithesis of organizational changes brought in over the

heads of the employees, and perhaps of local management too, with no research involved.

An increasing number of managers and employees are conducting action research in their own organizations (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). This book is concerned only with action research with outside researchers.

## **Participation, involvement, co-generation or co-creation?**

In a variety of contexts, though, one might ask whether critics have a point when they assert that participation is just a kind of democratic milking-parlour music to accompany change processes, because in reality those processes follow the principle of ‘I manage, you participate’ (Saxena, 2011). In the book, we argue that it is more complex than that.

We choose ‘participation’ as our basic term not only because it is the predominant term in action research, but also because the term can be said to span the gamut of meanings from taking part in something planned by others to having co-determination (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2016).

‘Participation’ denotes some people doing something in relation to others. There are some people who are involving others. This reflects one of our points about organizational action research: it is usually actors such as an employers’ association, a trade union, local management and/or researchers who involve the employees. We have therefore decided against ‘co-creation’ and ‘co-production’, as these could connote a joint initiative. Moreover, ‘co-production’ as a term is historically associated in Denmark with the public sector, especially the production of welfare services (Agger & Lund, 2017; Tortzen, 2017). Similarly, ‘co-creation’ is associated with the company-customer relationship.

‘Participation’, then, entails some people taking the initiative for the change process by involving others. However, it does not necessarily mean that the process proceeds only on the first party’s terms or that it leads only to results that benefit that party. Saxena’s critique could be interpreted like this. As we will show in the book, action research processes tread a fine line between efficiency improvement and humanization, between the different parties’ divergent and coincident interests.

This is also why we have rejected ‘involvement’ as our basic term, since in action research it seems primarily to be understood as a management tool, in the same way as ‘empowerment’ is (Greenwood & Levin, 1998).

## **How can we understand participation in the history of organizational action research?**

We have arrived at seven fundamental perspectives on participation. They arose in an interplay between practice and theory in organizational action research projects before and during the writing of this book. We understand them as an outline for a theory of involvement in change processes generally, based on a study of participation in action research in organizations. Some of these perspectives have been published previously (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017a, 2017b).

1. Historically, participation has meant anything from simply taking part to co-determination and self-determination by local employees and managers. There has been more co-determination in some projects than others.
2. Participation is an emergent process, not a once-and-for-all template. It cannot be set out in advance. Participation changes during individual projects.
3. Participation is always pre-integrated into complex contexts or systems that interact with individual projects in unpredictable ways.
4. Participation is the exercising of power in tensions between parties with different interests and knowledge. There are no power-free zones or safe spaces in organizational action research.
5. Participation unfolds in the tension field between a collaborative process and a researcher- and management-led one.
6. Participation unfolds in the tension field between consensus and dissensus, between development through a focus on similarities and agreement and/or a focus on differences and disagreements.
7. Participation unfolds in the tension field between efficiency improvement, humanization and democratization, i.e. between economics, psychology, ethics and politics.

It is our hypothesis that these perspectives apply to participation or involvement in all types of change process, not only to participation in organizational action research. We are indebted to many theorists, organizational action researchers and colleagues who have contributed directly or indirectly to the formulation of the seven perspectives. We shall return to some of them in the course of the book, but for now we want to mention in particular: Lewin



(1947a, 1947b), for his social psychology-based view that employees' reactions can be understood in relation to environmental factors such as pressure of work and management (not necessarily on the basis of the employee as a person); Trist (Trist & Murray, 1990; Fox, 1990), for his intuitive understanding of the importance of self-managing groups; Thorsrud (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a), for his frank description of the pitfalls of participation; Freire (1970), for his distinction between processes conducted on people's behalf and those that they conduct themselves; Heron and Reason (2001), for their corresponding distinction between 'research on' and 'research with'; Cornwall (2011) for her distinction between 'voice' and 'choice', between having a voice and taking part in decisions; Greenwood and Levin (1998) for their distinction between empowerment (aiming for economic efficiency) and participation (aiming for democratization); Fricke for his distinction between instrumental and democratic participation (2013); Marx (1968) for his thesis that the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, whereas the point is to change it; Habermas (1968) for his distinction between explanation, interpretation and emancipation as three scientific knowledge interests; and Foucault (2000) for his theory of the presence of power in all relations.

## **How can we write about history?**

This book shows that involvement and participation are not a new phenomenon. It investigates how involvement and participation are done in organizational action research in five countries—the USA, the UK, Norway, Sweden and Spain—in the second half of the twentieth century, plus one project in Denmark around 2010. Can action researchers and others working with change processes today learn something by taking a detour and studying the history of that time? We can at least see that it is not the first time that dilemmas, tensions and paradoxes have been on the agenda where participation is concerned.

The action research approaches and projects discussed in Part II take place between 1940 and 2000. We have chosen to write about particular action research approaches and projects for several reasons. These are approaches that have been significant in the history of theory and that have been discussed internationally among action researchers. The projects are internationally known. We therefore see them as representative of the approaches developed in organizational action research in the twentieth century.

Along the way, we considered how we as action researchers study and write about colleagues who were developing organizational action research in the second half of the twentieth century. The fact is that participation is not only about others. It is also about how we as authors contribute to shaping a particular understanding of the organizational action research of that time. It implies questions about power (Bryld, 2017). What, and who, is included or excluded? What empirical documentation underpins our interpretations? How is the interplay between past and present to be understood? And so on. Below, we present two methodological considerations.

### ***An empathetic-critical approach***

The first consideration concerns our view of history. We have sought to tread a line between a historical view and a critical, present-day view of participation in organizational action research. On the one hand, we seek to interpret experiments, theories and methods developed in five different countries in relation to their times and the context in which they arose. On the other, we ask critical questions about the underlying assumptions in the different approaches and our own way of understanding them. We therefore describe the methodology of the book as an empathetic-critical approach. The aim of this approach is to get closer to an understanding of the complexity of the participatory experiments and processes we describe in the individual chapters.

Our understanding of interpretation is inspired by Gadamer's (1960) philosophical hermeneutics, which is concerned with the relationship between the interpreter and the historical context in the field between familiarity and otherness. Unlike Gadamer, we use the concept of empathy. We understand empathy as inhabiting the other(s) on the basis of their own perspectives and the age that shaped them, while we, as readers of history, stay in our own, present-day shoes. Empathy is therefore not about identification, but about inhabiting the other(s) 'as if' we were them, while well aware that we never will be. Our conception is inspired by Carl Rogers (1957, 1962). He developed his understanding in a therapeutic context through a humanistic approach based on the psychology of the individual. In contrast to Rogers, we use empathy to understand participation in organizational action research in relation to the contemporary historical context in organizations and societies.

Critique is about maintaining a distance from history and continually asking fundamental questions. Critique does not mean that we apply a predetermined critical theory rooted in the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, 1937).

Critique means that we systematically question underlying assumptions—others' and our own—such as: what was the extent of employees' participation in the experiments? Could they refuse to participate? Could employees have an influence on, and make decisions in, the research processes? Who decided who was to be included in the research process or excluded from it? How did the projects practise relations between researchers and collaborative partners?

We are writing about the work of other action researchers, about some of the challenges they grappled with and that later became ours, too. However, we have not just taken on their challenges. From a history of ideas point of view, the concepts, methods and theories developed in that period have also had a history of effect (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) in our own work. Thus, we share Gadamer's (1960) hypothesis that the fusion of horizons is also about understanding being in some sense recognition. At the same time, we believe that, through this, we can learn from history. It becomes possible, for example, to relativize current, apparently new participatory concepts and approaches, because they appear in some sense as repetitions when viewed within a larger historical context. It also becomes possible to see something that our colleagues were not themselves aware of, perhaps because they lived at a different point in history.

Conversely, it means that the empathetic-critical approach becomes a balancing act. In particular, it has required us to transcend our own self-referentiality and not to judge or interpret the past by modern standards (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2004). We therefore decided not to write a book pointing out contradictions between what our predecessors said and what they did. Nor would we write a prescriptive book pointing out what they 'ought to have done' or 'should have done'. In this way, we have endeavoured to prevent our critique from becoming negatively judgemental and fault-finding in nature. This was not always easy, partly because we came up against our own inner judges.

### ***What sources are available?***

The second consideration concerns the sources available. All the chapters in the book describe a number of experiments in order to examine how participation and change processes are done in practice. Rather than simply recount or describe the experiments, then, the book would ideally also show them and document them. This proved difficult, because only to a very limited extent did organizational action research in the twentieth century document how par-

participation in the experiments was carried out. This applies to both practical and theoretical processes.

The book therefore settles on a methodological compromise. We first attempt to describe experiments, methods and theories in our colleagues' own words. On that basis, we ask some basic questions and make a number of interpretations which, had it been possible, we would have liked to anchor even more deeply in concrete empirical analyses of processes. In methodological terms, we have striven to make the presentation of the others, and our interpretation of them, transparent.

## **How the book is structured**

The book is structured chronologically. It describes a journey through the history of twentieth-century organizational action research, from its early beginnings in the USA of the 1940s to a more recent project in Spain around 1990. All chapters describe projects in the USA and Europe. All focus on participation in the practical and theoretical dimensions of action research processes. Thus, we have chosen to omit projects outside Europe and the USA. Nor does the book address special areas such as schools or the health service, or special perspectives such as gender or ethnicity.

The focus of the book is thus relatively narrow, but also more general. Over the chapters, it describes how different historical approaches understand action research and do participation in practice and in theory. The individual chapters thus address recurrent questions such as: how is the relationship between action, research and participation understood? How is participation practised? How do researchers and partners collaborate? What overall understanding of action research emerges? Taken together, the chapters show action researchers, working across national boundaries and through networks, developing the view of action research in organizations, from social psychology via systems theory to theories of communication and co-production.

## **Part and chapter overview**

The book is in two parts. Part I (Chapters 1–2) is about employee participation now and in the past. Part II (Chapters 3–7) provides an empathetic-critical view of participation in organizational action research in the twentieth century. The chapters are written so that they can be read separately. This means

that there will be some repetitions if one chooses to read them all. There is a summary of the differences and similarities between the various approaches in Chapter 8.

Chapter 1 provides ‘An example of tensions and dilemmas in organizational action research’. It describes a collaboration we undertook with Team Product Support at Danfoss Solar Inverters (DSI) in Sønderborg, Denmark from 2008 to 2010. The chapter is subtitled ‘On the infinitely large in the infinitely small’, because it links the little story in the team with the big story in the contexts that impinged on the project along the way. This happened in the organization when the management introduced crisis management; in society when the financial crisis hit and DSI struggled to survive; and in global relationships when Chinese sub-suppliers contributed to a temporary slowdown in production. By linking the large and small stories, the chapter presents the book’s seven perspectives on participation.

Chapter 2 sets out ‘A historical view of employee participation’. It describes the development of the ‘employee participation’ concept in Europe and shows that participation is also topical in organization theory.

Chapter 3, ‘Change-oriented social science’, concerns what are known as the Harwood experiments (1939–1947) at a textile factory in Virginia, USA. The experiments show that present-day questions about participation and efficiency are not new. They have been on the agenda since Lewin and colleagues began investigating whether it was possible to raise efficiency at Harwood by experimenting with participatory and democratic management and partially self-managing groups.

Chapter 4, ‘The origin of socio-technical systems thinking’, looks at the way socio-technical systems (STS) thinking was developed in connection with studies of British coal mines carried out from the late 1940s to the late 1950s by Trist and other researchers from the Tavistock Institute in London. STS combines the miners’ re-creation of partially self-managing groups with accompanying research on their organization. Participation is thus primarily about the practical dimension, the miners’ co-determination in day-to-day production. STS continues Lewin’s socio-psychological research on self-managing groups in organizations, and extends it with a technical perspective. It focuses on the interplay between the socio-psychological and technological systems.

Chapter 5, ‘Industrial democracy: Experiments in Norway’, deals with a national organizational development project focusing on the development of industrial democracy in Norway in the 1960s. It was created through collabo-

ration between the Norwegian Government, the Norwegian employers' association, the Norwegian labour organization and researchers affiliated to the newly established Work Research Institute (WRI) in Oslo, directed by Einar Thorsrud. The project, the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project (NIDP), was inspired by the socio-technical analysis developed by Tavistock researchers, who also took part in the project. Across projects, the NIDP practised action research as applied research on the basis of predetermined hypotheses about the connection between increased influence, positivity and democracy.

Chapter 6, 'Democratic dialogues: Dialogue conferences in Norway and Sweden', examines national organizational development projects in Norway and Sweden from the early 1980s. These were carried out especially by researchers associated with the WRI and Swedish universities—researchers such as Bjørn Gustavsen, who was also associated with the Centre for Working Life (Arbetslivscentrum) in Stockholm. Industrial democracy was no longer understood to mean introducing a new organization of work in the form of partially self-managing groups. Industrial democracy came to mean that the employees took part in a special change process that essentially consisted of democratic dialogues in which they themselves would help to define problems, goals and actions in the development of their organization. Democratic dialogues thus adopted, not a structural, but a processual communication perspective. Democratic dialogues initially built on Habermas's understanding of dialogue. The chapter discusses whether such an understanding is applicable in an organizational context and what level of participation is available to employees and local managers in the practical and theoretical dimensions of action research.

Chapter 7, 'Pragmatic action research', presents an approach developed by Greenwood and Levin. In contrast to STS, action research is not seen as a combination of action and research, i.e. of practical changes and theoretical innovations, but as a combination of action, research and participation. Employees, managers and action researchers create the research process and its results together on the basis of their different interests and knowledge, and they contribute to the solution of complex problems—both practically and theoretically. The approach is therefore known as co-generative research. The chapter examines and discusses the meaning of the prefix 'co-'. What is involved in wanting to co-generate a new practice in a democratic way and at the same time to generate valid theoretical knowledge? How do managers and employees become co-researchers? The particular case examined is a project in cooperatives in northern Spain in the late 1980s.

Chapter 8, 'Participation, past and future', summarizes the book's conclusions about participation in organizational action research in the twentieth century. Among other things, it deals with tensions between efficiency improvement and humanization, between consensus and dissensus, between democratization and management—and researcher-driven projects. The chapter presents a number of practical and theoretical challenges that one may notice when seeking to generate changes through participation.

## **The structure of the individual chapters**

All chapters of the book attempt to follow this structure:

First, we provide an overview of what the chapter is about. This is followed by some current examples showing why the chapter is relevant today.

Next come the aims of the chapter and its overall perspectives on the approach that it examines. An example of an organizational action research project within the approach in question is then described.

We then discuss how participation is done in practice and in theory. What part do employees and researchers play in this process? Who, for example, has voice and choice?

This is followed by a discussion in philosophy of science terms of how action research is understood within the individual approaches. Are we dealing with more traditional qualitative research, with applied research, with participation—or something else?

The following section concludes the whole chapter.

The last section is about our reflections. Here, we question our own interpretations, methods and reading. Do they hold water? Why/why not?

At the end of the book is a list of references to the literature cited, but also to other important literature about the approach not cited in the chapters but to which we wish to draw attention.

**Part I:  
Participation in  
organizational changes**



# **Chapter 1**

## **An example of tensions and dilemmas in organizational action research**

### **‘On the infinitely large in the infinitely small’ in Team Product Support**

#### **What and why**

This chapter tells a story about Team Product Support. This was one of the teams we collaborated with at Danfoss Solar Inverters (DSI) in Sønderborg, Denmark from 2008 to 2010, as part of an action research project on ‘Innovation and Involvement through Strengthening of Dialogue in Modern Team Organizations’. A total of 18 teams were involved in the project, which also included teams from Silkeborg Municipality’s Citizen Service and CSC (Computer Sciences Corporation) in Copenhagen. The project was funded by the Danish Council for Technology and Innovation, Ministry of Science.

Team Product Support consisted of eight staff and a team leader. The team was part of the Supply Chain section in the production department. DSI was then a small and relatively newly established high-technology company producing inverters for solar cell systems for a global market. The company is owned by the Danfoss Group, a Danish international company producing thermostats among other things. When we began collaborating with Team Product Support, the team was relatively new. It consisted of process specialists working on test principles. They were responsible for test equipment, parts lists, mechanics drawings and cell construction in the production department; they had many interfaces, particularly with the development department.

This chapter follows our collaboration with Team Product Support over one year. It relates how the collaboration evolved through a network of tensions that are collectively formulated in the book’s seven interlinked perspectives on participation (see Introduction). Among other things, these tensions concern the way organizational action research is embedded in larger systems, ranging from the small action research context in the team to the organization, society and the global economy. Thus, the narrative of the little Team Product Support story also becomes a story about more general tensions and challeng-

es in action research in organizations. For this reason, taking inspiration from the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes, we have subtitled the chapter ‘On the infinitely large in the infinitely small’—although Brandes was writing in the nineteenth century about Shakespeare, not about organizations in the twenty-first.

The chapter, then, attempts to document how participation manifests itself in the interaction between all the partners involved as a network of tensions and dilemmas, as encapsulated in the book’s seven participation perspectives. Why is this relevant to readers?

As action researchers, we have found it to be a challenge that we are part of the process and therefore close to our empirical material. It has often been a case of understanding the process backwards, i.e. not until afterwards. At those times, it was helpful for us to read specific analyses of examples from similar projects. We therefore hope that the story of Team Product Support can resonate with readers who have encountered or are encountering challenges when practising participation.

## **Structure**

The chapter is structured chronologically and divided into five sections.

The first two sections focus on the beginning of the action research project. They recount the tensions between the management team, Team Product Support and the action researchers, each of whom in their different ways exercise power and seek to set the agenda. Section 1 shows how participation unfolds in the form of tensions between involvement and co-determination, thus illustrating the book’s first perspective: that participation has many different meanings. Section 2 describes a process involving tensions between top-down implementation and dialogic bottom-up endeavours. It points, among other things, to the book’s fourth perspective: that participation manifests itself as tensions between different interests, all of which exercise power in the action research process.

The third section focuses on the smaller intra-team context, in which we and Team Product Support work together to study and improve the team’s meeting culture.

The fourth section unpacks the book’s third perspective: that the organizational action research process cannot be understood by looking at a so-called self-managing team such as Team Product Support in isolation. The process is

already embedded in bigger organizational, societal and global systems that impinge on the local, day-to-day reality of the team and the action research process in many ways.

The fifth section focuses on inquiry, action and learning. It unpacks the book's sixth perspective: that organizational action research occupies the tension field between consensus and dissensus. The section shows how employees from the production and development departments attempt to manage difference through a dialogic dissensus approach. We developed this approach jointly with teams from DSI and other teams in the project. The section concludes with a discussion of the book's seventh perspective: participation seen as an endeavour unfolding in the tension field between efficiency improvement, humanization and democratization.

Across these five sections, the chapter as a whole shows how participation in the DSI project functions as an emergent process. This illustrates the book's second perspective.

The chapter overall also shows that the process develops from being predominantly researcher-driven and management-driven into more of a collaborative process. The chapter thus describes the book's fifth perspective: that action research in organizations unfolds in the tension field between a researcher- and management-driven process and a collaborative one.

We used various methods to document the various processes in the course of the project: audio tape to record verbal interaction in meetings, written minutes of all meetings, interviews with Team Product Support members and other DSI staff. We have written about the results of the project together with a DSI employee who acted as method and tools facilitator (Clemmensen, Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2009), and in a number of other articles (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2009, 2010, 2011).

## **1. Tensions between participation as involvement and/or as co-determination**

As mentioned above, this section focuses on the beginning of the action research project. It shows how the three parties—the management team, Team Product Support and the action researchers—have different interests, and how all of them exercise the power of definition. Who decides, for example, whether employees are to be involved in a project whose guidelines have been staked out in advance by management, perhaps in collaboration with the action re-

searchers? Or whether the employees themselves can also take part in determining the aims of the project? This section demonstrates the book's fourth perspective. It is about participation unfolding in the form of tensions between different interests, all of which wield power in the organization and in the action research process.

The first two sections discuss the tensions in concrete terms: who is to be on the project steering group? Can Team Product Support itself define the aim of the action research project? What does the 'co-' in 'co-determination' mean?

The concrete background to these questions is that it is us, as action researchers, who devised a project on employee-driven innovation in teams and obtained funding for it. We then asked DSI's management whether they wanted to be part of such a project, with them and the employees determining the concrete content for themselves. Our way in to DSI therefore raises questions about the degree of participation this affords to the employees in practice.

The project proposal on employee-driven innovation in teams was drawn up in 2007. This was before we became aware of the distinction between involvement and participation that we use in this chapter and the remainder of the book. We see involvement as a management tool that can aim primarily to improve efficiency (Nielsen, 2004). We define participation as a more collaborative endeavour that is about improving quality of working life as well as efficiency. We understand both involvement and participation as the exercising of power.

The chapter does not focus on power as understood from a possession perspective (Dahl, 1961; Bachrach & Baratz, 1962), but on how power is exercised in concrete contexts (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011). Taking inspiration from Foucault (2000) and Giddens (1981, 1984), we understand power as a fundamental aspect of all forms of social practice (Giddens) and social relations (Foucault). The chapter is thus concerned with the effects of power and with how power creates either constraints and/or empowerment (Hayward, 1998). Both this chapter and the remainder of the book therefore assume that there are no power-free spaces in organizational action research processes (Neidel & Wulf-Andersen, 2013; Phillip & Kristiansen, 2013). The chapter examines one aspect of power in particular: the power of definition. Who has the right to define whose reality is included or excluded, i.e. whose reality counts (Chambers, 1997)?

### ***Who sits on the project board?***

At an introductory meeting with the project steering group at the beginning of February 2008, the group drew up some general guidelines:

It is crucial that this does not look like another project imposed on staff from above, but a process that will help with activities we are already undertaking or about to undertake.

The group also stated the overall aim of Team Product Support's participation in the action research project:

The task for the team is to provide product and production technology support, including ensuring a culture and behaviour that will provide continuous improvement of the existing production set-up and ensure good product commissioning and start-up of new products such as ...

The project steering group, henceforth referred to as the project board or PB, was identical to the sales, production and development management team plus the CEO, whom we knew from an earlier collaboration at Bang & Olufsen (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005). At the first meeting with the PB, there were tensions between them and us. We argued that the employees should be represented on the PB, too, because the project was about increased involvement and co-determination. The management team rejected this, citing stiffened economic competition in the global market and the resulting crisis management, which we will return to below. In this situation, management did not want employees on the PB. At the same time, they emphasized that it was not to be a top-down project imposed on staff, but one that would help with their day-to-day activities.

The PB agreed to a process with each of the participating teams. It would initially run for one year and consist of seven or eight three-hour meetings with each team, where we would collaborate on improving matters identified by the teams and by management. We also agreed on a division of labour between them and us. They would contribute their time and practical knowledge. They were interested in practical results and on-the-job training—that is, in the practical dimension of the action research process. As the CEO bluntly put it, the project had to 'kick ass'. We were responsible for organizing the process and for the theoretical dimension of the action research project, which the PB showed

no interest in. At the first meeting, then, different interests were present. This was apparent with respect to questions of representation—who was to sit on the project board—and with respect to the understanding of the project—was it a practical consultancy project, or was it also an action research project with an integrated research dimension?

Today, we would have declined to carry out the project, for two reasons. We would not enter into a project in which not all parties were represented on the steering group, especially not one like this, about employee-driven innovation. The management team were not the only ones bound by an economic agenda, though. We felt the same way ourselves. We let ourselves be pressured because our grants were to run out in January 2010. Nor would we today have agreed to a project in which we had not also negotiated a clear agreement on a shared focus on the theoretical dimension.

### ***Are ‘better interfaces and good communication’ a shared goal?***

A few days later, we had our first meeting with Team Product Support, and set out the idea of co-determination, i.e. that they would contribute to determining the goals and the design of the process. Here, it became apparent that several staff thought that management’s statement of objectives covered their own wishes, but that it concentrated too much on their internal team collaboration. They felt that their biggest challenge had to do with better interfaces and collaboration with Product Development (PD) and with Service and Repairs in the production department:

John (team leader): We can certainly relate to the wording of the assignment [from the project board]. We know very well what that’s about.

Marianne: It’s important to us that this makes sense to you. And if you have anything that needs adding, it’ll be added, so you can say, ‘This is something we can get behind’ ...

Claus: To me, the communication gap isn’t actually internal to the department. It’s between departments.

Jørgen: So, if you were going to improve something, it would actually be mainly there?

Carsten: Yes, I would say that in our department [production], communication can be made better, and lots of things can be done, but where there really is a problem, is that we are two separate buildings [the pro-

duction department in one, and the product development department in another]. There are sort of two trenches. That's very much how I see it. There are two very clear fronts. So we sort of throw stuff back and forth ...

Per: That gap between Production and Development ... That's where we have different ways of looking at things ... It can certainly be a struggle now and then. It's about bringing those things to light, but then we haven't just sat down and ... The people in Development have to develop the things, but it can only be a good product if we talk to each other ... They are very different people, and we're different too, from their point of view, and it's a matter of getting everyone to talk to each other properly.

Tom: But down here [in the production department], we have three sections, and I think now and then it happens there, too, that we sometimes let things slip through our fingers, but not as noticeably as in relation to Development.

Marianne: Such as?

Tom: Well, when someone thinks someone in the other sections is doing something that they actually aren't. For example, we have some challenges in relation to Service and Repairs.

The meeting ended with the team formulating an extra-team goal of 'better interfaces and good communication' with Product Development (PD) and with Service and Repairs in Production. This goal was new in relation to management's proposal. It was therefore decided that we would go back to the project board to ensure that improved communication between Production and Development, and with Service and Repairs, would also be an objective of the action research project in the team. Management accepted the team's new objective.

The team also formulated a number of internal goals that could be seen as a concretization of management's proposal. As a new team, they wanted to work to create clarity regarding their areas of work, to give visibility and structure to their tasks and their solutions to them, and to improve their meeting culture. We as action researchers proposed that we and they should begin by studying the meeting culture at their meetings from a communication point of view. What communication was inhibiting employees' development of innovation in teams, and what communication was promoting it? We therefore also

proposed tape-recording their meetings for study and documentation purposes. The team agreed to this.

### **Summary**

The analysis of the start of the action research project points to three issues, all of which are about participation as the exercising of power.

*First*, there were differences of interest and tensions between the management team, Team Product Support and us as action researchers. The management team argued against staff representatives being members of the PB. We tried in vain to argue in favour of employees being represented on the PB in a project that was about employee-driven innovation. Team Product Support had a project objective that was different to the management team's. It had to do with better interfaces and communication, especially vis-à-vis the development department.

Our interpretation is that these different interests and tensions are about the power of definition. This is apparent in several ways: who had the power to decide who and what was to be included in or excluded from the PB? Who decided whether the project was to be just a consultancy project and/or an action research project?

*Second*, there were different conceptions of participation. They all had to do with the exercising of power, because they represented different definitions of who and what was involved and of who and what was excluded. The management team understood participation as involvement of staff on a project that they have determined in advance, where they decide on the goal and the employees decide on the means to bring it about. As action researchers, we understood participation as co-determination. This became apparent when Team Product Support gained co-determination not just over the means, but especially over the statement of the project aim of improved collaboration with Product Development. But was that a joint decision of the whole team? Were they, in other words, practising co-determination internally in the team?

We cannot answer that question. We heard Carsten, an experienced member of staff, being the first to draw up a new agenda about better interfaces, one that was distinct from the project board's goals. We could also see that he was the one getting most of the eye contact from the team leader, who was new and inexperienced. We also heard Per and Tom supplying elaborations and additions, and we ourselves put elaborative questions ('such as?') and check questions ('mainly there?') to those who spoke. But we did not get round to asking



what those who were silent were thinking or feeling, nor did we investigate whether the team wanted to take part in the project, only how they wanted to ('It's important ...').

So, we cannot know whether there is co-determination of goals in this situation, because there were several team members whom we did not involve in the process by asking questions and who did not make their opinion known unprompted, either. Action research processes, then, are also about involvement in the very concrete sense of who gets asked and what they are asked about. Questions are not just neutral, but act as ways of including or excluding other people or agendas, i.e. as the power of definition. It is all the more complicated because it is continually changing.

*Third*, the process of action research on employee-driven innovation in teams had so far generally seemed to be predominantly a management and researcher-led process where employees were not included in decisions about the initiation of the process:

It was senior management who agreed to initiate the project and who set its overall goals. Employees had no say as to whether the project should be initiated. It was the team themselves who formulated the central goal of improving interfaces to other departments, but their goals were in other respects concretizations of management's, i.e. a concretization of the means to carry out the goals set by management.

Nor was this a case of action research as a collaborative process. It was we as action researchers who formulated the idea of a project about employee-driven innovation in teams. It was we, too, who proposed studying and tape-recording communication in Team Product Support. In the tight financial situation, a division of labour evolved where the team and the team leader took care of the practical improvements as per the objectives, while we took care of the process and its theoretical dimension including concept development. For example, we wrote meeting minutes and action plans, gave feedback on team communication and presented new concepts regarding things like communication patterns in the team (see Section 3).

## **2. Tensions, positionings and the exercising of power**

The three summary points in the foregoing section all have to do with participation unfolding in the form of the exercising of power. In this section, we show some more aspects of participation as the exercising of power that ex-

pand on the book's fourth perspective. The section describes how the Head of Production, the team leader, the various members of Team Product Support and we as action researchers continually positioned ourselves and each other. Specifically, the section does this by showing how there is a difference between top-down implementation and a collaboration-centred endeavour. The section also points to whether, and how, action researchers can contribute to making the exercising of power more transparent. In positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990, 1999), power is not understood as a role or structure that is set once and for all. Seen through the prism of positioning theory, power is regarded as an emergent process in which all parties continually contribute to the positioning of themselves and others through their mutual interaction.

### ***Tensions between top-down implementation and collaboration-centred endeavour***

After our second meeting with Team Product Support in March 2008, we wrote in our notes:

We must not take anything for granted. During the meeting with the team, it suddenly occurred to us that the Head of Production and the team leader had not passed on [our and the PB's] presentation on the background to the whole process ... We also realized that on Thursday the Head of Production, i.e. the team leader's boss, had tasked the team leader with describing the remit of the team, i.e. defining its boundaries in relation to other functions. The presentation is to be produced ASAP. This apparently means that the employees will have no time to be involved. This is happening at the same time as management has agreed to launch this project, which just so happens to be about involvement.

At the meeting, we realized that we had been naïve and taken for granted something that turned out not to be the case. The manager and the team leader had not forwarded to the team the text describing the basis of the project. Moreover, the manager had gone straight to the team leader and asked him to describe the remit of the team as soon as possible. This could be seen as a circumvention or exclusion of the team, which had just this issue of remit definition as a key team goal. The speed of the decision could mean that the team had no time to come up with a properly worked-out proposal to the manager. The remit was about the ground the team was to play on. Should the team be

involved in deciding what the remit would look like? This is equivalent to asking whether co-managing groups should be involved in deciding on goals and not just means.

That afternoon, it also became clearer to us that it was apparently important for us as action researchers to help make explicit who was making which decisions and what was being included or excluded. For example, was the project board's objective identical to the team's own agenda, and/or was something or someone being excluded? At the meeting, we therefore asked the team: 'Who has drawn up the goals for your work?'. The meeting culminated in the team deciding to invite their manager to a meeting to clarify. In their internal minutes from 5 March 2008, they wrote:

Before the meeting, we would like to have clarification of Anton's [the manager's] attitude to this and of what tasks he thinks our team should carry out.

We understand this example as a clash between different interests, with the partners positioning themselves differently. On the one hand was the manager's interest in rapid organizational implementation; on the other was the interest of the project and the team in personally helping to draw up the team's remit. We interpret this as tensions between rapid top-down implementation and a slower, more collaboration-focused endeavour.

As action researchers, we had a problem: the pace of work at DSI was fast, and it was often not until a meeting was under way that we understood what had happened since we were last at DSI. Hence, there were corresponding tensions between us as action researchers seeking to practise dialogue and co-determination on the one hand, and on the other a more top-led organization in a critical situation, acting fast and all the time.

## *Summary*

From examples such as those in Sections 1 and 2, we came to the view that participation in organizational action research functions as the exercising of power between parties with different interests (the fourth perspective). Participation is thus not just a shared process in which, for example, a united 'we' arrives at the same interpretations, decisions and proposals together. Examples of participation being wielded as power are when:

- the team expand their goals to include external goals as well;
- Carsten sets a new agenda for the team's goals;
- the project board defines the overall remit of the project and the teams taking part, and at the same time decides who can be a member of the PB;
- the Head of Production apparently bypasses the team;
- we as action researchers problematize the basis of decision-making processes ('Who drew up the goals for the team's task?');
- we drew up the basis of a project about employee-driven innovation in teams;
- we designed the project;
- we proposed to the team that we and they develop concepts about team communication patterns that can promote and/or inhibit, as the case may be, employee-driven innovation.

Everyone thus wields power when they position themselves and others. The examples show that power can have either a constraining or an expansive function. There are also other forms of power. As we know, only bosses, managers and directors have the structural power over employees to make crucial decisions about the remit of their work. We encountered this form of structural power in Team Product Support when management replaced the team leader with a more experienced leader part-way through the process. He concretely supported the team's goals, gave the team new powers and supported their activities even if it involved saying 'no' to the head of production.

Section 2 also highlights another point. We queried who had made which decisions. In this way, we attempted to make power mechanisms such as inclusion and exclusion visible, in the hope that it might help make power more transparent. However, we did not get round to asking Team Product Support whether they understood the process as the exercising of power.

### **3. Experimental change of communication patterns in Team Product Support**

Early in spring 2008, Team Product Support began working on changing their meeting culture. At the same time, we proposed that we and they should investigate communications patterns in their team. Which patterns helped to inhibit casework and employee-driven innovation in their team, and which helped promote it? Neither we nor the team knew the result of this inquiry in advance.

We made suggestions and gave feedback on communication patterns in the team. In meetings, the team tested whether our suggestions and theirs worked, and they gave feedback on them. This was the start of a collaborative learning process with a definite division of labour. The collaborative learning process entailed a move from researcher-driven inquiry to all-party collaboration on an inquiry ranging across different interests and knowledge (Phillips & Kristiansen, 2013). It began internally within the team and then spread throughout DSI. Indeed, after a couple of months, there turned out to be limits to how far Team Product Support could go in changing their own meeting culture without involving the whole organization (Section 4). We thus came up against Lewin's idea that action researchers and partners gain knowledge of the organization when they try to change it together.

The inquiry arose particularly from the team's perception that many meetings were a waste of time. One team member put it like this:

... You know, sometimes you sit in meetings where you can look round at people and see that they're pretty much thinking, 'This just isn't happening! Get it over with!'. It's deadly boring—but we don't say it ... It could do with being part of our culture to stop and ask, 'Is this working?'.

### ***Bystanders and focus***

At the third meeting, in the spring of 2008, we made this suggestion:

Jørgen: From what we saw at the last meeting, we want to suggest that you strengthen what's known as the bystander function. A bystander is someone in the group who can be a little bit on the outside at the same time, taking a bit of a helicopter perspective, so for example they might say, 'Right now, I actually think we're going round in circles', i.e. come up with good ideas on how you can stay focused.

For instance, when we asked you, last time, to list what we should work on, one item came up, and then everyone chimed in on that item. You could also have chosen to say, 'We'll just list these ten items, and then we'll put them in order of priority afterwards'. So the bystander should ideally be a tool to stop you getting 'stuck in' straight away on an issue, because that way you forget the big picture.

Marianne: A bystander typically comes in before you move on to the next item, to sum up: 'What have we decided here, and whose court is the ball in?'

Carsten: We're not brilliant at that.

John: That's quite true, we could certainly be better at it ...

Carsten: Yes, I think there are a lot of meetings where it just goes off at a tangent. We're not good at saying, 'Let's just go back to where we were, and get this item wrapped up'.

Jørgen: For example, just now, when you had to decide whether or not to take that test, my feeling was that that decision rather fell between the stools [we had used a test about the team's skills].

Helle: Yes, that's true, actually.

Jim: Yes, we immediately started working out what was the best method.

It looks as though Team Product Support could recognize their own communication in our examples, because they added to them with examples from their day-to-day work. We didn't get round to asking why they understood their communication as a fault and as something they weren't good at, but we believe we contributed to that because we focused on deficiencies in the team's communication and defined the content of the agenda.

A bystander is the team's observing 'I', watching how communication takes place and continually balancing expectations to ensure that the team are moving in the same direction (Isaacs, 1999). A bystander does not focus on team members' individual communication, but watches recurrent patterns in the team's communication from a helicopter perspective. A bystander continually puts these communication patterns into words so that they can perhaps be used productively and promote employee-driven innovation in the team. A bystander is often someone who alternates between being present and being slightly at a distance.

At the start, we acted as bystanders and gave feedback on the team's communication patterns, as in the quotation above. After a couple of meetings, Torsten took over that function. For example, when the team talked in circles, changed topic before an item was concluded or went rapidly into solution mode, he would metacommunicate:

... Now we're talking about the same thing again ... This is kind of a bit beside the point ... Let's not go into solution mode ... Are we quite sure this item is concluded? ... That's an item further down the agenda ... I'll just list what we've talked about and what we've decided ...

At the end of the meeting, we would give feedback on Torsten's bystander role. We gave examples of what he had said and done, showing whether it had helped bring about change in the team's meetings. After a couple of months, Jens, Per and Helle said that they had got better at staying focused, and that their meetings had become shorter and more efficient. For example, they had introduced a sign for 'stay focused': putting their hands together in a forward-moving gesture. They used it to get back on track:

Jens: The very first thing we focused on was our meetings. It's quite clear that we've got much, much better at them. They are a lot more efficient.

Helle: That's right. It's not just talk.

Jens: It's still hard to keep focused.

Helle: Yes, but there's always someone who says, 'Shall we just keep focused here?'. We're almost at the point where this sign is enough [makes a gesture, putting her hands together and making a forward narrowing movement].

Per: There are a couple of people who are really good at staying focused. Because most of us rush into solution mode.

Our retrospective interpretation is that Team Product Support seemed to be continuing the process in meetings where we were not present. For example, we had not seen them use the sign in the meetings we were present at.

## ***Summary***

With the inquiry into communication patterns in Team Product Support, the action research process changed from being predominantly researcher-driven to being more of a collaborative process (the fifth perspective) in which we and the team used our different skills and knowledge to improve the team's meeting culture.

Together with Team Product Support and other teams on the project, we established that repeated use of particular communication patterns in the

team could contribute to inhibiting employee-driven innovation in teams. These patterns were about: issue focus and quick solutions; fault-finding and counterviews when others put forward new viewpoints; frequent changes of subject; kicking things into touch. The inquiry also showed that other communication patterns could help promote employee-driven innovation in teams. These were about defining a clear remit, appointing a bystander and asking open questions. But the inquiry also showed that it was important to organize meetings in other ways. These were about introducing helicopter team meetings separate from ordinary working meetings, using alternating small groups and ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ groups, having rounds where team leaders are silent, and continually following up and evaluating (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2009) [‘pro’ and ‘anti’ groups are where the team is divided into two groups, with one group acting as devil’s advocate, i.e. against, while the other finds all the arguments in favour of a viewpoint or proposal].

#### **4. Tensions between the smaller project context and larger organizational, societal and global agendas**

Section 4 describes how the team and the action research context were already embedded in DSI as an organization. DSI as an organization was itself anchored in larger societal and global systems. In meetings with Team Product Support, we were therefore meeting not only a team with local problems at DSI in Sønderborg, Denmark, but also a globalized world’s inroads into a team in a Danish manufacturing company. The interplay between the small team and action research context and the larger systems manifested itself as tensions between them. Section 4 unpacks the book’s third perspective on projects as always precontextualized. The section thus adopts a systemic perspective on the action research project, one that seeks to connect the infinitely small in the team with the infinitely large in the surrounding systems (Bateson, 1979, 1972; Stacey, 2001).

First, we describe tensions between changing the team’s meeting culture and the organization’s meeting culture; next, tensions between increased competition in the world market and top-led crisis management vis-à-vis employee involvement in Team Product Support.



## ***Tensions between changes to the team's meeting culture and the organization's meeting culture***

At a meeting on 08.04.08, Team Product Support adopted these rules of play:

1. Attendees are to come prepared.
2. The meeting starts on time.
3. As a general rule, attendees must not arrive late.
4. If an attendee arrives late, (s)he will not be briefed.
5. Anyone who is absent without having declined the meeting will have no influence on decisions taken at the meeting. This includes tasks assigned to the absentee.
6. Internal group meetings will be called off if just one attendee infringes one of the above points.

After the summer holiday, they explained that they were practising these rules of play at their ordinary team meetings, which we did not attend. They also mentioned that 'the meetings have become shorter and more efficient since the new team leader arrived and only relevant people are invited'. Finally, the team said that, when they had meetings with colleagues from other departments, they recognized their own 'old' meeting culture, with participants coming unprepared, arriving late, failing to attend etc.

Team Product Support and the action research project thus came up against limits to changes in the team's meeting culture. They could change their own culture within the team through the project, but not their meetings with colleagues from other departments, i.e. the organization's meeting culture. We confirmed this to them in a written presentation setting out a systemic perspective:

We think we are reaching the limit of the progress you can make on your goals when we 'only' meet your team. We think it is necessary to involve people from management to speed the process up, because you as a team are a part of the whole organization. We therefore propose that the issue of improving the meeting culture in the organization as a whole should be taken up at a meeting with management ...

Together with Team Product Support and other teams on the project, we now began to examine the conditions for employee-driven innovation in teams.

This was done in a collaborative process in which research and action were integrated. So, together with Team Product Support, we examined how far the team could get with their intra-team goal of changing their meeting culture, and we agreed to take up with the PB the question of changing the whole meeting culture at DSI.

We therefore sent a presentation to the project board in which one point dealt with changing the meeting culture at DSI. The text reads in part as follows:

**Meeting culture—or how to gain three man-years by tightening things up?**

- We have not been to see you once without there being problems with holding the agreed meetings:
- Not everyone seems to have been informed/read how the meeting is to proceed.
- We have several times had to move to a venue other than the one we had kitted out with tape recorders etc.
- Once, the venue was occupied by another meeting without either us or the people we were to meet being informed.
- Not everyone has the agenda with them at meetings.
- Meeting preparation sometimes leaves a lot to be desired.
- Meetings rarely start on time.

We gather that managers at the company have a great many meetings, often all in a row. We also hear from staff that they too are invited to many meetings, usually with no agenda, i.e. with no possibility of preparing. There is evidently a culture of just putting your heads together, which may have been an appropriate kind of meeting back when you were a small gazelle company. This also means there is no way of determining the relevance of a meeting invitation.

If we assume that there are an average of six attendees per meeting, that meetings start an average of 10 minutes late, and that 24 meetings (to pick a figure at random) are held in the company per day, it may be possible to save three man-years by tightening things up. This is all the more necessary given that there seems to be a febrile atmosphere of stress, surely unsustainable in the long term, saturating your company [in 2008–10, DSI was hit by the economic crisis and was struggling to survive].

It would have been better to tell you this at a meeting, because things always seem harsher in writing, but we must admit that our feeling last week was ‘can we count on you?’.

Of course, our feelings aren’t crucial, but, if they reflect what others—customers, employees etc.—are feeling, it may be serious. In any event we would—if we experienced something similar as employees or customers—have this feeling of doubt as to whether we could count on you. And we’d be wondering whether it was worth arriving on time, never mind preparing.

Our proposal is that you—as the role models you are—decide once and for all that this meeting chaos will change within a period of X months. And that you put that decision into effect with all but toe-curling zeal. We understand that a paper on meeting culture is being written. We hope you don’t let it remain on paper—but that is a fear that we detect among the staff. So perhaps it would be appropriate to have a cross-hierarchical group to ensure that this isn’t just a soapbox proclamation? For example, it is impossible for Team Product Support on its own to decide on a changed meeting culture if the rest of the organization carries on as usual.

### **The presentation is based on several assumptions:**

- It is not possible to make small local changes such as a change of meeting culture in a team such as Team Product Support without at the same time changing the bigger system, which in this case is the whole organization’s meeting culture (and vice versa) and without involving the project board. As action researchers, we therefore write the letter from a systems theory point of view of organizations and management, not just as a neutral message.
- It is not possible to bring about changes in organizations without at the same time exercising power and positioning oneself and each other in different ways. We do this in the presentation, where we as action researchers practise participation as the exercising of power, although we have no formal power over the project board.
- It is possible to handle power in ways where one endeavours to make it more transparent. We attempt to do this by practising first-person and second-person action research (Marshall & Mead, 2005; Torbert, 2001). This consists of putting a name to our inner dialogues (first person) and presenting them in dialogue with the PB (second person). More concretely,

it means that we put into writing our observations of the meeting culture at DSI, its possible economic consequences and our feelings of lack of confidence. We would have written less directly had we not known the CEO from previous projects.

- It is possible to use one's own observations and feelings from the action research process as mirror of what may be happening elsewhere in the organization. Borrowing a term from supervision, we call these parallel processes (Jacobsen, 2005). They describe relationships between a supervisor and a supervisee who is a therapist, and between a therapist and a client. They are based on the assumption that the supervisee (the therapist) unconsciously repeats in his or her relationship with the supervisor what happens in the relationship with the client. We use this concept in a different context and without involving the unconscious. We ask whether what we observe and experience in the action research process is a repetition of something happening elsewhere in the organization.

At about the same time as we emailed the presentation, the management at DSI adopted a common set of rules of play for meetings in the organization; these were posted in all meeting venues. They were not significantly different from Team Product Support's rules. Three months later, the project board considered that meeting culture was still a focus of attention and that it had 'clearly improved'. We did not get around to asking Team Product Support for its view.

### ***Tensions between increased competition in the world market and top-led crisis management vis-à-vis employee involvement***

In 2008, our initial collaboration with DSI coincided with increased competition in the world market in inverters for solar cell systems. This was evident in a fall-off in orders, especially from the southern European market. At the same time, there were production problems with a new type of system, which was plagued with faults that it was difficult to find time to identify and test, because customers had already been promised them for a particular date.

This production crisis occurred at the same time as DSI was growing from a small 'gazelle' company that could make decisions over lunch into a big mass-production company. The crisis was exacerbated by weather conditions in China, where a heavy snowfall caused the roof of a production facility at a Chinese sub-supplier to collapse, further delaying production. Together with

a team, we watched this on an internal video screen one morning when we visited DSI.

Planned meetings with Team Product Support and others were therefore cancelled during this 'blizzard week'. Because of these urgent issues, which were a matter of survival for the company, in the spring of 2008 management switched to practising top-led crisis management, following up and setting out (new) guidelines, for example, every day. At one project board meeting in August 2008, when DSI was emerging from the acute crisis, we and management agreed that the conditions for collaboration had not been in place in the spring of 2008.

In this way, the action research project was embedded in larger global, economic agendas that impacted the conditions for the collaboration in unpredictable ways such as meetings being cancelled. The ongoing crisis in DSI also affected Team Product Support. According to minutes from 15.09.08, it did so particularly in two ways. They encountered dilemmas regarding management's top-down implementation of decisions versus their invitations to bottom-up involvement on the one hand, and speed versus quality on the other.

#### *The top-down implementation versus bottom-up involvement dilemma*

Team Product Support and their team leader gave a number of examples of sudden shifts between invitation to involvement and top-down implementation. At the September 2008 meeting, one team member said:

In the past year, we've put forward a number of arguments regarding a particular project where we feel we aren't being listened to. Instead, we feel that a message will suddenly come down from above that things now have to be a particular way that doesn't take account of our wishes and objections.

Another member of the team said that she had been about to say this in an assembly where the CEO had talked about them wanting to have production-friendly development, but she had held back so as not to put her boss on the spot. She also gave an example concerning the fit-out of their hall, when a manager walked round with the boss and said that the indoor climate was top notch. The team's experience, in contrast, was that it was 28 degrees Celsius in summer, while in winter they sometimes had to sit on their hands to warm up.

Team Product Support thus expressed frustration at the differences between invitations to involvement and rapid top-down implementation. Their team leader said of the culture at DSI: ‘At one meeting, the CEO put forward a proposal and invited everyone to have their say. Good involvement—until suddenly time was short, and there was no more time for dialogue.’

Other teams on the project described similar experiences of this dilemma. For example, an employee in another team said: ‘There’s a weird mixture in our culture of free rein suddenly followed by micromanagement from above.’

### ***The speed versus quality dilemma***

The other dilemma encountered by Team Product Support was about differences between speed and quality. At the meeting on 15.09.08, they said they had the impression that they often had to ‘do things that are wrong, just because a particular product has to go out right now, rather than doing it right first time’. They also mentioned that unrealistic deadlines were being set and that they themselves contributed to maintaining a fast pace and producing errors:

Jens: It sounds like a good idea, we’ll take it, we have to get on, very action-focused. If the task is half-defined, then it’s done almost before it comes out. We get started straight away. We don’t necessarily need to talk about the consequences. It just has to be done.

Per: So it may well be we find out six months later that what we did was a piece of scheisse.

Other teams, too, spoke of the dilemma of high speed versus quality, which meant that mistakes were made that it could be hard to find time to fix. For example, the hardware team in Product Development said that they did not feel they were listened to as regards time estimates.

### ***Summary***

We have tried to show that the team’s goals and its work, and the action research project too, were embedded in larger organizational and economic/global agendas. These agendas could manifest themselves in interaction, and impinge on the project in unpredictable ways having to do with anything from pace of work, meeting culture and quality requirements to collaboration and snow in China.

The action research project could contribute to changing a small part of these conditions, such as the meeting culture, but self-evidently not the crisis in the world market. The collaborative action research process with Team Product Support helped to concretize dilemmas on the basis of the team's local perspective and experiences. In retrospect, we have considered how we can understand these dilemmas and contradictions of top-down implementation and crisis management versus bottom-up involvement, and of speed versus quality.

It would be natural to conceive of them as discrepancies between managers' declared intentions and their actual practice, i.e. to give managers the 'blame' for being too impatient, for example, or for living too far away in an ivory tower high above Production and Development. We view this individual-focused, psychological understanding as simplistic and inadequate. Rather, we understand the implementation-versus-involvement and speed-versus-quality dilemmas as conditions of modern organizations characteristic not only of DSI, but also of other organizations. This means that action research projects, not only at DSI but also at other organizations, are embedded in organizational and economic conditions that impinge concretely on projects in complex and often unpredictable ways. Management's handling of them plays a part in this, but so too, perhaps to an even greater extent, do other factors such as the world market.

## **5. Tensions in the management of organizational difference through dissensus**

This section will show that the ongoing crisis at DSI led to new ways of handling tensions and dilemmas. Here, with its focus on communication and dialogue, the action research project came to play a part not only in Team Product Support, but also in other teams that we were collaborating with, such as a new interdisciplinary team drawn from across the production and development departments.

The first subsection describes how Team Product Support manage difference between Production and Development by organizing review meetings. In the next subsection, a new interdisciplinary team from those two areas adopts new guidelines for collaboration on a new project that breaks with the old project culture. Lastly, we synthesize these two examples in a dialogic dissensus approach that examines whether difference can be made into an engine of

development and change. Section 5 thus focuses on the sixth perspective of the book, which sees organizational action research unfolding in the tension field between consensus and dissensus. Here, we also touch on the book's seventh perspective, seeing participation in the tension field between efficiency improvement, humanization and democratization.

### ***Management of difference between Development and Production***

In September 2008, Team Product Support had achieved their internal goals. They therefore decided to start on their external team goals, which were about better interfaces and communication with the development department. Individually, they started visiting the development department more often. This led to a new routine of ad-hoc review meetings with colleagues from Development. Here, Helle is talking about dialogue between the two departments:

Helle: ... We had a bit of a go at the mechanics people [in Development], because we needed some drawings, because they weren't ready with theirs. So they produced a load of drawings and said we should do a review. So we actually sat down, the two of us, and reviewed these drawings. We found loads of mistakes and some things we wanted to have changed.

One of the drawings was so complicated that we'd covered it in red marks where we thought things should be different. We thought it would be unwarranted to send it back to them. So we agreed that we'd invite them [the development people] to a short meeting to review these amendments. So, there was a development guy there who said, 'Oh, it's really great that we can just meet and talk about these ideas'. And you know what, we all came away happy. We'd really managed to have a dialogue. We've got better at engaging in dialogue with them.

Marianne: What happened?

Helle: Well, we carried out some assignments between our meetings with you ... One result was that we could also go and see them ourselves. We can't just expect them to come to us, after all. So I did. I went up and visited them when I was over there, just went up and announced myself and said, 'What are you wrestling with now, what are you up to?'. We used to just talk about 'them over there', you know. But then you [Marianne & Jørgen] suddenly asked, 'Can you do something yourselves



to make it better?'. We'd never have thought of that if you hadn't just said it ...

Jens: It's the method that's got better. We've worked out that this works, so we use it.

Helle: You [Jens] are one of those that can go back and forth with the flow, even though there are big waves.

Previously, Team Product Support thought in terms of 'them over there' in Development and 'us' in the production department. They were inclined to find fault, to put red marks on the drawings they received from the development staff and to take a non-committal stance. As part of the action research project, in late summer 2008 they began to drop into the other department unannounced. This led to Team Product Support taking the initiative to invite development staff from Mechanics to a short meeting about the drawings. Through dialogue, they arrived at a solution. This meeting was the start of a new arrangement of short, focused review meetings between the departments.

The development of dialogue as a means of managing difference was not planned in advance as a research question to be studied by us together with Team Product Support. The approach was developed emergently as the team's response to a question we put to them, as described by Helle ('But then you [Marianne & Jørgen] suddenly asked, "Can you do something yourselves to make it better?'. We'd never have thought of that if you hadn't just said it ...').

According to the team, this contributed to an improvement, not only in the quality of their own working life, but also in that of their colleagues in the development department:

Helle: We have been focusing more on collaborating, rather than putting up barriers and then trying to say, 'Shouldn't we be helping each other with this?'. We do that in Mechanics. In our area, we're doing really well now. We say to each other, oh, isn't it great that we're meeting instead of just sending messages and envelopes back and forth with these drawings in. We've really got good collaboration there now. It's just fantastic ...

Per: It's that thing about solidarity instead of having a go at each other. It's got better. It's now more about saying that we have a problem, instead of saying that you have a problem.

Management of disagreement and tensions between the departments also contributed to better troubleshooting and cost savings. Jens from Team Product Support explains that the informal review meetings have reduced the number of things needing to be redone and have helped reduce costs. For example, he realized during a meeting with the development department that a new device with a new option would not be able to go through the test equipment. Had he not been given 14 days to sort it out in advance, it would have meant:

... that, next time Production had to produce that device with that option, it wouldn't get through the test equipment, because it wouldn't accept it. And then production of that device would be at a standstill. That means that, if it has to go [to the customer] at 3 o'clock tomorrow, it just won't go out. And that costs money. The customer will be extremely unhappy. How many delays like that will it take before he isn't with us anymore?

Per: And that's a good example of why it's important that you go round and talk to the others in development.

Helle and Per recall that dialogue about differences has given them better collaborative relationships and more job satisfaction in Team Product Support and in relation to their colleagues from Development. We see this as a modest example of the project apparently contributing to the humanization of their working conditions. Jens adds that management of differences between Development and Production has also helped reduce costs, because they have been able to locate faults in time. In this example, then, participation is not just about increased job satisfaction, but also about savings or efficiency improvement.

As noted, the book's seventh perspective is that participation in organizational action research unfolds in a tension field between efficiency improvement, humanization and democratization. In this example, there was apparently no contradiction or tension between the first two aspects. On the one hand, there was efficiency improvement in the form of cost reduction. On the other hand, there was humanization in the form of increased job satisfaction and greater influence on the relationship with the other department. Was there also democratization? We asked Team Product Support, who mentioned that their leader had delegated responsibility to them and that they had been

given more functions as employees—functions that they themselves did not think they could cope with:

Marianne: What is the most important thing your leader does?

Helle: He delegates responsibility.

Jens: We're allowed to do our jobs.

Helle: We're allowed to try things, this trip to Slovenia [where I was to present something], for example. I think that's fantastic. He really has confidence in us.

Jens: Just the fact that he goes on holiday and believes we can mind the shop while he's away.

Helle: Yes, we coped while he was away. He has confidence in us.

Jens: It means you dare take certain decisions, because we'll be backed up on them later ... He's very much a mentor.

Per: He's very good at asking and ... It helps give you that self-confidence.

We see the back-up by management, delegation and increased co-determination that Helle and Jens want as a form of humanization. We think democracy and democratization mean that it is essentially the *demos*, the people—here, the employees—who decide and who can choose leaders. We see no trend in that direction at DSI.

Our interpretation is that, after six months at DSI, the action research project developed from being predominantly researcher and management-led to being a collaborative learning process in which employees, team leaders and action researchers continually studied the conditions for creating new ways of doing things. This inquiry arose during the process when Team Product Support and other teams at DSI came up against the organizational culture, organizational obstacles and production conditions that made it difficult to achieve their team goals, as shown in Section 3.

We had not developed these research questions and methods for the collaborative process in advance. In retrospect, we can see that participation was occurring as an emergent process. This illustrates the book's second perspective. Together with Team Product Support and other teams and parties, we investigated concrete conditions of change. A key method was dialogue, understood as an inquiring conversation without a predetermined outcome.

## ***Balancing expectations in an interdisciplinary group linking Production and Development***

As part of crisis management, and as an offshoot of the action research project, in October 2008 a new interdisciplinary team was created, drawn from Production and Development and including as members Helle and Jens from Team Product Support. The team was an unforeseen result of the action research project and subsequently became part of it. The team began by homing in on good and bad experiences from the recently concluded solar cell project. On that basis, they identified some guidelines for the new project:

- Don't sell the product until it's READY!!!
- Contradict the CEO if things are NOT as he believes.
- Dare to change the end date.
- Set a realistic schedule with commitment.
- Communicate altered plans.
- Get test apparatus ready.
- Improve the relationship between SC [Supply Chain, i.e. Production] and PD [Product Development].
- Feedback to Development from Production (it's easy to make etc.).
- Everyone is obliged to speak up if they don't believe in a schedule.

The new, transverse team problematized the speed-versus-quality dilemma and the project culture associated with production of the old solar cell system. That culture was about setting unrealistic deadlines, not contradicting the CEO and a lack of interdisciplinary collaboration. The team decided to say 'no' to unrealistic deadlines and to the CEO if they understood things differently to him, to improve collaboration between Development and Production, and to communicate changes. In this way, they took the initiative on changing the old project culture by asking critical questions of some accepted norms that characterized it. Team Product Support's external goals regarding better interfaces and communication with Development were thus organizationally anchored in the form of common rules of play on meetings at DSI and review meetings between Development and Production, but also in a new interdisciplinary project group that might possibly mark the start of a new project culture.

In this part of the collaboration with the teams, we as action researchers were present on the sidelines. It was the teams' local knowledge and learning process that led to the formulation of the guidelines for a new project. It was

also they themselves who organized the process. The project thus moved from being predominantly researcher and manager-driven via a collaborative project, to being employee-driven.

### ***Summary: on the management of difference and the dissensus approach***

These two sections show that apparently simple dialogic skills such as asking open questions and saying ‘no’ if a team or an employee disagrees with colleagues and management can in small ways help bring about better financial results and inter-colleague relationships, partly because they ask questions about a particular project culture at DSI.

For example, Helle and Per from Team Product Support say that they felt it would be ‘unwarranted’ to send the drawings back with lots of red marks to colleagues in the development department. Instead, they put themselves in their mechanics colleagues’ place and dealt with the difference between their colleagues’ understanding and their own by inviting them to a meeting about the drawings. Per and Helle say that, instead of ‘putting up barriers’ and ‘having a go at each other’, they became better at collaborating and developing across those differences. The interdisciplinary, cross-department team decided that they would henceforth openly put forward the criticism that they had hitherto been silent about within the organization.

We understand these examples to show the DSI employees starting to practise what we began in the course of the project to call a dialogic dissensus approach (Dalgaard, Johannsen, Kristiansen & Bloch Poulsen, 2014). The fundamental idea of this approach is to investigate whether disagreement can contribute to making the organization stronger, because different types of knowledge can bring about more sustainable results. We therefore examine the extent to which difference and disagreement can act as an engine of development. This happens through dialogues encompassing certain ways of organizing meetings in which everybody’s viewpoint has a greater opportunity to be heard (dissensus organizing) and certain ways of relating to critical and silent voices (dissensus sensibility) (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2010).

The dissensus approach may look like a harmless concoction, perhaps just a matter of asking questions and saying ‘no’. However, the approach can be used to problematize a certain organizational culture and to change it, as the interdisciplinary team sought to do with the old project culture. The approach thus diverges from organizational cultures in which, for various reasons, peo-

ple opt to ‘play the game’ and avoid raising objections higher up in the system because criticism could, for example, harm one’s own future opportunities in the organization (Argyris, 1990; Willig, 2016).

The dissensus approach can also look as though it is just a smarter way of making money in organizations. Here we see a duality, in that participation in organizational action research projects is located between efficiency improvement and humanization. Dissensus is thus a way of making money, as Jens noted, but it is also an approach that can contribute to employees developing themselves professionally and creating more satisfactory working conditions because they collaborate internally and transversely, as described above by Helle and Per.

This chapter, in which we have recounted the story of an action research project with Team Product Support at DSI, has demonstrated the book’s seven main perspectives in practice:

1. Participation can mean anything from simply taking part to co-determination.
2. Participation is an emergent process that evolves along the way.
3. Participation is always already embedded in multiple contexts/complex systems, which interact with individual projects in unpredictable ways.
4. Participation unfolds in the form of tensions between parties with different interests and knowledge who continually position themselves and each other, thereby exercising power in organizations and in research processes.
5. Participation unfolds in the tension field between a collaborative process and a researcher- and management-driven one.
6. Participation unfolds in the tension field between consensus and dissensus.
7. Participation unfolds in the tension field between efficiency improvement, humanization and democratization.

The next chapter will show how participation in organizations, i.e. employee participation, was perceived in different and mutually contradictory ways in the USA and Europe during the twentieth century.

## Reflections

In 2008–2010, we spent many hours with teams from the Silkeborg Municipality Citizen Service department and from Danfoss Solar Inverters on the project

on employee-driven innovation in teams. Rather than discuss the practical and theoretical results of the project, we will reflect on how much of a part the date, financial constraints and time considerations play in enabling an action research project to succeed.

In Citizen Service, we encountered many organizational changes in the wake of the Municipal Reform, a reform of the whole area of local government in Denmark that impacted employees' working life and reduced their motivation to engage in an action research project. At Danfoss Solar Inverters, we were overtaken by the global crisis, which meant that the company was fighting to survive. It was not a good time to choose to start and carry out an action research project in the two organizations. At that time, we had obtained research funding from the Ministry of Science that was limited to a two-year period. This meant that we agreed to the project. It also made us consider what conditions needed to be in place in order to start an action research project. Today, we would have investigated those conditions more thoroughly prior to the project, as they came to play a much bigger part than we had expected. We would also have said 'no' to carrying out the project in those two organizations.

Another question that concerned us was the employees' desire to engage in a time-consuming action research project at a time when their lives were already very busy. An action research project can easily end up making additional demands on employees' time. Although the organization receives money to cover staff time in connection with the project, those hours do not mean reduced hours of work for the individual employee.

The date, financial constraints and time considerations thus impinge on individual projects in many ways that can be hard to discern when you are in the middle of the process. If you are under pressure as an action researcher, questions such as these will arise:

- Are we saying 'yes' to conditions we would otherwise have said 'no' to, in order to get our foot inside an organization?
- Are we accepting project meetings being used as an escape valve for frustrations that staff may not be able to vent elsewhere? A dialogue-focused manager in one of the other participating organizations felt that this had happened. We had to admit she was right.
- Are we accepting a division of labour in which the organization does not spend time participating in the theoretical dimension of the action research process, so that we are solely responsible for it? We can see that at

certain times we put up with the action research being reduced to consultancy. We are not proud of this.

- Are we giving up on key research ethics values? Citizen Service was the last of three organizations in the project. By then, we had learnt to insist that employee participation meant that employees should be involved in significant decisions such as those on aims and process design. We made it clear that we would not take part unless this was possible. In Citizen Service, therefore, we began to make more use of our power to accept or reject. This led to comprehensive negotiations and the identification of hidden agendas, but also to the development of the concept of participation as the exercising of power.

More generally, the chapter poses the question of whether any organizations nowadays have time to engage in action research projects. We recommend that time requirements and constraints be made as clear as possible at the start of a project, and that they should if appropriate be reviewed on an ongoing basis during the project. Indeed, these factors concern not only the organization, but also the action researchers' working conditions and their ability to contribute to successful projects. Here, we are also thinking of the conditions to which students wishing to do action research are subject, such as those laid down in the curriculum.

We feel we learned to our cost that we had failed to make adequate inquiry in advance into the conditions for embarking on the project.



## **Chapter 2**

# **A historical view of employee participation: four understandings**

### **What and why**

This chapter is not about participation in organizational action research, but about different understandings of employee participation. It focuses on organizational theory in the period following the Second World War in Europe. The chapter demonstrates the book's first perspective: that participation has had many different meanings. In some periods, the emphasis has been on participation through trade unions. In others, it has been about involvement of the individual employee. The degree of participation has also varied. It has meant industrial workers being able to propose solutions to operational or tactical production problems, or knowledge workers having influence, not only on the performance of their day-to-day tasks, but also on organizational development. The democratic aspect plays a part in some understandings, while in others participation is primarily a means of improving organizational efficiency.

We hope the presentation of these differences will make the chapter relevant today. Can these differences help demonstrate that participation depends today, too, on a number of complex factors? These may be economic factors such as demands for greater workplace flexibility creating the conditions for increased participation. They may be political factors, such as a desire to secure a better balance between people's influence as citizens and their influence as employees. They may be factors related to values or culture, such as a generally higher educational level apparently leading to demands for more participation and influence. At the same time, we hope the chapter shows that participation remains a two-edged sword today. On the one hand, it can mean improved efficiency and a higher quality of working life; on the other, it can mean a greater strain on employees.

## 1. Participation in working life: a mixed bag

The concept of ‘participation’ or ‘employee participation’ has a long history outside organizational action research. Participation in working life denotes all forms of participation (Wilkinson, Gollan, Marchington & Lewin, 2010), from employees being consulted by management with a view to improving production efficiency, to the workers themselves having management through radical democratic works councils. In this chapter, we show that organizational action research is a part of certain general societal development trends that make it clear that industrial democracy, self-managing groups and self-leadership, for example, are not just a discourse within organizational action research. The chapter thus unpacks the book’s first perspective: that, historically, participation has meant anything from simply taking part to co-determination and self-determination.

We have chosen to provide a brief sketch of the history of organizational participation based on a particular view which distinguishes between participation understood as trade-union-based participation by workers as a class, and participation understood as management’s involvement of the individual employee. There are other divisions we could have chosen as our criterion. For example, some understandings of participation refer to processes, and others to results. Heller, Pusi, Strauss & Wilpert (1998) put it like this:

Definitions of participation abound. Some authors insist that participation must be a group process, involving groups of employees and their boss; others stress delegation, the process by which the *individual* employee is given greater freedom to make decisions on his or her own. Some restrict the term ‘participation’ to formal institutions, such as works councils; other definitions embrace ‘informal participation’, the day-to-day relations between supervisors and subordinates in which subordinates are allowed substantial input into work decisions. Finally, there are those who stress participation as a *process* and those who are concerned with participation as a *result*. (p. 18)

Similarly, Wilkinson & Dundon (2010) note that participation means very different things in different European countries and that there exist many different forms and methods:

... we find employers in different countries use the same terms for employee participation (engagement, voice, involvement, or empowerment) in different ways. Some forms of direct participation coexist and overlap with other techniques, such as suggestions schemes, quality circles, or consultative forums. (p. 167)

In this chapter, we present four different understandings of participation in organizations in Europe, with the emphasis on the post-1945 period. They are particularly inspired by Wilkinson, Gollan, Marchington & Lewin (2010), Wilkinson & Dundon (2010) and Budd, Golan & Wilkinson (2010). This is a crude subdivision, as the different understandings overlap in time and in content. We have chosen here to present some general development trends relating to employee participation. This means that the chapter does not touch on differences between industries, organizations, countries or parts of the world.

The *first* understanding features in the working life of Europe mainly from the end of the Second World War to, roughly speaking, the 1970s. It is about participation as industrial democracy. Here, participation is tied to trade union representation. This results in wage earners gaining increased influence in companies through trade unions. This takes the form of predominantly advisory works committees and an increase in shop stewards' powers. In organizational action research, industrial democracy manifests itself especially in the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project, where participation is both a democratic goal and a means to increased efficiency. We shall return to this in Chapter 5.

The *second* understanding comes into play from around the 1980s to the present day. It is about participation as individual involvement. Here, participation is no longer the involvement by management of the trade unions, but of the individual employees. Participation becomes a means, i.e. a management tool for improving production efficiency. This typically takes place in industrial companies in the form of so-called self-managing teams, for example, in which skilled and unskilled employees become involved and are given advisory functions and limited authority to make decisions concerning day-to-day production. In this understanding, wage earners become co-workers. The management philosophy is known as Human Resource Management (Wilkinson, Bacon, Redman & Snell, 2010).

The *third* understanding comes into play from around the 1990s to the present day. It sees participation as self-leadership (DiLiello & Houghton,

2006; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Pearce & Manz, 2005). Here, we also see a special form of instrumental participation particularly associated with the fact that team-based organization has spread to the knowledge society, which also includes public-sector organizations with highly educated employees. Employee participation no longer just means influence on day-to-day operations, but on organizational development, too. Employees thus come to be understood as self-leading members of the organization, i.e. as stakeholders on a par with other groups such as managers, customers, other decision-makers etc. Human Resource Management is thus expanded to encompass organizational development.

The *fourth* understanding is older. It was in play in the wake of the societal upheavals in Europe around the First World War. Here, participation was not understood as involvement, but as worker autonomy, with participation an end in itself. The basic idea was that the workers constituted the management through works councils chosen by themselves (Crusius, Schiefelbein & Wilke, 1978; Materna, 1978). The idea ended in its antithesis, i.e. as dictatorship, wherever it was tried. Since then, this idea has functioned as a critique of the other understandings of participation, which, from its point of view, are seen as particular mechanisms of exploitation (Lucio, 2010; Mouffe, 2011).

In our view, there are four aspects to participation:

An *ethical* aspect having to do with human dignity, with humanism in a broad sense, including the idea that the individual should have the greatest possible influence over his own (working) life (Wilkinson & Dundon, 2010, p. 169). Budd (2004) terms this aspect ‘equity’:

Equity in the employment relationship is a set of fair employment standards that respect human dignity, the sanctity of human life, and liberty and cover both material outcomes and personal treatment ... equity entails fairness in both the distribution of economic rewards (such as wages and benefits) and the administration of employment policies (such as nondiscriminatory hiring and firing). (p. 7–8)

This ethical understanding appears to be part of the basis of both the first conception, concerning industrial democracy, and the fourth, concerning radical democracy.

A *political* aspect having to do with the idea that one should have influence as a citizen and hence also as an employee. This appears to be part of the basis of both the first conception, concerning industrial democracy, and the fourth, concerning radical democracy.

A *socio-psychological* aspect having to do with improved quality of working life and humanization of working life, including a certain influence on one's own work. This seems to be part of the basis of all four conceptions.

An *economic* aspect having to do with increased organizational efficiency through a form of participation. This seems likewise to be part of the basis of all four conceptions, although the relationship between social psychology and economics is understood in different ways.

Budd (2004) also speaks of a religious justification for participation, which we do not examine further.

Below, we present an overview that attempts to combine historical phases, understandings and visions. The left-hand column indicates the understanding of participation; the middle column shows how the involved employees are viewed; the right-hand column shows how the participation unfolds.

Table 1:

<i>Understanding of participation</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Forms of participation</i>
Industrial democracy	Wage earner/trade union member	Trade union representation - predominantly advisory, on operational issues
Human Resource Management in industrial society	Co-worker/individual	Involvement in operational production issues
Human Resource Management in knowledge society	Organizational member/stakeholder/individual	Self-leadership in production and parts of development
Radical democratic perspective	Worker/economic and political power holder	Autonomy

## 2. Participation as industrial democracy

Wilkinson & Dundon (2010) describe participation as a catch-all term for many different ways of engaging or involving employees following the Second World War: 'We can try to make sense of the elasticity of the term by seeing participation as an umbrella term covering all initiatives designed to engage employees. However, one can identify two rather different philosophies underlying participation' (p. 169).

There are thus two main tendencies, they say, in the conception of participation from the mid-twentieth century onward.

One is about participation as industrial democracy. This conception is associated with a social democratic understanding. It is about greater participation by the workers as a class through the trade unions. The other is concerned with participation as individualized involvement. This conception is associated with a more liberal understanding. It is about greater involvement of the worker as an individual co-worker.

The conception of participation as industrial democracy gains ground in the wake of the Second World War, when a number of West European social democratic parties and trade unions propose the introduction of works councils with advisory functions within limited areas of working life (Geiger, 1979; IDE International Research Group, 1976, 1979, 1981a, 1981b). Later, the institution of the shop steward is extended. Wilkinson & Dundon (2010) define participation as industrial democracy as follows:

First, the concept of industrial democracy (which draws from notions of industrial citizenship), sees participation as a fundamental democratic right for workers to extend a degree of control over managerial decision making in an organization ... This also brings in notions of free speech and human dignity ... (p. 169)

Industrial democracy and democratic rights stress the political aspect of participation. It is an attempt to transfer thinking from democratic citizens' rights to the world of work (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970b; Wilkinson, Gollan, Marchington & Lewin, 2010). It derives from a desire to see democracy in political life rub off as a form of democratization of working life, making it less hierarchical (Thorsrud, 1976), for example. This also applies in reverse: industrial democracy will rub off on political democracy as a reinforcement of it. This endeavor

our depends on a collaboration between trade union, employers' organization and government, especially in the Scandinavian countries, where employees gain voice—the opportunity to make proposals—and limited choice, i.e. a limited right of decision making (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a; Thorsrud, 1976).

Participation, then, is about wage earners being ensured a voice in organizations. In the first instance, this happens through involvement of the trade union as the wage earners' representative. It takes place via works committees, extended shop steward powers and employee representatives on boards. In a number of European countries including Norway and Sweden, this form of influence is enshrined in statute (Elden, 1986; Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a; Wilkinson & Dundon, 2010). In the Norwegian industrial democracy project of the 1960s, however, this representative aspect constitutes only the initial phase of the project (see Chapter 5). Later, there is more emphasis on 'shop floor democracy' in the form of partially self-managing groups. Lessons from and knowledge of the organization of partially self-managing groups reached Norway from the Tavistock Institute's studies of British coal mines in the 1950s (see Chapter 4).

### **3. Two phases of participation as individualized involvement**

Since the 1980s, a neoliberal policy has to a large extent succeeded in rolling back trade union power (Boxall & Purcell, 2010; Wilkinson, Gollan, Marchington & Lewin, 2010). The understanding of participation as industrial democracy has also apparently lost influence. This has paved the way for an individualized understanding of participation. Participation was previously about the power relation between management and the trade union as the collective representative of the workers; now, it becomes more a matter of the relation between management and the individual employee. Wilkinson & Dundon (2010) argue that two phases are distinguishable in this individual understanding of participation from the 1980s onwards.

The first phase runs from the 1980s to the 1990s. It occurs particularly in industry, where participation as individualized involvement becomes a response to changed conditions of production that are no longer dominated by mass production and its long series (Wilkinson, Gollan, Marchington & Lewin, 2010). This phase puts Human Resource Management (HRM) on the agenda.

The second phase begins in the 1990s and continues into the twenty-first century. It springs from the growing spread of the knowledge society, globalization and the increasing complexity of the public sector. It means that team-based organization also spreads to knowledge-heavy organizations in the private and public sectors. Employees become increasingly involved in the organization and development of their own work. Participation comes to be about self-leadership (DiLiello & Houghton, 2006; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Pearce & Manz, 2005).

From the 1980s, participation comes to mean that management involves individual employees in work-related decisions directly and not, as before, through representative democracy via the trade unions (Wilkinson, Gollan, Marchington & Lewin, 2010). Initially, wage earners are consulted and gain the right of decision making on limited operational production issues such as those involving planning, direction and control of day-to-day production. Later, employees are also involved in the development of the organization and of their own work.

The new understanding of participation as involvement brings about a change in the way personnel are viewed. They go from being wage earners to being co-workers individually rewarded for their contribution to improved production efficiency. This takes the form of individual pay, performance bonuses etc. Budd, Golan & Wilkinson (2010, p. 304) therefore argue that participation in working life becomes individualized. This applies to both the first phase and the second. We therefore speak of participation not just as involvement, but as individualized involvement.

This means that participation becomes a management tool putting the focus on the demands of the market rather than employee rights as was the case with ideas of industrial democracy. Participation thus becomes a means of raising efficiency through involvement of the individual employees. This applies to both the first phase and the second. We therefore use the term 'instrumental' participation or involvement (Fricke, 2011, 2013). The political aspect of participation disappears, while the socio-psychological aspect is made into a means of the economic aspect (Hohn, 2000).

A corresponding critique is inherent in Greenwood & Levin's (1998) distinction between participation, understood as a democratizing endeavour, and empowerment, understood as an efficiency-improving endeavour. Nielsen (2004) similarly distinguishes between participation and involvement. Participation means a bottom-up movement in the direction of increased co-determi-



nation and democracy, with participation seen as an end in itself. Involvement and empowerment are defined as a management tool where employees are involved in decision making within a field demarcated by management, because involvement can be most efficient from a management point of view. In organizations, it may for example mean management deciding that the overriding goal of a change process is to reorganize a department from division by discipline to team-based organization. Within this organizational framework, the individual teams are tasked with defining the means, i.e. the sub-goals they will work towards, when they will do so, and how they will ensure the relevant skills development. In involvement, then, participation is made into a means or an instrument.

### **Phase 1: Participation as individualized involvement**

Until the 1980s, industrial production was dominated by mass production, i.e. the manufacture of long series of identical products and hence infrequent re-tooling (Budd, Golan & Wilkinson, 2010). This made managers better able to oversee the entire production process in their departments. They were usually in sole charge of planning, direction and control. Communication mainly took the form of information transfer in which managers were predominantly order givers, telling wage earners what to do and perhaps expanding on this with one-way communication in the form of newsletters etc. (Budd, Golan & Wilkinson, 2010, p. 304).

A change takes place around the beginning of the 1980s, when industrial production is to a great extent converted from mass production to small, customized series. Production for inventory is widely replaced with 'production on demand'. Together with the roll-back of trade unions (Gospel, 2010, p. 10) this apparently helps to create a new understanding of participation, described by Budd, Golan & Wilkinson (2010) as follows:

While the history of employee voice and participation is longstanding, there has been a sharp increase in interest in employee voice and participation among academics, practitioners, and policymakers in recent years. Among employers, the breakdown of the mass production era and the resulting quest for high-performance work practices that deliver flexibility and quality has generated widespread experimentation with methods for sharing information and consulting with employees, involving employees in workplace decision-making, and soliciting feed-

back ... At the same time, the global decline in union membership has opened the door for alternative voice mechanisms while also prompting renewed debates over the need for union voice and supportive public policies. (p. 305)

According to Budd, Golan & Wilkinson (2010), the new understanding of participation is about a growing group of employers and managers beginning to ask how they can involve employees in knowledge sharing and decision making so that work can be organized more flexibly and efficiently.

Participation in the sense of the use of so-called self-managing teams with self-motivating employees comes onto the agenda in the 1980s because self-managing teams can show greater flexibility in meeting new production demands for rapid retooling and knowledge sharing (Hohn, 2000; Mueller, Procter & Buchanan, 2000). No longer primarily the province of trade unions, participation become a matter for individual employees, who are increasingly organized into teams.

A new management philosophy, Human Resource Management (HRM), may be seen as a response to this development (Boxall & Purcell, 2010, p. 29). The HRM approach is about involving individual employees' resources to ensure efficiency in a period dominated by rapid retooling. Wage earners are no longer seen as a muscular appendage to the production machinery, primarily carrying out the orders of their immediate managers. They are understood as co-workers who need to have their brains and knowledge with them at work in order to contribute to the flow of production. HRM thus makes participation into a management tool having to do with individual involvement rather than a democratic right of workers (Boxall & Purcell, 2010, p. 42).

In the USA, according to Hohn (2000), two schools of thought crystallize: an early socio-psychological school in research on groups and teams, focusing on group dynamics, social processes and the quality of working life; and a later management-focused approach that emphasizes technology, goals, tasks, procedures and high-performance teams, i.e. performance and increased efficiency through teamwork (Ancona, 1987; Gillette & McCollom, 1995; Sanna & Parks, 1997). This understanding is developed in Katzenbach & Smith's (1993) book on high-performance teams, for example. Here, the humanization of working life and the improvement of efficiency seem to face off as two separate aspects of participation, and to be divided between the two research areas.

Our interpretation is that HRM can be seen as a particular combination of these two schools, with the efficiency aspect in pride of place while the socio-psychological humanizing aspect becomes its tool. It thus looks as though good intra-employee and employee-manager relations, and opportunities for employees to develop their resources, all become means to increased efficiency. Other researchers make similar points. Thus, Boxall & Purcell (2010, p. 42) writing about the progression from industrial democracy to HRM, state that production efficiency has out-competed industrial democracy's demand for representative participation through trade unions. At the same time, the political aspect of industrial democracy seems to be excluded in the HRM approach (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 25), so that the wage earner is no longer understood as a citizen with co-responsibility for democratic development.

There has been debate as to what influence employees gain when management involves them in decisions. Budd, Golan & Wilkinson (2010) state that participation as involvement rarely goes beyond the purely advisory—beyond voice, in other words. They conceive of it as direct communication dealing with day-to-day contact between individual employees and managers, and as upward problem solving in which employees can make proposals that may be included in management's decision-making basis:

... direct communication [and], upward problem-solving ... these are essentially direct and individually focused, often operating through face-to-face interactions between supervisors/first line managers and their staff. Some take the form of informal oral or verbal participation, while others are more formalized in the form of written information or suggestions. (p. 304)

Wilkinson & Dundon (2010) write that participation as involvement does not question managerial power in organizations. It proceeds on management's terms and leads to a number of new methods:

This new wave of participation was neither interested in nor allowed employees to question managerial power ... In effect, this was a period of employee participation on management's terms in response to a concern for competition, especially Japanese production methods which spawned in TQM [Total Quality Management], Quality Circles, and Six Sigma ... (p. 170)

Overall, our fundamental interpretation is that first-phase participation as involvement takes place within certain demarcated areas that are of an operational and tactical nature and defined by management. At the same time, it proceeds by the use of certain specific methods or designs defined in advance by management. It is therefore our interpretation that this is a case of management-choreographed participation being used instrumentally for financial, not ethical or political/democratic, purposes. Our fundamental interpretation disregards the socio-psychological aspect, where, historically, there may be big differences in employee satisfaction depending on a large number of factors such as organizational culture, market, management and colleagues.

### **Phase 2: Participation as individualized self-leadership**

From the 1990s onwards, instrumental participation grows more widespread in the world of work. It is no longer only in industrial companies that hourly paid employees—skilled and unskilled—are organized into so-called self-managing teams with a degree of influence on day-to-day production. Team-based organization is also introduced in numerous other organizations more firmly located in the knowledge economy. It thereby also becomes a dominant working format in many public-sector organizations. Highly educated staff are no longer organized into offices and departments, but into teams. There thus appears to be a tendency for formal hierarchies to become smaller, organizations flatter, and teams more numerous (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011; Nielsen, Jørgensen & Munch-Hansen, 2008; Wilkinson, Gollan, Marchington & Lewin, 2010).

There are many reasons for this. For one thing, in companies, knowledge is key to differentiating oneself as a condition of avoiding being outsourced as part of globalization (Wilkinson & Dundon, 2010, p. 170). For another, the knowledge society depends on a rising level of education among employees. They increasingly demand to be involved and to gain influence on their day-to-day working situation (Wilson & Dundon, 2010). It is our experience, based on several action research projects with knowledge workers, that the highly educated generally demand more co-determination than the less well-educated (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2006). Finally, interdisciplinary teams seem to be a response to growing complexity in the production of goods and services. This also applies to the public sector, which is characterized, for example, by frequent reorganizations resulting from new directives.

An executive in a Danish public-sector knowledge institution put it like this in a 2006 interview with us:

Our duties and working conditions are constantly changing ... We don't have much standard production and repetition. Staff have to handle highly differentiated, knowledge-based tasks for which they have to use new methods. We have team-based organization to give staff more responsibility, because we can't structure our work the way we used to in a more traditional hierarchy. We need staff who can practise self-management in teams on the basis of our values.

Growing complexity and the rising educational level of staff mean that HRM, which traditionally ensures employees a degree of influence on day-to-day production, is no longer sufficient. This leads to staff gaining influence not only on day-to-day production, but also on the development of production and of their skills, in order to create and secure continued development.

The concept of participation is thus extended to encompass the involvement of employees in the development of their workplace. That development, however, appears to be dictated not by management, but by itself, something also known as the necessity of development. Management therefore begins to focus even more on leadership, i.e. on coaching and facilitation (Elmholdt, Keller & Tanggaard, 2013). It becomes a matter of facilitating the supposed necessity of development. Where wage earners could originally be seen as an appendage to the machine, co-workers as organizational members can now be understood as an appendage to supposedly necessary development. Peters (2001) calls this form of involvement self-leadership.

In the first phase, up to 1990, participation as involvement can be seen as a paradox: a managerial diktat that employees had to be involved. They had to make proposals and give advice, take part in so-called self-managing teams with limited operational and tactical powers, and so on. Human Resource Management meant that human resources were subordinated to management. Self-leadership is similarly paradoxical in nature, but the paradox now seems blurred. The highly educated themselves demand to be involved. For example, we worked on an action research project with a group who found it 'unbelievably hurtful' that they were not involved in a decision on their organizational positioning (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2006).

Highly educated members of the knowledge society no longer seem to be workers, wage earners or co-workers. They seem to be organizational members on a par with numerous other stakeholders such as management, customers and other relevant decision makers (Larsen, Pedersen & Aagaard, 2005). When everyone is a stakeholder, the relationship between management and employees becomes blurred. The organization and its environment are increasingly portrayed as family relationships. Management is now not by diktat, but by values. Power discourses have competition from love discourses in the attempt to understand modern organizations (Andersen & Born, 2001).

Lucio (2010) gives three reasons why participation understood as self-leadership has come onto the agenda. The first concerns the use of employees' creativity; the second is about belonging; the third is about legitimization:

... participation ... is seen as an essential ingredient of the way organizations may harness employee creativity and commitment for the cause of economic success ... Second, participation facilitates a sense of belonging amongst workers. It responds to a sense of justice in that one is addressed less as an employee and more as part of an organization, as a stakeholder.

... Third, the role of participation is critical in terms of legitimacy ... Participation allows management to be seen as justified and reasonable in its actions. (p. 105)

To put it another way, self-leadership can be interpreted as a form of neoliberal governmentality (Mitchell, 2010). Governmentality means that the individual is brought up and trained to lead himself from inside in accordance with the dominant discourse. The highly educated individual can therefore perceive his self-leadership as different from traditional involvement, which was an instrumental participation dictated by management. We have, however, yet to come across a highly educated employee who was unaware of this fundamental dilemma: that he or she was to a large extent self-leading, and that self-leadership was at the same time an efficient form of control.

Peters (2001) speaks of self-leadership as dictated autonomy: '... the "dictated" autonomy conceals its own heteronomous determination: the subordinates ... internalize the power of command and can thus develop a feeling of independence' (pp. 147–48).

According to Peters, management becomes internalized as self-leadership. This, in his view, camouflages the fact that self-leadership is dictated by management. This is therefore a dictated form of autonomy that creates dependence. This can have individual-psychological, socio-psychological and physical consequences. In an interview with us in 2006, a highly educated employee in a Danish public-sector knowledge institution described his individual-psychological dilemma as follows:

Very often, we can see the positive in all the new initiatives, and we think it's very exciting to be part of all these assignments, but it's a two-sided coin. It's so exciting and fun in many situations, because you suddenly get the opportunity to go in one direction or the other and test your skills on some new assignments, but it's also very frustrating, because you have to tackle your day-to-day assignments at the same time. So you fly off at a tangent, and you can't physically cope with it, but that's also what makes it such fun to work here. Although a lot of things are very exciting, you also need to think about yourself.

Several researchers have pointed out how self-leadership is internalized as increased self-exploitation (Bovbjerg, 2001; Buch, Andersen, & Sørensen, 2009; Sennett, 1999). In a study of self-managing teams, Barker (1999) describes this internalization as follows: 'They [team members] were controlled, but in control' (p. 137). He defines self-exploitation socio-psychologically as 'concertive control'. This means that the team has the status of a sort of collective superego that controls its own interaction without itself being aware of it. With this internalization, the dilemmas of working life change character. The traditional dilemmas were mainly associated with the relationship between management and employees (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2006). They were about who decided what, i.e. about the limits of wage earners' or co-workers' decision-making authority. Where did they have voice, and where did they have choice? The modern dilemmas indicate the way this power question plays out within so-called self-managing or co-managing teams of organizational members. Below, we give some examples showing how such a team becomes a field of tension requiring team members to gain new conflict facilitation skills.

There may be contradictions between being a bogeyman/'middle manager' who has to give instructions to a colleague, and being a colleague; between wanting to help colleagues and having nothing left to offer; between

asking colleagues for help and feeling guilty about it because they are busy; in getting time off on a day when the team later turn out to be very busy; between supporting diversity and ignoring others' voices/wanting your own way; between wanting to be oneself and having to fit in with the team's standards; in wanting to hold meetings when others want to work undisturbed; in finding a balance between operations and development; between initiation and follow-up; between time spent on professional matters/'work' and time spent on all the other things (meetings, small talk etc.); between wanting to embrace new things and feeling you haven't the time; between attending to one's own area and considering the whole; between sharing knowledge/learning from the best and having to meet deadlines at the same time; between desiring flexibility and having no time for training; between wanting to make a proper contribution to one's team and having many other tasks at the same time; between positive stress (job satisfaction, engagement, professional pride) and negative stress (overwork, forgetfulness, inability to see the big picture etc.); between having an exciting job and finding time for family, leisure etc. (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2006).

We have chosen to list many examples of modern team dilemmas in order to underline their complexity and to point out that increasing stress often seems to be associated with self-leadership (Busck, Knudsen & Jørgensen, 2009). Sennett (1999) talks about the corrosion of character by modern capitalism. Lucio (2010) writes that emancipation today can be seen as self-mutilation: 'A new functionalism prevails which reconfigures the dream of emancipation, and hence mutates it into a parody where the individual involves themselves in their own self-mutilation' (p. 123).

Pihl-Thingvad (2012), however, indicates that self-leadership seems to reduce perceived stress. There are therefore mixed views of the new methods employed in participation as self-leadership. These include, for example, greater use of so-called self-managing teams, employee development interviews and staff satisfaction surveys. Some researchers see them as new mechanisms of employee control; others see them as opportunities for organizational members to contribute to the promotion of better working conditions for themselves (Pearce & Manz, 2005). We understand participation by self-leadership as a two-edged sword (Buch, Andersen & Sørensen, 2009).



## 4. Participation as autonomy

Seen in a larger historical perspective, participation has not always been defined as industrial democracy, as individualized involvement or as self-leadership. In connection with revolutionary trends in several European countries around the First World War, participation meant autonomy, i.e. self-determination. This applied not only politically, but also in the world of work. In a radical democratic endeavour, anarcho-syndicalist and socialist movements sought to create workers' and soldiers' councils to govern organizations and societies from the bottom up (Crusius, Schiefelbein & Wilke, 1978; Materna, 1978). Elected council representatives had had leadership delegated up to them, so to speak, and they could be replaced if they did not act in accordance with the demands of the workers or the people. In practice, as we have said, the reverse became the case.

Today, too, as we have shown, participation describes the opposite, namely a top-down endeavour that acts as a form of involvement, i.e. as a management tool, with management in private and public sector organizations involving employees within a certain framework set by management, while it looks as though the individual employees are self-leading. The political and ethical aspects thus appear to have been eliminated from the modern concept of participation. Lucio (2010) describes it, with reference to HRM, as follows:

What has emerged in the past twenty or so years is a view of participation in contemporary approaches to HRM that is concerned with the extent to which they undermine the autonomy of independent voice mechanisms. Participation is being remoulded managerially to undermine autonomous and independent representative mechanisms and to tie them closer to the needs and agendas of capitalist organizations ... the new modes of participation create spaces for involvement which are fragmented and disconnected from broader social and macro-oriented agendas. (p. 119)

This radical democratic critique does not seem to have much wind in its sails today. A laconic remark by Wilkinson & Dundon (2010) provides a sort of status report on this and similar utopian tendencies: 'A utopian view of participation extending further and deeper as organisations become more democratic (Gratton, 2004) is not supported' (p. 182).

## 5. Some conclusions

Three of the four conceptions of participation we have presented in this chapter are about ‘employee participation’ in the day-to-day work of organizations.<sup>1</sup> They range from participation as a collective affair in the form of industrial democracy and collaboration between trade unions, government and employees, to participation as an individual affair in the form of instrumental participation as a management tool and as self-leadership in teams. Chapter 2 thus presents examples of the book’s first perspective, which is about participation or involvement having had several different meanings. The three conceptions also show that participation unfolds in a tension field between participation as a means of improving efficiency and generating revenue, and participation as the humanization and perhaps the democratization of working conditions. We have encapsulated this tension in the book’s seventh perspective.

## Reflections

This chapter is about participation within organizational theory. Employee participation has largely turned out to mean (partially) self-managing groups and teams. It is a weakness of the chapter that it remains unclear what ‘self-managing groups or teams’ mean, concretely, in a given organization. This is true of both trade-union-based and individual participation. Can employees influence whether self-managing groups are to be set up? Can they influence where the boundary lies between management’s sphere of competence and that of the group? Do the employees have voice, i.e. co-influence, where they can make proposals? Do they also have choice, i.e. co-determination, where they can also participate in decisions? Is their co-influence or co-determination merely about means, i.e. about methods of carrying out managerial decisions, or do they have an independent decision space?

These questions show how complicated participation is in practice. We hope the following chapters will come closer to some assorted answers. These chapters focus on action research in organizations. They revolve around the same issue as does organizational development theory: what is to be understood by employee participation. They add a new question: what does it mean

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1 In what follows, we are concerned only with the first three conceptions of participation, because the fourth has, historically, been less widespread in organizations.

to involve employees and local managers in the action research process, i.e. in the practical and theoretical dimensions of the change process? Do they become respondents in studies carried out by the trade union, employer's association or researchers? Do they become co-researchers? Or something else?

**Part II:**  
**An empathetic-critical view of  
participation in organizational  
action research in the twentieth  
century**  
**—From self-managing groups to  
co-generation of practical and  
theoretical change?**

## **Chapter 3**

# **Change-oriented social science: Early organizational action research in the USA in the 1940s**

### **What and why**

Chapter 3 discusses Kurt Lewin's view of participation, change and action research in organizations. German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) is regarded by many as the founder of action research. For Lewin and his colleagues, the three concepts mentioned are closely connected. They understand organizational action research to mean experiments in which changes are generated and studied at the same time. Lewin thus combines action with research. This is achieved through various forms of participation.

The chapter analyses a series of experiments that took place at the Harwood textile mill in Virginia between 1939 and 1946. The experiments show that questions of participation and efficiency have been on the agenda ever since Lewin and his colleagues realized it was possible to increase efficiency at Harwood by experimenting with participatory and democratic management and partially self-managing groups. By linking economic efficiency improvement with participation, organizational action research thus took on elements of Organizational Development (OD) from the outset. The chapter thus illustrates the book's seventh perspective, that participation unfolds in the tension field between efficiency improvement, humanization and democratization.

The Harwood experiments indicate a particular understanding of participation. The mill workers were involved in questions about means. For example, they debated how to implement decisions already taken by management and action researchers to make production more efficient. As mentioned earlier, we call this involvement or instrumental participation. Participation in theoretical questions of the research process meant collaboration among the researchers, who made use of feedback from the workers in their experiments.

We hope that readers will be able to use this chapter to problematize their own underlying assumptions, whether they are engaged in action research processes, organizational development or consultancy where there is a desire to involve employees, their managers and perhaps other stakeholders. Should

employees contribute to determining the purpose of the project, for example, or its design? Should they have influence on the research process? Whose interests should a project serve?

At the outset of an action research project in a municipality, an employee asked us: ‘Whose project is this, anyway? Is it management’s to use to make themselves look forward-thinking and increase efficiency at the same time? Is it yours to use to raise your research profile? Or is it ours to use to create better working conditions?’. The question hints at some fields of tension that one enters when seeking to contribute to the generation of change in organizations.

## **1. Aims and perspectives**

The Harwood studies have been seen as the beginning of Organizational Development and organizational action research (Burnes, 2007; van Elteren, 1993; Marrow, 1969, 1972; Pasmore & Fagans, 1992; Zimmerman, 1978). They have also been regarded as key because they move Lewin’s research on groups from the laboratory into organizations, and because they play a part in the development of his concept of change (Burnes, 2007). A new agenda was set at the Harwood mill. It was characterized by experiments in participatory management, self-managing groups and democratic management style. This was action research, and as such it did not just want to study changes in organizations, but to generate them.

The chapter will enquire whether, and if so to what degree, the workers participated in the action research process during these experiments. On the basis of this enquiry, the chapter has two aims: first, it will show that participation was present to a certain degree in the Harwood experiments. This took the form of worker co-determination in group discussions and decision-making on the most appropriate methods—i.e. it took the form of management attempts to practise participative management. The words ‘to a certain degree’ indicate that participation was limited to discussion of and decisions on the means of increasing efficiency, i.e. ‘how’ questions about means and methods. The overriding organizational goal of increasing productivity through changes to the group dynamics in working groups was set by management and the action researchers. In this way, participation was practised as involvement, i.e. as a management tool or a means (Nielsen, 2004). In the chapter, this is understood as an example of instrumental participation (Fricke, 2011, 2013). Organizational action research thus seems to begin as a form of Organizational

Development studies (Burnes & Cooke, 2012). Then again, these experiments could also be viewed in relation to their time, when they presumably gave the workers more co-influence in a period when they were not usually consulted.

Secondly, the chapter will show that participation in the theoretical questions of the research process takes place primarily as collaboration among researchers. Workers are part of the researchers' field experiments and produce data for them. Action research thus means experiments moving out from university laboratories to the organization at Harwood. We have been unable to find examples of the involvement of the workers as co-producers of knowledge, or as decision-makers in the theoretical discussions of the research process, being raised as an issue.

We link these two aims with a discussion of Lewin's view of planned change. This has been criticized as linear and causal (Kanter, Stein & Jick, 1992, p. 10) and as making action research into a short-term intervention (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 18). We conclude that Lewin regards action research as a long-term process. He sees no contradiction between emergence and planning. He restricts planning to the first phase of action research projects. After that, one must feel one's way forward on the basis of the lessons gleaned. Finally, we frame issues of participation and change in philosophy of science terms. Here, we discuss Lewin's view of action research as a change-oriented social science on a natural science foundation.

The chapter is in six parts. An introduction sets the context (Section 1). This is followed by a presentation of the Harwood studies and the literature on them (Section 2). Then comes a more detailed description of the Harwood experiments (Section 3). This leads on to a discussion of the degree of participation (Section 4) and of Lewin's view of change (Section 5). Finally, the view of participation and change is situated in relation to an overall discussion, in philosophy of science terms, of Lewin's view of action research (Section 6). The last two sections summarize the chapter in a series of conclusions, and reflect on its underlying assumptions.

## **2. The Harwood studies: Action research at Harwood**

The Harwood company had previously been located only in New England. In 1939, it opened a new mill in the town of Marion, in a rural part of Virginia. Harwood was a family-owned company, and Alfred J. Marrow was the third

and last generation. Marrow met Lewin in 1934 in connection with his post-graduate studies, and invited him to visit the factory in 1939.<sup>2</sup>

The workers at Harwood were unskilled women who had not done factory work before (Marrow, 1969, p. 141). The Marion factory was particularly having problems with low efficiency, high rates of sick leave and high workforce turnover as compared with the one in New England. Lewin did not understand these problems from an individual-focused point of view. He saw them in relation to the management style of the local factory foremen and to workload. He therefore set the problem in an organizational context and also recommended that the mill should launch its own research programme.

Lewin did not carry out the research at Harwood himself, but took part in a series of meetings at the mill (Marrow, 1969, p. 143). Two former PhD students of his from the University of Iowa, Alex Bavelas and John R. P. French, were in charge of the actual research, with Lewin acting as mentor (Burnes, 2007, p. 216). Marrow (1972) and Lewin describe the research at Harwood as action research:

We agreed that the emphasis was to be on action, but action as a function of research. Each step taken was to be studied. Continuous evaluation of all steps would be made as they followed one another. The rule would be: No research without action, no action without research. (p. 90)

This was probably the first time Lewin's view of action research had been tried out in organizations outside university laboratories (Burnes, 2007). The action research at Harwood was carried out as a dual process:

- A series of experiments were set up to solve some concrete organizational problems at the factory. Previous change processes had moved workers to new jobs that they were not as proficient at as the ones they had been used to. This had brought about lower productivity and increased workforce turnover (Marrow, 1969, p. 149). This was to be avoided in the new experiments.
- At the same time, a research process was going on. It continuously assessed how these experiments were working in the organization (Burnes, 2007,

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2 Marrow was CEO of Harwood. He was a qualified psychologist and also became a board member of organizations such as MIT and CCI. As such, Marrow was a key figure in work on organizational development in the USA.



p. 217). Action research therefore became research into how changes work, i.e. what generates the conditions for change, and how it proceeds. These changes were initiated by management and action researchers.

### ***Silence about the Harwood studies***

The Harwood studies are rarely mentioned in connection with the series of experiments and theories traditionally seen as the foundation of Organizational Development—in contrast to the Hawthorne studies or Maslow’s pyramid of needs, for example (Burnes, 2007). In a way this is strange, because the Harwood studies yielded the expected results. They showed a positive correlation between increasing participation on the one hand, and increased productivity and falling rates of sickness absence and workforce turnover on the other. The Hawthorne studies, in contrast, did not end with the planned results. They indicated the so-called Hawthorne effect, namely that productivity rises when management and researchers pay more attention to the workers (Eisenberg, Goodall & Tretheway, 2010). Some researchers assert that the Harwood experiments appear to have had more impact on the development of participatory group processes, management etc., and on the understanding of resistance to change in organizational development, than the Hawthorne studies have (Burnes, 2007; Burnes & Cooke, 2012; Dent, 2002).

### ***Sources and view of the period***

The chapter is based on primary and secondary sources. Lewin himself did not write about the Harwood experiments in detail and made only limited reference to them (Lewin, 1947a). The chapter therefore draws on a number of articles written by Lewin in collaboration with several of his former PhD students, or by them alone, to document and contextualize the Harwood experiments (Coch & French, 1948; French, 1950; Lewin & Bavelas, 1942; Lewin, Lippitt & White, 1939; Lippitt & White, 1947). The chapter also uses Lewin’s (1947a and 1947b) two articles on group dynamics to determine his view of participation, change and action research.<sup>3</sup>

The chapter also draws on other articles and books. Marrow (1969) wrote about the Harwood studies in a chapter on ‘Action Research in Industry’ in

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3 We take no position on the debate as to whether it was Lewin who developed the three-step model of change (unfreeze, change, refreeze) normally attributed to him (Cummings, Bridgman & Brown, 2016).

his biography of Kurt Lewin, and about ‘The effects of participation on performance’ (1972). Burnes (2004, 2007) writes about the contribution of the Harwood studies to Lewin’s development of his theories of the field, group dynamics, change, action research and democracy. Adelman (1993), van Elteren (1993) and Moreland (1996), in contrast to Burnes (2007), take a critical view.

Unlike us, Burnes (2004, 2007) had access to archives on the Harwood studies in the USA. We have chosen to use his presentation of these sources in Section 3. Extracts from this are indicated with quotation marks.

### **3. The Harwood Experiments**

Marrow (1969, p. 217) writes that most of the experiments carried out at Harwood concerned:

- group decisions (Bavelas)
- self-management (Bavelas)
- leadership training (French)
- changing stereotypes (French)
- overcoming resistance to change (French and Coch).

We will follow this sequence below. However, we will not touch on issues of changing stereotypes as this is less relevant to the focus of the chapter.

#### ***Experiments with participatory group decisions***

Bavelas carries out repeated experiments with a small group of the most efficient operators. He has some informal conversations with them, lasting about 30 minutes, over a 5-month period:

‘Therefore, in 1940–1941, when Bavelas was asked to conduct experiments to increase productivity, he was already primed to use a group-based participative approach. He selected a small group of the company’s most productive operators and met with them several times a week. These were brief, 30 – minute, informal meetings. The group was asked to discuss the barriers to increasing production. They began by discussing their individual working methods. In so doing, it became clear that workers doing the same job often used different methods. The group talked about why this was so and the merits and drawbacks of

their different approaches. They also identified changes that the company's management would need to make to improve productivity. These were accepted by the company.' (Burnes, 2007, p. 218)

Bavelas uses methods including both group discussions and voting on proposals. The operators discuss their individual working methods especially. They talk about the differences between them, their advantages and disadvantages, and necessary changes at factory level. This approach is derived from an earlier study of three different management styles (autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire) (Lewin, Lippitt & White, 1939). The method apparently contributes to solving the problems of declining productivity. Burnes (2007, p.218) adds that Bavelas tests Lewin's hypothesis that it is not enough to discuss and make proposals; the discussion must conclude with democratic decisions. It therefore looks as though the workers need to have both voice and choice (Cornwall, 2011). This can help to anchor changes because they are 're-frozen' by group decisions.

Marrow (1969) elaborates on Lewin's perception that employee influence (voice) must be linked to employee decision-making or employee determination (choice):

Lewin explained, 'Motivation alone does not suffice to lead to change. This link is provided by decisions. A process like decision making, which takes only a few minutes, is able to affect conduct for many months to come. The decision seems to have a "freezing" effect which is partly due to the individual's tendency to "stick to his decision" and partly to the "commitment to a group"'. (p. 144)

### ***Experiments with participatory management training***

There also seems to have been training of managers in participatory democratic management at Harwood (Burnes, 2007). Here, researchers began to study the correlation between participatory democratic management and productivity. This brought the training of managers' interpersonal communication skills onto the agenda, because those skills are important to various forms of group dynamics. Bavelas, and later French (1945), were in charge of this training. According to French, it was based on these principles:

- The managers are not to be taught, i.e. attend a lecture or be pupils in a classroom. They are to take part in a ‘clinic’, i.e. train.
- The training is emergent.
- It is problem-focused.
- It uses role-play.
- It uses follow-up in the form of work on problems between training sessions.

Burnes (2007) cites this source from the training sessions:

‘At Lewin’s suggestion, French initiated an experimental leadership training program for all line managers. The first set of six training sessions was conducted by French between December 7, 1944, and January 25, 1945.<sup>2</sup> French introduced the first session by saying, “What we will try to do is make it not a lecture, not a class, but a clinic where we will bring in the problems that are bothering us for discussion.” He then asked the participants to address three questions:

1. What is the most frequent problem you meet? I don’t mean problems that have to do with the machines or sewing in a straight line, but the personal problems that bother you.
2. What is your most difficult problem?
3. What is the most distasteful problem you meet?

The answers provided the basis for two role-play exercises, the objective being for them to gain insights into their own and other people’s behavior (French, 1945). In the following sessions, various other scenarios were enacted, and between meetings the participants would try out different approaches to the problems they faced, and the results of these would be discussed in the following training session’ (p. 220).

<sup>2</sup>. The following information is taken from the notes of these sessions in the Marrow papers in the Archives of the History of American Psychology.’ (p.229)

It is our interpretation that these experiments indicate a sort of ambiguity or tension with respect to the foremen’s co-determination. On the one hand, they do not appear to have been asked what the objective of the process should be.

It was apparently an objective set by senior management (Marrow) and the action researchers (Lewin, French et al.). The objective is that the foremen should become more participatory and democratic in their management style. On the other hand, we see French's distinction between class/lecture and clinic as an understanding of the relationship between learning, emergence and planning in action research which, for 1945, can be said to be far ahead of its time. It is apparently the foremen themselves who are to define which are the problems inhibiting productivity that they want to work on. We have encountered foremen in Denmark, for example, as recently as the 1990s, who regarded such an understanding of learning, emergence and planning as too unstructured and radical. They were used to training being about handling cases set by the instructor/researcher.

### ***Experiments in overcoming resistances to change***

After Lewin's death, Coch & French (1948) worked on resistances to change. Here, French acted as researcher and Coch as personnel manager.

The workers were against frequent changes of job in the factory making them take on new functions. The factory wanted the action researchers to develop methods that could handle or counteract this resistance. They wanted to prevent changes causing a fall in productivity (Burnes, 2007).

It seems to have been French and Coch who designed the experiments. We have found no sources indicating that the workers were involved in the design. Coch & French (1948), and later French (1950, p. 88), used what they called a democratic participatory method to overcome this 'resistance'. They carried out some experiments aimed at finding out how to reduce the likelihood of resistance to changes. Coch & French (1948) used groups with three different degrees of participation. In this way, they wanted to investigate the correlation between participation and resistance. French (1950) discovered that the degree of resistance was inversely proportional to the degree of participation. The more participation, the less resistance. French (1950) concludes: 'Not only was the productivity after change of the three types of groups proportional to the degree of participation, but the amount of aggression expressed towards management and the turnover rate also varied inversely with the degree of participation' (p. 90).

Coch & French (1948) write that they draw on Lewin's work and his understanding of resistance. Lewin stresses that it is not the individual worker who puts up resistance. It is a series of interconnected forces or conditions that

can oppose change processes. Lewin evidently does not have an individual-focused concept of resistance. He understands resistance as forces in the field.

These experiments put the relationship between participation and involvement in the organizational process on the agenda. In our own projects, we have struggled with the tensions between participation and involvement. We have often been in doubt as to whether we are just involving employees in experiments that we have already agreed with senior management. We have found no instances of French and Coch reflecting on this question.

Adelman (1993) has a critical discussion of Lewin's contribution to the genesis of action research. He problematizes the direct linkage between organizational action research, efficiency and democratic participation: 'Action research was the means of systematic enquiry for all participants in the quest for greater effectiveness through democratic participation' (p. 7).

#### **4. Discussion of Lewin's view of participation**

This section has a dual focus. It is concerned, on the one hand, with participation in the practical dimension of action research, i.e. with organizational changes. It is about the correlation between democratic participation and productivity, between management style and productivity, and between democratic participation, management style and resistance. On the other hand, it is concerned with participation in the theoretical dimension of action research, i.e. with the understanding of the conditions for generating organizational changes. This is particularly a matter of whether and how the workers participate in the researchers' experiments. The dimensions are integrated and are discussed in relation to tensions that are about power, and hence about inclusion and exclusion.

##### ***Two fundamental issues around participation as involvement***

The Harwood experiments bring up two fundamental issues around participation as involvement:

First, should the workers, in the researchers' view, have both voice and choice in decision-making processes? As mentioned above, Bavelas tests Lewin's hypothesis that it is not enough to debate and make proposals. The discussion must conclude with democratic decisions in order to ensure anchoring.

Second, is participation as involvement studied by researchers through emergent and problem-focused processes in which the workers speak from their own experience, or through processes planned in detail by the researchers alone?

As far as we can see, this is the first time these two issues arise in the history of action research. They anticipate later debates about the understanding of participation as involvement. Is participation conceived of as voice and deliberation in a weak sense, i.e. as co-influence—or as voice combined with choice, i.e. as co-determination (see Chapter 6 on democratic dialogues)? Is participation understood as emergent and experience-based processes, and/or as the planning of all phases of the project (see Section 5, and Chapter 7 on co-generative learning)? How do action researchers understand workers' reactions to experiments? Are they interpreted on the basis of predetermined theories—as psychological resistance, for example—or in relation to the field and the context (see Chapter 4 on Tavistock)?

### *Participation as involvement and/or humanization?*

As early as 1920, Lewin (1920) mounted a critique of Taylorism in which he spoke of the psychological significance of work for the workers:

Only a precise examination of the psychological factors involved in various kinds of works can point to the specific tasks and goals of increasing the value to life of that work, which can be undertaken either directly using psychological means or with general technical improvements. (p. 20) (own translation from German).

In the above quotation, Lewin's understanding of the significance of work can be interpreted as a humanistic approach in which work has value in itself and is not merely a means of increasing productivity.

In French's (1950) studies, a key question in the Harwood experiments is whether there is a correlation between democratic methods and productivity. He understands democracy as a group's co-determination, as distinct from it being the manager who takes the decision: 'So the first step was to study the effect of one aspect of the total complex we call democracy—namely, decision making by the group rather than by the leader' (p. 84).

Coch, too, carries out an experiment investigating the interrelationship between democratic participation, working methods and productivity. Coch

talks about a ‘total participation technique’ as the highest form of participation (French, 1950, p. 90). As he describes it: ‘... all members of the group received an explanation of why the change was necessary, and participated in designing the new methods and setting the new piece rates’ (p. 90).

Here, then, the highest form of participation consists of the workers gaining influence over means and methods. They do not gain influence over the objective, which has been determined in advance. The experiments described by Coch result in ‘... an increase in production, reaching a level of approximately 15 per cent higher than their production before the change’ (p. 90).

It thus appears that both French and Coch take the objective of higher productivity for granted as their starting point. This is also supported by a distinction drawn by French (1950) between pure laboratory experiments and field experiments: ‘... the dominant objective of industry is production and this objective cannot be subordinated to the research objectives of a field experiment ... Most fundamentally, it must render a service which helps the practitioner to achieve his practical objectives’ (p. 91).

French understands field experiments as means to help practitioners attain practical objectives in organizations. For example, experiments do not seem to be expected to question the objectives, which are apparently taken for granted.

French (1950) writes that it is not only a matter of raising productivity through participation, but also of achieving greater job satisfaction through participation:

Not only was the productivity after change of the three types of groups proportional to the degree of participation, but the amount of aggression expressed towards management and the turnover rate also varied inversely with the degree of participation. Thus we see that greater participation leads to both greater productivity and greater satisfaction in the group. (p. 90)

We are not convinced that less expressed aggression and lower workforce turnover can be interpreted as valid indicators of higher job satisfaction being generated in the work group through participation. Lower aggression toward management might also, for example, reflect a suspicion among the workers that the action researchers will be going to see senior management, making them reticent in their criticism. Lower workforce turnover can contribute to



both increased and decreased productivity. It may, for example, reflect a greater scarcity of job opportunities elsewhere in the vicinity.

To sum up, we can see that the workers participate in discussions and have co-determination of methods and means. They have to secure the objectives and changes mapped out by senior management. Democratic participation thus appears to function in these experiments as a means to increased efficiency. We interpret these examples as showing that participation takes on the character of a means, i.e. of involvement. Lewin's original humanization aspect seems to disappear at Harwood in favour of an efficiency-enhancing agenda. The action research project thus illustrates the book's seventh perspective, in which participation unfolds in the field of tension between efficiency improvement, humanization and democratization. We cannot know whether these interpretations are correct, however. We do not know how the workers felt about the experiments or what they gained from them. Nor do we know whether they were interviewed and related their own versions of the process. Still, we may imagine that they gained experience of a form of democracy that they would not otherwise have had in the Virginia of the 1940s.

Organizational action research apparently begins as a form of Organizational Development. At the same time, through the experiments, new agendas of voice and choice, of planning and emergence, and of the understanding of resistance, are set within action research.

### ***Workers as partners in the theoretical dimension of the research process?***

We now turn from workers' and foremen's influence in the practical dimension of the action research process to their influence on the theoretical dimension. A key issue here is whether they act as working partners and co-producers of knowledge in the researchers' experiments. Lewin (1920) criticized Taylorism for making research subjects into guinea pigs ('Versuchskarnickel'). He distinguishes between Taylorism's abuse of workers and psychological experiments that seek to build the subjects' trust:

Among psychologists, who have always been suspicious of Taylorism in Germany for sociopolitical reasons, an understanding is beginning to gain ground that a fruitful examination of the work process requires support and, indeed, direct cooperation from the worker. As with psychological experiments in general, an essential task of the "subject" is to be a "self-observer", i.e. to be able to provide information about the

specifics of their working methods under certain test conditions. The worker therefore need not fear being misused or degraded as a guinea pig. (p. 19) (own translation from German).

It therefore becomes important to ask what this collaboration between researchers and workers consists of and how it is practised. Are the workers the ones who are to provide the researchers with information or data?

Bavelas's experiments with participatory group decision-making indicate that it is the researcher who selects the group from among the most productive operators. Not all workers are involved as group members or in deciding its composition. There does not seem to be any co-production of objectives. At the same time, the workers and foremen are participants in the theoretical dimension of the research process. Their experiential, problem-focused group discussions and decisions are the basis on which the researchers choose the next steps in the research process.

Lewin's collaborator, Lippitt (1947), writes that Lewin began to conceive of the researcher-worker collaboration as an intimate working relationship between two experienced groups of practitioners and researchers:

... Kurt Lewin came to see more and more clearly the necessary relationship between action personnel and research personnel in carrying out fruitful experimental designs ... It became obvious to him that for many types of experimentations a very intimate working relationship between highly skilled social practitioners with an interest in research and highly skilled researchers with an understanding of social action was necessary. (p. 90)

Here, Lippitt outlines some approaches to understanding the collaborative relationship in the action research process as something more than participation in the researchers' experiments. Moreover, Marrow (1969, p. 88) gives many examples of the way Lewin practised brainstorming ('Quasselstrippe') and dialogue, not only with his students, but with everyone he came into contact with. Many of the interviewees in Marrow's biography of Lewin emphasize that he was spontaneous, engaged and democratic in his behaviour toward them. We therefore hypothesize that Lewin had a special skill in creating relationships and building inspiring inquiry spaces in research processes.

The intimate working relationship between experienced groups of researchers and practitioners described by Lippitt may possibly have been present in these experiments. However, we have found no evidence that the workers were involved in the theoretical dimension of the research process. From a modern perspective, we could wish to have seen the workers' non-participation as decision-makers in this dimension mentioned as a problem. Van Elteren (1993) expresses similar observations about the limits of participation:

A closer look at the successive experiments reveals that in each case a predetermined goal by management was at stake with which the researcher(s) and the group leader(s) seem to have agreed. (p. 346)

In this action research also a certain 'domestication' of the workers took place ... due to participative methods within the tradition of 'democratic social engineering', to which Lewin committed himself soon after his arrival in the USA. (p. 351)

We could wish for more detailed analysis by van Elteren of what the actual working relationship was like in both the practical and the theoretical dimension. We cannot judge whether 'domestication' actually occurred. It may equally be, for example, that the workers developed their professional and personal skills through the experiments in ways that would not otherwise have been possible?

### ***Participation and power***

Fundamentally, the degree of participation can be understood as a question of power. Co-influence and co-determination can be seen as reflecting differing balances of power. This is also true of the following questions: who decides that a change process is to be initiated? Do shifts occur in the relationship between owners/managers, employees and action researchers during the process? Who is included, and who is excluded (see Chapter 1, Section 1)?

Van Elteren's (1993) view is that the Harwood studies meant a domestication or taming of the workers, rather than liberation and emancipation. Similarly, Adelman's (1993) view is that Lewin and his partners took no position on questions of economic power in the relationship between managers and workers:

However, Lewin's ideas on democratic participation in the workplace did not include any critique of the wider society, particularly the range of economic relations between worker and employer, capital and labour. Indeed a fair observation would be that although Lewin and his co-workers demonstrated the efficacy of action research for improving productivity, they did not develop conceptual structures that took explicit account of the power bases that define social roles and strongly influence the process of any change in the modes of production. (p.10)

Lewin was Jewish; he left Germany in 1933. He was theoretically and practically preoccupied with social discrimination. This is evident in his theoretical understanding of organizations (1947b), for example. Here, he talks about board members, CEOs and other gatekeepers who have the power to decide who is to be included and who excluded:

Gate sections are governed either by impartial rules or by "gate keepers." In the latter case an individual or group is "in power" for making the decision between "in" or "out." Understanding the functioning of the gate becomes equivalent then to understanding the factors which determine the decisions of the gate keepers and changing the social process means influencing or replacing the gate keeper. (p. 145) ... Thus if we think of trying to reduce discrimination within a factory, a school system, or any other *organized institution*, we should consider the social life there as something which flows through certain channels. We then see that there are executives or boards who decide who is taken into the organization or who is kept out of it, who is promoted, and so on. The technique of discrimination in these organizations is closely linked with those mechanics which make the life of the members of an organization flow in definite channels. Thus discrimination is basically linked with problems of management, with the actions of gate keepers who determine what is done and what is not done. (p. 146)

It is reasonable to ask which gatekeepers have the power to include which participants or workers in the process, or to exclude them from it. We have found no examples, though, of Lewin and his colleagues using this view of power to understand what is going on in the experiments in the interplay between managers, action researchers and workers in the process at Harwood. In contrast,

we have read of examples from an inter-ethnic summer school in Bridgeport, Connecticut in 1946 (Lewin, 1946; Kleiner, 2008, p. 26). Here, Lewin and his colleagues did include first one, and later all, attendees in evening meetings at which they talked with the researchers about the day's workshops. The participants brought in their own experiences, even when they were at odds with the researchers' judgements. In this way, the theoretical dimension of the research process became more participatory. Did Lewin have a gatekeeper's power to include participants in Bridgeport, as he could not at Harwood?

### *Summary*

At Harwood, management formulates the change objectives for the practical dimension of the action research. They are about increased productivity, less sickness absence and lower workforce turnover. The workers have co-determination over the means or methods of implementing these changes. We interpret this as involvement, i.e. instrumental participation. In the theoretical dimension of the action research process, senior management and the researchers set the objectives and design the experiments. Workers and foremen are not co-determining. They do not contribute to setting the objectives or the design of the research project, or in writing up the evaluation of it. We therefore understand this participation as taking part, i.e. the workers and foremen take part as informants and as providers of feedback to the research-based experiments of the researchers and senior management. It is therefore debatable whether participation in the theoretical dimension of the research process includes only management and researchers. As mentioned, we have no sources to document whether it also happened this way in practice. Overall, therefore, our interpretation is that there was in the Harwood studies and early organizational action research a limited, consensual form of participation in which the exercising of power by management and the action researchers were apparently not questioned.

Looking at this degree of participation from the perspective of the time, we are convinced that this is an early, radical innovation (Burnes, 2007). In the then-dominant Taylorist paradigm, workers were not asked their opinion; they were told:

Therefore, for the way that organizations would be managed, Harwood marked the point at which the era of autocratic management started to give way to the more participative approaches that began to character-

ize academic thought and managerial practice in the 1950s and 1960s.  
(Burnes, 2007, p. 228)

Looking at participation from a modern Danish perspective, the position is different. We have around 25 years' experience of working as action researchers in industrial workplaces and in private and public-sector knowledge organizations. Our experience is that employees today will generally not accept never having influence on the objectives of a change process (Buch, Andersen & Sørensen, 2009; Larsen, Pedersen & Aagaard, 2005). In that event, they would probably feel like guinea pigs. A form of co-determination seems to be part of the modern paradigm. This has to do with the move from the 'worker' of the past to the 'co-worker' of the present, as discussed in Chapter 2. When introducing action research processes, it will therefore be reasonable to ask, 'What do you want to improve—if you want to improve anything?' (Dalggaard, Johannsen, Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2014).

## **5. Discussion of Lewin's theory of change**

This section will argue that Lewin sees no contradiction between planning and emergence. His theory of planned change does not, therefore, imply that one can plan and map out the sub-goals and final objectives of an entire change process in advance, as one might on the face of it think. As Lewin understands it, the objects of action research are change processes. It achieves its results by studying change in experiments. These experiments have, according to Lewin (1947b), three focuses:

This type of experiment, whether laboratory or field experiment, has as its objective the study of three situations or processes, namely: (a) the character of the beginning situation, (b) some happenings designed to bring about certain change, (c) a study of the end situation to see the actual effect of the happening on the beginning situation. A diagnosis of the before and after situation permits us to define the change or effect; studying the happening should be designed to characterize the factors which brought about the change. (p. 151)

The diagnosis of the 'before' situation seems to equate to mapping the forces that promote or inhibit a change process, such as poor co-determination for

groups of workers combined with authoritarian management that merely tells workers what is going to happen. Lewin understands such conditions as forces resistant to change. In contrast, a high degree of participation and the participatory management associated with it seem to have the opposite effect. They are forces that promote changes and help anchor them. Thus, there is a close connection between Lewin's field theory of the forces operating in a field in the given context and group dynamics, change and action research.

Diagnosis makes a plan possible. This is, as far as we can see, the basis on which Lewin (1947b) talks about planned change. It has been criticized as reflecting a mechanical, linear, monocausal way of thinking (Kanter, Stein & Jick, 1992, p. 10). The term 'planned' can have those connotations. However, Lewin (1947b) himself writes:

It is important, however, that such a plan be not too much frozen. To be effective, plans should be 'flexible'. Accepting a plan does not mean that all further steps are fixed by a final decision; only in regard to the first step should the decision be final ... Instead it should be investigated whether the effect of the first action was actually what was expected. (pp. 147-148)

Lewin, then, understands planning and emergence not as each other's opposites, but as connected. It is only the first phase of the experiment that is, or can be, planned. Action research as Lewin understands it therefore does not have the character of a short-term intervention as Greenwood & Levin (1998, p. 18) say. After the first phase, action researchers must react to the feedback coming from the action; they must pay attention to new facts, and so it continues: 'To be effective, this fact-finding has to be linked with the action organization itself: it has to be part of a feedback system which links a reconnaissance branch of the organization with the branches which do the action' (Lewin, 1947b, p. 150).

Moreover, Lewin (1947b) understands social life not as linear, but as circular. It is seen as analogous to physical self-regulating feedback systems: 'Organized social life is full of such circular channels. Some of these circular processes correspond to what the physical engineer calls feedback systems, that is, systems which show some kind of self-regulation' (p. 147).

Lewin has been criticized for having a stationary theory of change in which changes can be made, so to speak, from a stable zero point (Kanter, Stein &

Jick, 1992). In our interpretation, this is scarcely justified. Lewin himself (1947a) writes that changes only appear to be stationary. He therefore speaks of ‘Quasi-stationary equilibria in group life’. In this connection, he writes that group life is never stationary: ‘Change and constancy are relative concepts; group life is never without change, merely differences in the amount and type of change exist ...’ (p. 13).

## **6. Lewin’s view of action research: A philosophy of science perspective**

### *A change-oriented social science on a natural science foundation*

In this section, we discuss experiments, participation and change in relation to a philosophy of science perspective on Lewin’s understanding of action research. Lewin’s theory of action research is part of a coherent theoretical whole comprising his field theory and his theories of planned change, social conflict and group dynamics (Burnes, 2007). Lewin (1947b) understands action research as a particular type of social science. It has moved from simply describing social problems to seeking to change them and to develop new methods of doing so. Action research is therefore research into social actions and changes to those actions: ‘It is a type of action research, a comparative research on the conditions and the effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice’ (p. 150).

Research into social changes takes place as experimental research that has moved from the laboratory to the field. Like French (1950), Lewin (1947b) makes no fundamental distinction between experiments conducted in the laboratory and those conducted in the field, such as in organizations:

Field experiments are basically not different from laboratory experiments. An experiment as opposed to a mere descriptive analysis tries to study the effects of conditions by some way of measuring or bringing about certain changes under sufficiently controlled conditions. The objective is to understand the laws which govern the nature of the phenomena under study, in our case the nature of group life. (p. 151)



These two types of research thus differ only in where they take place. They share an understanding of science and method. Both use controlled laboratory experiments. They measure the effect or result produced if, for example, a researcher changes a limited number of variables. For instance, Bavelas changes the degree of participation in groups. He investigates whether it results in better anchoring when a group can take a decision itself as opposed to merely debating and making proposals. Similarly, French (1950) investigates a correlation between use of democratic methods and productivity. The overriding aim, then, both in the laboratory and in the field, is to understand which laws govern what is being studied in the experiments. This is done through an investigative process encompassing fact-finding, feedback and learning. Fact-finding is assessing what works and what doesn't. Fact-finding thus becomes feedback in experiments. This means that action research comes to function as a learning process (Lewin, 1947b, p. 150).

Lewin (p. 152) stresses that any action research programme must be guided by the needs of an organization and must describe them as precisely as possible. He thus argues that action research must be contextualized and anchored in the organization, as the Tavistock researchers will later do from a systems theory perspective (see Chapter 4).

Overall, Lewin's version of action research may be understood as a change-oriented social science on a natural science foundation. He himself describes this combination as 'social engineering'. Like natural science, action research here seeks to explain 'if-then' correlations between cause and effect. What will happen to productivity, for example, if management at Harwood starts practising participatory management? Action research is seen as a special form of social science that does not merely study and describe correlations. It attempts to generate social change. It does so by using new methods such as participatory group decision-making and participatory management. Social techniques are, however, applied within a framework of understanding from the natural sciences, in which the researcher carries out controlled laboratory experiments based on predetermined hypotheses in order to put forward general laws.

### ***Action research as the social engineer's applied social science***

The Lewinian version of action research may thus be understood as a form of applied social science. Researchers help to solve organizational and social problems by studying effects on the basis of predetermined hypotheses. The

designation 'positivist science of change' is, at one and the same time, a contradiction in terms and perhaps the most precise characterization of Lewin's scientific approach. Lewin (1947b) draws a parallel with a 'physical engineer', i.e. with a social engineer working on a sort of systemic basis rather than a traditional 'if-then' basis. As far as we can see, Lewin understands the action researcher as just such a 'social engineer'. He or she drafts plans for change after the objectives have been set in collaboration with senior management. The workers or foremen have no influence on the design of the research process or the setting of objectives in the organization. Participation seems not to apply here.

Habermas's (1963, p. 257) later critique of the social engineer concept as the colonization of social science by the technico-rational mindset does not refer to Lewin, nor could it in our view be used as a critique of him. Although Lewin's early striving for humanization seems to give way to an efficiency-raising agenda at Harwood, his readiness to involve the summer school attendees in Connecticut in 1946 points in a different direction.

As we have said, it is debatable whether Lewin's understanding of action research in organizations can be characterized as participatory in the theoretical dimension. He himself stresses that action research on the social life of groups is ideally conducted as group research, i.e. as a collaboration between researchers: 'Research in group dynamics is, as a rule, group research ... One cannot overemphasize the importance of the spirit of cooperation and of social responsibility for group processes' (p. 153).

Here, Lewin is only talking about collaboration between researchers, not about collaboration between them and the workers in the theoretical dimension of the research process. This therefore appears to be a limited form of participation, because it includes only the researchers. As mentioned earlier, Lippitt emphasized that Lewin was on the way to developing a broader and deeper theoretical understanding of collaboration between researchers and what he termed practitioners in the research process when he died.

We are aware that positivism was the dominant paradigm in the 1940s. Nevertheless, we are left puzzled. There is an apparent disparity between the radicalism of Lewin's theoretical understanding and his view of action research as natural-science experiments. For example, Lewin's theory of group dynamics is characterized by a broad, complex understanding. It understands groups in organizations from a holistic perspective focusing on many interacting forces; it sees them as contextually anchored in the organization, as more

than just the sum of individuals, as attempts to resolve social conflicts through democratic group discussions, as feedback systems, learning etc. This theoretical understanding foreshadows systems theory, cybernetics and a holistic understanding of groups and the theory of learning. In contrast, his use of experiments in organizations, and his way of designing them, follows a more traditional natural-scientific, positivist paradigm. Here, though, change is an integral part of the science, in contrast to positivism. Marrow (1969) considered that Lewin's socio-psychological approach broke with earlier, mechanistic ways of organizing in organizations:

... Lewinian methods helped the shift of industrial management from mechanistic engineering approaches to social-psychological concepts. The great interest in recent years in the humanization of industry stems in large measure from Lewin's emphasis on the dynamics of groups at work. (p. 151f)

Lewin himself (1947b) pointed to a number of challenges facing researchers that may also be said to be topical today:

The social scientists, perhaps more than the natural scientists, have to learn to be unafraid and at the same time fair-minded. To my mind, fair-mindedness is the essence of scientific objectivity. The scientist has to learn to look facts straight in the face, even if they do not agree with his prejudices. He must learn this without giving up his belief in values, that is, without regressing to the pre-war cynicism of the campus. He has to learn to understand how scientific and moral aspects are frequently interlocked in problems, and how the scientific aspects may still be approached. He has to see realistically the problems of power, which are interwoven with many of the questions he is to study, without becoming a servant to vested interests. His realism should be akin to courage in the sense of Plato, who defines courage as wisdom in the face of danger. (p. 153)

Our interpretation is that Lewin did display this courage, at the start of the Harwood studies among other occasions. As CEO, Marrow was inclined to understand the low productivity, high sickness rate and high workforce turnover in terms of the personality of the female workers. Lewin instead asked whether it might not rather be a matter of the foremen's management style and the

high workload. Questions like these, in which action researchers problematize underlying assumptions, are also necessary today. In our view, Lewin has left a baton to be picked up, because, in the current discourse, class conflicts and differences of interest seem to be giving way to a so-called dialogue-based consensus mentality. For example, ‘worker’ was many years ago replaced by ‘co-worker’. In line with the spread of self-managing groups, self-leadership, knowledge work and New Public management, ‘co-worker’ appears—as mentioned in Chapter 2—to be in the process of being replaced by ‘stakeholder’. This implies a discursive parity with other stakeholders such as managers, shareholders or political decision-makers. In this discourse, differences and class contradictions seem to be disappearing. It therefore seems important to us today for organizational action researchers to have the Lewinian courage to articulate such differences and contradictions. We hope this may help prevent them being banished to ‘cultures of silence’ (Freire, 1970) in which action research is reduced to a means or tool contributing mainly to higher productivity on a par with other theories of organizational development.

## 7. Some conclusions

*Our conclusions to this chapter are of the ‘both/and’ variety.*

On the one hand, we feel there is reason to emphasize Lewin’s courage in problematizing the underlying assumptions of his time. We see him and his colleagues as ahead of their time. In many ways, they are radical in their approach without themselves drawing attention to it. They involve the workers in decision-making on methods. They allow them to take part in practical training situations based on their own production-related problems, not on presentations by the researchers. This is happening at a time dominated by Taylorism, which reduced workers to a muscular appendage of the production machinery.

On the other hand, we have argued, *firstly*, that participation in the practical dimension means instrumental participation. This is involvement, i.e. a tool for management. Participatory democratic management and ‘total participatory technique’ mean that the workers can contribute to decisions on methods or means. The efficiency objectives are predetermined. In this way, as we have said, early organizational action research becomes a form of Organizational Development studies.

*Secondly*, we have shown that participation in the theoretical dimension means that workers and foremen produce data for the researchers. The democratic participatory method seems to mean that the researchers study what happens when they experiment with different degrees of participation. Workers and foremen do not seem to contribute as co-generators of knowledge in the research process.

*Thirdly*, we have shown that Lewin and his colleagues apparently understand action research as the social engineer's applied, change-oriented social science on a natural science foundation. This implies a further reduction of the workers' and foremen's participation, because the hypotheses and design of the inquiry process are fixed in advance by the researchers.

Overall, therefore, we feel that the Harwood studies and Lewin's understanding of organizational action research leave a question for modern researchers in the field: is it possible to maintain Lewin's radicalism and to balance participation and involvement—and if so, how?

## Reflections

There are several underlying assumptions in our problematization of the work of Lewin and his colleagues at Harwood. One is that the employees must have the greatest possible influence, in both the theoretical and the practical dimension. The second is that organizational action research must have practical goals over and above efficiency improvement. The third is that the concept of 'democracy' must be about having influence on more than the means to implement what others have decided.

The first assumption is about the 'greatest possible influence'. This is not a standard that is set once and for all. It varies according to time, organizational culture etc. We do not know how much influence the workers at Harwood wanted. We guess that they got more influence than they would have had at other workplaces in the area at that time. In this way, one could certainly assert that, historically speaking, they gained the greatest possible influence. Our 2020 apprehension is ill-suited to understanding the work of Lewin and his colleagues. It equates to understanding historical events in isolation from their historical context.

The Harwood researchers have a particular way of relating to the workers and foremen in the theoretical dimension of the research process. They design certain experiments in which the workers and/or foremen take part. Some of

them take the form of training using realistic problems facing the foremen. They deal with a practical question: do the proposals and results work in practice? Do they lead to efficiency improvements? As far as we can see, the researchers have a monopoly on interpreting the theoretical question of how the results are to be understood. In our own projects, it has been a challenge to find a balance between the practical and theoretical questions such that employees and managers also had influence on the theoretical understanding. Often, a division of labour was created in which employees and managers took care of the practical side, while we took care of the theoretical. On some occasions, employees and managers were directly involved in the theoretical part of the research process. It then became apparent that they had, for example, knowledge and perspectives that could problematize our understanding. In a project at Bang & Olufsen, for example, we had developed an understanding of the manager as a gold prospector—someone whose job was to dig up gold, i.e. employees' unused resources, so that it could benefit collaboration and efficiency. Employees and managers rejected this metaphor because, as an image of an employee, gold suggested someone unable to think for themselves. Together, we developed a theoretical and practical understanding of the manager as a midwife (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005). We therefore believe that there is much new and varied knowledge to be gained by inviting employees and managers to participate directly in the theoretical part of the research process.

The second assumption is that efficiency improvement cannot be the sole objective of an organizational action research project. We think there was a tendency toward this at Harwood. Then again, there is an unknown here. Efficiency was raised through collaboration and greater influence. We have no way of knowing what this collaboration and influence meant in other respects. We have no way of knowing whether it meant increased job satisfaction, for example, or whether some of the workers or foremen were able to unlock unused resources, develop new skills etc.

The third assumption is that 'democracy' must entail more than having influence on the generation of the most efficient methods of achieving goals set by others. As already mentioned, we consider the Harwood experiments to have been far ahead of their time. Still, we cannot see anything to give substance to terms such as participatory democratic management, democratic participatory method or total participation technique—terms used by the researchers themselves. We do see it as having been the case that workers and foremen participated with a degree of influence unusual for the time.

## Chapter 4

# The origin of socio-technical systems thinking— Studies at British coal mines in the 1950s<sup>4</sup>

### What and why

Chapter 4 examines the evolution of the socio-technical systems (STS) perspective developed by researchers associated with the Tavistock Institute in London through a series of studies at British coal mines between the late 1940s and the late 1950s. STS research begins by studying spontaneous change processes organized by miners and local management at the Haighmoor mine in South Yorkshire. It is therefore not a study of experiments initiated by management and researchers as in the Harwood studies. It shares with the Harwood studies a focus on investigating the correlation between participation in the form of self-managing groups and increased productivity.

The STS perspective continues Lewin's socio-psychological research into self-managing groups in organizations, and extends it with a technical perspective focusing on the interplay between the socio-psychological and technological systems in the organization. They later extend the perspective to include the ecological system as well (Emery & Trist, 1973). STS may thus be seen as an extension of Lewin's group dynamics focus in action research by the addition of a systems perspective. Like Lewin, the STS researchers understand their research as action research. By the end of the period, they characterize their approach as a new paradigm, which they see as an alternative to Taylorism.

We hope that this discussion of the STS research will be useful for reflection on questions such as the following in relation to the reader's own projects:

How, as researchers, do we demarcate our projects? What systems are directly involved in the project? What systems would it be a good idea to involve, perhaps because they have powers that may affect the project? For example, one of our own projects failed after one year because we had demarcated the

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4 The texts consulted for this chapter use a variety of terms for the places where coal is mined, and sometimes use different terms for the same place: 'colliery', 'mine', 'pit' and 'seam'. We have not changed this when writing the chapter.

system too narrowly, overlooking an important and powerful actor. The chapter thus illustrates the book's third perspective: that participation is always pre-embedded in complex contexts or systems that interact with individual projects in unpredictable ways.

In the beginning, the STS researchers obtain access through local area managers and miners; later, through regional divisional management in the mining industry and trade union, which are further away. Does the difference in the researchers' access to the field have consequences for the knowledge that can be produced in the projects?

What is the attitude of the action researchers to managers and employees who have a different opinion to their own? In the later STS studies, some of the workers' and managers' reactions are interpreted psychoanalytically as regression when they do not support the Tavistock researchers' self-managing groups idea. The chapter therefore poses a number of questions to action researchers. Can we maintain our openness toward perceptions different to our own? Is it possible to strike a balance between learning and implementation, i.e. between development and operation? Which voices do we include, and which do we exclude?

## **1. Introduction and aims**

### *Participation: practical and theoretical*

The chapter has two aims.

The first concerns participation in the practical dimension of action research. The chapter will show that participation is primarily about co-determination in day-to-day production, where the miners are organized into autonomous groups that are themselves responsible for the flow of production. In line with this, the chapter will show how the introduction of self-managing groups is linked to power struggles unfolding between all parties and at all levels over the best way of organizing the work. For example, not all miners immediately see self-managing groups as a good idea. Nor do all layers of the management hierarchy support organization in autonomous groups. For example, the research results indicate that some management layers can be cut if self-managing groups are introduced. The chapter thus supports the book's fourth perspective: that participation is the exercising of power in tensions between parties with different interests and knowledge.



The second aim concerns participation in the theoretical dimension of the research process. It discusses the character and development of the research carried out in British collieries on the basis of two perceptions.

First, the chapter argues that a shift takes place in the STS research from the initial studies at the Haighmoor colliery to the later studies at the Durham collieries. This shift shows a movement from a more collaborative process to one that is more researcher-driven and management-driven. The chapter thus elaborates on the book's fifth perspective: that participation unfolds in the tension field between a collaborative process and a researcher- and management-led one.

Second, the chapter argues that the STS research operates as socially engaged 'accompanying research'. It is based on a division of labour in which the researchers study changes in the organization of the miners. Trist describes it as the researchers' 'research on them' (Fox, 1990, p. 262) or as 'our "researching" their innovation with a view to its diffusion to other mines' (Trist, 1981, p. 8). The main conclusion of the chapter in philosophy of science terms is that the STS research does not operate as action research, but may rather be characterized as socially engaged accompanying research.

Between these two aims, the chapter presents a new paradigm of self-managing groups developed by the STS researchers as part of their accompanying research.

## **Sources**

The chapter on the socio-technical systems perspective in British coal mines is closely based on primary sources, as we wished to take a view at once empathetic and critical.

We have striven to empathize with the Tavistock researchers' self-understanding as reflected in the sources used. At the same time, we have endeavoured to take a critical view when discussing the researchers' self-understanding. What are the consequences of a psychoanalytic interpretation of a conflict in a mine for the Tavistock researcher's wish not to use their own 'heads' as their starting point but to learn 'from the experience of people in the field' (Trist in Fox, 1990, p. 265)? On this point, we have also drawn on articles critical of STS.

We have attempted to put the researchers' understanding of STS and the British coal mines into a historical context. This includes a brief sketch of the history of the Tavistock Institute based primarily on Trist & Murray (1990a)

and Trist's description of his experiences during the research process (Fox, 1990) (see Section 2). We see this as in keeping with STS's stress on the importance of surrounding systems.

In order to gain a broader and deeper theoretical understanding, we have supplemented these sources with monographs and articles written by Tavistock researchers. Here, the anthologies edited by Trist & Murray (1990b) and by Trist, Emery & Murray (1997) have been a great inspiration. When beginning our investigations, we read introductory articles on STS. Especially helpful here were Pasmore (1995, 2001) and van Beinum (1997). Finally, in December 2017, we visited the Tavistock Institute's archive at the Wellcome Library in London, where we researched events in Bolsover, and at the Durham collieries, in particular.

## ***Structure***

The chapter is in seven sections.

Section 1 introduces the chapter and presents its aims, perspectives and structure.

Section 2 describes part of the historical background to STS. It deals with the genesis of the socio-technical approach in the new Tavistock Institute for Human Relations in London, founded in 1946, and with the Tavistock group's experiences before, during and after the Second World War.

Section 3 presents the initial studies carried out at the Haighmoor and Bolsover coal mines in Britain. It shows how STS was developed on the basis of spontaneous change processes among miners and local management at the Haighmoor mine. It also discusses whether what took place at Bolsover was action research.

Section 4 discusses some follow-up studies at the Durham collieries.

Section 5 combines the new STS paradigm with seven theoretical principles of organizing self-managing groups developed through the STS research. The section discusses in particular whether the systems theory perspective of the socio-technical approach can be understood as a participatory paradigm.

Section 6 discusses how socio-technical systems thinking views participation in the practical and theoretical dimensions of the research process. In particular, it discusses from a philosophy of science point of view whether the STS perspective can be understood as action research.

Section 7 summarizes the analysis in the chapter conclusions and reflects on the validity of our arguments.

## **2. The Tavistock group's experiences before, during and after the Second World War**

### *Historical background*

After the Second World War, there was a lack of investment capital and new technology in Britain. The Labour government was banking on raising industrial productivity through better utilization of human resources. It set up an Industrial Productivity Committee with a Human Factors Panel (Trist & Murray, 1990a). The new Tavistock Institute applied for, and received, money for three research projects, all aiming to investigate how productivity could be increased through better collaboration in organizations. One of the projects took place in British coal mines. It marked the start of the development of the socio-technical approach. Organizational action research in Britain thus began—as in the USA—with a focus on raising productivity in organizations through better utilization of human resources.

### *The Tavistock group's experiences in the inter-war years and during the Second World War*

The socio-technical approach to organizational action research is linked to the establishment of the new Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London in 1946. Initially, it was financially supported by the Rockefeller Foundation. Tavistock was a partly new, socially engaged, interdisciplinary research institution. The Institute's overriding mission was to use the psychological, medical and social sciences to actively solve some of society's problems (Trist & Murray, 1990a). Eric Trist was one of the Institute's founders and later its Director. In the passage quoted below, he talks about the need for researchers to engage with the community's social problems and contribute to solving them. For this reason, a key work on the Tavistock Institute, edited by Trist & Murray (1990b), is entitled *The Social Engagement of Social Science*:

Yes, if we hadn't had that money [from the Rockefeller Foundation] we would have never started. We couldn't get any money from British foundations or the government at that time—they were too hostile to what we were doing. We were doing action research. We were trained in psychoanalysis. We were spreading this stuff in a social version. We were not nice people. It wasn't certain that we were logical positivists and

could do statistics to prove every step we took. Several of us knew a lot of statistics, but that was not the point. We were trying to engage with real problems of the society. I'm titling this book series I am editing *The Social Engagement of Social Science*. That's what it is all about (Trist in Fox, 1990, p. 266).<sup>5</sup>

The initiative came from a small group consisting mainly of psychiatrists and psychologists, including Wilson, Sutherland, Bion, Trist, Dicks, Hargreaves and Rees. They became known as the 'Tavistock Group', because several of them had worked at the Tavistock outpatient clinic before the war. The clinic had been set up after the First World War. It was a place where practising doctors, psychiatrists, neurologists and others worked on a voluntary basis, studying and treating war trauma and the social neuroses arising in the wake of the First World War.

During the Second World War, several of the Tavistock group were asked to work with the Directorate of Army Psychiatry (DAP) (Trist & Murray, 1990a). Together with officers, soldiers and others, they developed certain organizational innovations for the WOSBs (War Office Selection Boards) relating to the recruitment and training of officers, and innovations relating to group therapy with traumatized prisoners of war in CRUs (Civil Resettlement Units). Trist & Murray (1990a) describe the WOSB group's approach as follows:

Rather than remain in base hospitals they went out into the field to find out from commanding officers what they saw as their most pressing problems. They would listen to their troubled military clients as an analyst would to a patient, believing that the 'real' problems would surface as trust became established, and that constructive ideas about dealing with them would emerge. The concept thence arose of 'command' psychiatry, in which a psychiatrist with a roving commission was attached to each of the five Army Commanders in Home Forces. (p. 3)

The Tavistock group's approach apparently consisted of listening and asking, thereby building trust and learning together with the officers. It may be characterized as collaborative, emergent and learning-based, with a linkage

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5 In this section, we use several quotations from an interview conducted with Trist by Fox (1990). References are therefore to Fox (1990), not to Trist.

between theory and practice. It apparently generated new and unforeseen interpretations and forms of organization.

Both the WOSBs and the CRUs were concerned with solving big, urgent societal problems affecting many people in a period when time was short and the economy was under pressure. The WOSBs' task was to help build up an army in short order. They had to find ways of ensuring that numbers of officers survived the war and were able to pass on their experience. The CRUs were tasked with treating repatriated POWs in order to ease the transition to civilian life. This led to the creation of therapeutic communities based on group therapy, e.g. with officers leading group discussions with former POWs.

With Tommy Wilson, a psychiatrist who later became Director of the Tavistock Institute, Trist interviewed returned soldiers who had been in captivity. This led to the creation of the above-mentioned therapeutic communities, the CRUs (Civilian Resettlement Units). Trist (Fox, 1990) describes how this proceeded:

As a result of that, the war office went to Cabinet and a decision was reached for us to create a set of therapeutic communities to enable people to make the transition from being prisoners of war to being back in civilian life ... We trained ordinary officers to do most of the group discussions. A great thing in those days, we used to say, was that, first of all, we ourselves took the task out into the technical area and had to look at it with one or two of the key soldiers. We then drew up a plan which we tried out in the experimental unit, and then we handed control back to the army, and we went into the background ... We had 20 of these units, with 240 in at a time. This was one of the high points in my life as an action researcher. It was very moving and very successful. I learned an enormous amount from it. (p. 265–266)

Solutions seemed to present themselves along the way. The Tavistock group and selected officers felt their way along through action in experimental units, and then extended the model out to other units. Trist describes this above as an example of action research based on collaboration. He adds, 'So again, it was not in our heads. It came to us from the experience of people in the field' (Fox, 1990, p. 265). As early as the Second World War, then, there is documentation showing that the Tavistock group had an action-research-inspired approach

based on collaboration and participation. They themselves say that it helped generate new models of officer recruitment and treatment of POWs.

### ***Power struggles in the newly-established Tavistock Institute***

In 1945, the Tavistock group set up an Interim Planning Committee (IPC) tasked with defining the mission of an institute in peacetime. Those who had worked in and with the Army during the war gained power in the IPC. These included Rees, Dicks, Hargreaves, Wilson, Trist and Bion (Trist & Murray, 1990a, p. 5).

The IPC decided to develop further the former psychiatric outpatient clinic. The Institute's overall focus was to be on solutions to large-scale social problems, making use of experience from working with groups in the Army. A permanent management body, the Professional Committee (PC), was appointed. It would later want the Institute to join the new National Health Service created by Labour in 1948.

After the war, there were internal tensions and power struggles between the old clinic and the management of the new institute. Some of the tensions revolved around the differences between a large, part-time staff with many volunteer workers in the old Tavistock group and a smaller, full-time staff at the new Tavistock Institute, between those who should stay and those who should perhaps leave (Trist & Murray, 1990a). Should an existing group of doctors and psychiatrists leave, for example, and make way for a new group including, in addition to those mentioned, newcomers such as Bowlby, Jacques, Winnicott and Klein? Moreover, the PC made undergoing psychoanalysis a condition of membership of the new Tavistock Institute.

According to Trist & Murray (1990a), this episode was known as Operation Phoenix. It is not clear to us whether the group from the old clinic themselves chose to leave, or whether they were excluded for reasons such as the requirement to undergo psychoanalysis. Trist and Murray (1990a, p. 6) add that those remaining were left with a feeling of guilt. From a psychoanalytic perspective, one could perhaps say that the new Tavistock Institute was built on the ruins of a parricide. In this situation, Bion acted as group therapist to the new staff in a series of meetings. Trist & Murray (1990a, p. 7) consider that 'Without them [the meetings] the post-war organization could scarcely have survived its conflicts. Our first experiment with group methods was on ourselves'.

We see this account as a rare example in organizational action research of two researchers openly describing internal power struggles in inter-researcher collaborative processes that they themselves were part of.

### ***Three industrial action research projects***

As mentioned in the introduction, in 1951 Tavistock applied for grants for three research projects. They all aimed to raise industrial productivity through better utilization of human resources (Trist, 1981; Trist & Murray, 1990a). It was the Medical Research Council that approved and allocated funding to the three projects, which concerned:

1. Changes to internal relations within a single firm working to change the organizational culture through process consultation across areas of conflict.
2. Self-managing groups in coal mines; this led to theories and methods of socio-technical systems.
3. Postgraduate training of field workers in applied social science. This was a two-year programme for six students from industry. They spent the first year participating in the first project, learning in practice about unconscious factors in therapy groups and learning to lead their own group with the help of a mentor. After the first year, they returned to the organizations where they had been employed before. One of the participants was ex-miner Ken Bamforth (Trist & Bamforth, 1951), who played a crucial role in the Institute's collaboration with the mines (see Section 3).

From the outset, then, Tavistock's approach to organizations and conflicts was characterized by a broad understanding of human resources in organizations. This is apparent in the involvement of unconscious processes, in the management of conflicts across organizational areas, in the training in group leadership and the processing of one's own countertransferences, etc.

### **3. Initial studies at the Haightmoor mine**

Section 3 describes how some local miners and management groups at the Haightmoor colliery opposed the Taylorist mechanization of the mines and re-introduced the former self-managing groups in the mechanized mines.

The mechanization of British coal mines took place over a very long period. This section will focus on the mechanization that was carried out in the inter-war years and underlay the organization of the Haighmoor colliers. The mechanization employed equipment such as pneumatic drills, electric coal-cutters, conveyor belts etc. (Ashworth, 1987, vol. 4, p. 378; Goldthorpe, 1959; Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963, p. 12).

Mechanization did not bring the expected rise in productivity. The management strata below national level in the coal industry wondered whether socio-psychological factors might be responsible: 'Divisional and Area executives felt that the results obtained from increasing mechanization were far from always up to expectation and wondered how far the reasons might lie in the socio-psychological field' (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963, p. 13). Similar deliberations were going on at government level (Trist & Murray, 1990a, p. 8). The failure to increase productivity is part of the background to the Tavistock researchers' British coal mine studies.

### ***An experiential realization with consequences for research***

Trist and Ken Bamforth came across the basis of what was to become the STS research by accident in the British coal mines. It happened when Bamforth, as part of his two-year postgraduate training as a fieldworker at Tavistock, visited the Haighmoor mine in Yorkshire (Trist, 1981; Trist & Murray, 1990a). He had previously worked there for 18 years as a miner. Trist recounts:

I was tutor of a student who had been a miner, called Ken Bamforth. He went back to the mine—the pit as we called it—that he had worked in. He came back to London very excited and said, 'You must come and see what is happening up there, because I think it has something to do with us'. So I went up with him to Yorkshire, went down the mine, and came up a different man. (Fox, 1990, p. 260).

The miners had a long-standing tradition and years of experience of working together in small, self-managing groups before mechanization. Down in the mine, Trist observed how local management and miners had reintroduced in the mechanized mine some of the self-management principles they had used in the pre-mechanized mines, resulting in a combination of the two ways of organizing.



Trist describes his experience as a revelation of understanding. It summed up what he and his colleagues had learnt about groups, and indicated a new direction for the organization of work in self-managing work groups:

This was a very big experience for me because I recognized in what was being done there, what we had learned about groups during World War II, and also from the clinical side of group therapy. It all came together. Kurt Lewin, and everything that we had been doing, it was there in front of me (Fox, 1990, p. 261) ... it emerged while I was down there at the coal face. All this stuff we had been talking about, all this hinterland that I was full of—it clicked. It just came together. Here is what we were looking for as a new pathway of organization in industry. (Fox, 1990, p. 267)

Trist makes a distinction between revelation and research:

It was a revelation, which one doesn't have often in one's life. But then you had to come back from the experiential moment—the peak experience, as Maslow would say—and start thinking about it, conceptualizing it, and then planning research to drive understanding of this through empirically, until you were really clear that you were onto something. So after that moment of insight, there comes the empirical struggle, the work in the trenches, the slogging to get empirical data and analyze it. So we were eight years in and out of the coal industry before we really had the evidence. (Fox, 1990, p. 267)

The last two quotations indicate that the research in the coal mines was based on Trist and Bamforth's perception of the miners' own experience of organizing their work. Trist also links his experiential realization with knowledge and lessons from previous experiments. Finally, he distinguishes between his spontaneous realization, which he sees as a kind of peak experience, and the long-term research processes of collecting and analysing empirical data. The mine studies eventually went on for eight years and laid the foundation for the development of socio-technical systems theory.

### ***Historical overview: shortwall, conventional and composite longwall***

Trist & Bamforth (1951) carried out a study of the fundamentally different socio-technical systems in the mines in order to answer the question of the

non-existent productivity gains in the mechanized mines. They did not use the term ‘socio-technical system’ as such, but it was in this study that they laid the foundation for the concept. There were three systems:

- Pre-mechanized shortwall production, also known as single place, responsible autonomy or composite working. This was skilled work carried out at short coalfaces in self-managing groups.
- Conventional longwall production, which depends on mechanization of the work by means of conveyor belts etc., as used in industrial workplaces. Here, miners worked as semi-skilled labourers at long coalfaces.
- So-called composite longwall. This was the innovation observed by the researchers in the Haighmoor mine. It combined the self-management of shortwall with the mechanization of the longwall way of working.

Our model, below, summarizes the differences and similarities between the three systems.

Table: From pre-mechanization to mechanization: An overview of work organization

<i>Pre-mechanized</i>	<i>Mechanized</i>	
responsible autonomy	Taylorist	Self-managing
single place shortwall composite working	Conventional longwall	Composite longwall

### **Shortwall**

Before mechanization, all miners belonged to a self-managing group and were responsible for all work functions (responsible autonomy). The group was functionally flexible, because the miners were or had been trained by each other on the job to handle multiple roles. The groups were thus self-regulating and self-supervising. The miners had put the groups together themselves and had picked each other as workmates. People often worked together for years. Jobs were sometimes handed down to sons. Men worked in a limited area (single place), i.e. at the veins in a short wall. They could be at work the whole time, because they could move to other veins in other walls. There was therefore no need to wait for other groups to finish their work, as the group performed multiple tasks in a flexible manner. They received the same pay even though individual group members differed in efficiency according to skill and age. The self-managing groups took part in setting their own production tar-

gets, so they were matched to age and skill (Trist & Bamforth, 1951, pp. 6–7). Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock (1963) describe the organization as follows: ‘In traditional mining methods, control and regulation of work at the coal face were carried out autonomously by the working group, which developed customs of selfregulation, task control, and role-rotation appropriate to the underground situation’ (p. 294).

### ***Conventional longwall***

Mechanization led to this form of organization being changed in favour of Taylorist principles, in accordance with which a long line of miners carried out the same work at the veins along a long wall. They worked in large groups of 40–50 men (Trist & Bamforth, 1951, p. 10). The work was mechanized by means of conveyors. Functional flexibility was dispensed with in favour of a division of labour such as that between the men breaking the coal and those loading it onto the conveyors. There was thus a trend towards specialization on the ‘one man—one job’ principle (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963, p. 13). The miners no longer picked each other for the groups. They received differential pay. They had to stop work if others had not delivered on time. Managers moved the groups around or divided them up again depending on how they interpreted production demands. This form of organization is known as conventional longwall. It became the standard way of mining coal in Britain before the Second World War. It was this organization or method that was under pressure because the expected productivity gains of mechanization were either failing to appear or were not reaching the estimated level.

### ***Composite longwall***

In a few mines, however, the researchers had the opportunity to study certain change processes in the conventional longwall organization. As we have said, local management and miners seem to have been reintroducing some of the principles of the self-managing groups used in shortwall working:

*Conventional longwall organization* has developed on the principle of ‘one man-one job’, but an alternative form has emerged on some hewing and cutting faces which has its origins in the single place tradition [i.e. shortwall]. This is known as *composite longwall* working in which there is no rigid division of labour as on conventional faces. (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963, p. 13)

The conventional longwall method had a clear division of labour among the miners. Composite longwall, in contrast, adopted the principles of shortwall production in a mechanized context. This was an attempt to get past the sharp division of labour and pay inequality characteristic of the conventional approach:

The team undertakes full responsibility for allocating men to shifts and tasks and the methods devised give rise to multi-skilled roles ... Such group regulation and continuity of face operations parallels the self-regulation and continuity characteristic of the single place working. (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963, p. 291)

Composite longwall seems to bring about improvements in both productivity and quality of working life:

... to us, a novel phenomenon consisting of a set of relatively autonomous groups interchanging roles and shifts and regulating their affairs with a minimum of supervision. Cooperation between task groups was everywhere in evidence; personal commitment was obvious, absenteeism low, accidents infrequent, productivity high. (Trist, 1981, p. 8)

### ***A collaborative study***

Of particular concern to Trist & Bamforth (1951) in the Haighmoor pit are the differences in effect between conventional longwall production and the new composite longwall production with self-managing groups. This applies to productivity, psycho-social and psychosomatic differences.

The research in the Haighmoor mine takes place in close collaboration with local miners, managers, trade unions and employers' associations, using ethnographically and sociologically inspired methods. This is apparent in several ways.

The researchers gain access to the field through a key figure, Ken Bamforth, who introduces Trist to the Haighmoor mine. Trist recalls:

... It was his village, his brother was there as the trade union secretary, the manager was a friend of the family—they were all one folk. And I went into their houses and into the pubs and heard all about it. And I

was accepted, because I was with Ken Bamforth. If I was all right with him, I would be all right with them. That was the idea, and they were not exactly unsuspecting of outsiders. (Fox, 1990, p. 261)

Trist & Bamforth (1951) choose to use some particular methods to observe and understand the miners' organization of their work and their perceptions of it:

- They have contact lasting two years with around twenty experienced informants representing different types of work in the mines. They conduct repeated interviews and discussions with the informant group.
- They conduct repeated interviews and discussions with managers up to Area Management level.
- They observe at the coalface how the miners work.
- They bring in three psychiatrists specializing in the psychological problems of miners.

Finally, the collaboration is apparent in the way the researchers adjust and adapt their methods to the miners' wishes. At the Haighmoor pit, they accept the miners' proposed venue for the interviews. Something similar happens later at the Durham collieries, when the miners say they do not care for the researchers sitting behind them at the coalface, taking notes. The researchers meet them halfway, instead recording their observations after they have finished making them. It thus appears that the miners gain influence over how the research methods are used. We see this as a parallel to the collaboration with officers (in the WOSBs) and traumatized POWs (in the CRUs). There, Trist & Murray (1990a; Fox, 1990) describe how the researchers used methods from psychiatry and social psychology to gain a better understanding of what was going on in the field.

This approach of endeavouring to listen and ask is evidently part of the reason one comes across instances like the following, in which an older collier describes his disappointed expectations of the nationalization of the British coal mines. Nationalization took place on 1 January 1947 and was known as Investment Day (Ashworth, 1986, p. 21): 'My coals don't wear any new look since Investment Day. They give me a look as black as before' (Trist & Bamforth, 1951, p. 10).

At the Haighmoor mine, then, it looks as though Trist & Bamforth use their knowledge of social psychology. They identify with the miners' working

conditions while at the same time operating as researchers. It looks as though they stress the socio-psychological significance of relationship building to gain access to the field and generate usable knowledge. At the same time, they do not operate as researchers who objectivize others by merely making them the objects of observation. They lay stress on understanding the miners' experiences. They have many conversations in which they listen, ask and build relationships. Moreover, after 18 years as a collier, Bamforth is apparently still regarded as an insider in the mining community. The study thus bears the stamp of a collaborative approach.

### ***A systemic perspective***

Trist & Bamforth adopt a systemic perspective in their investigation of self-managing groups. The focus is on systems and the group, not on particular jobs or individuals (Fox, 1990, p. 268). They understand the organizations as technological systems with different social structures that have different psychological effects. They therefore hypothesize that an interaction is taking place between technological organization and social patterns, and that these elicit particular psychological reactions:

... the [conventional] longwall method will be regarded as a technological system expressive of the prevailing outlook of mass-production engineering and as a social structure consisting of the occupational roles that have been institutionalized in its use. These interactive technological and sociological patterns will be assumed to exist as forces having psychological effects in the life-span of the factory workers, who must either take a role and perform a task in the system they compose or abandon his attempt to work at the coal-face. (Trist & Bamforth, 1951, p. 5)

It therefore does not suffice to focus on technology if one is to understand the problems associated with conventional longwall production: 'That they require understanding in social and psychological terms is something that still remains largely unrecognized. Accounts so far appearing have presented recent changes almost exclusively in engineering terms' (p. 10).

### ***Practical and theoretical results at Haighmoor***

According to Trist & Bamforth (1951, p. 3), the new composite longwall production yields higher productivity and a better quality of working life than conventional longwall. The miners feel greater cohesiveness and greater personal satisfaction, while sickness and absenteeism rates fall.

The studies also indicate certain other practical results relating to self-managing groups: simple social changes generate improvements in group-relatedness (Trist & Bamforth, 1951, p. 4). Before mechanization, the miners who broke the coal worked together with those who removed it. In mechanized mines, these two groups were separated, so that the miners no longer knew each other. In the new composite longwall, this separation was altered so that the two groups of miners were once again in the same self-managing group (Trist & Bamforth, 1951, pp. 3–4). These changes seem to have had a significant effect on productivity as well as having psycho-social consequences. At a theoretical level, Trist and Bamforth conclude that the improvements were due to the conventional form of the longwall method lacking certain social qualities that the miners had before mechanization, when they were using ‘hand-got methods’.

Trist & Bamforth (1951) propose certain improvements to conventional longwall. These are in line with the innovations brought in by the Haighmoor miners and managers themselves with the composite method. In their view, the problems associated with the conventional longwall method can scarcely be dealt with without a return to the responsible autonomy and flexibility characteristic of shortwall:

... it is difficult to see how these problems can be solved effectively without restoring responsible autonomy to primary groups throughout the system and ensuring that each of these groups has a satisfying sub-whole as its work task, and some scope for flexibility in work-pace. (p. 38)

Our analysis indicates that, in the period from 1949 to 1951/52, the researchers took an exploratory stance and seemed marked by revelatory enthusiasm at the Haighmoor mine in South Yorkshire. In the study, participation finds expression in the miners’ own choice to take part in self-managing groups. Trist and Bamforth have no predetermined, correct model. It is a case of socially engaged ‘accompanying research’ based on collaboration between

miners and researchers from a systemic perspective, which at this point is formulated in certain hypotheses.

### ***From Haighmoor to Bolsover***

The ideas for a socio-technical approach were developed further at the Bolsover Colliery near Chesterfield in Derbyshire (1952–54). Emery, an Australian visiting researcher who took part in the project, describes it in Bridger et al. (1994) as akin to a form of applied action research. Thus, unlike at Haighmoor, the researchers do not merely observe the miners' own organization in self-managing groups. According to Emery, they move from observation to action, becoming action researchers who design new ways of organizing the miners' groups:

... whereas at the Yorkshire pit, where Eric and Bamforth reconstructed the history of it and analyzed how it operated, they were pretty much forced into the observer role ... But when we got to the Bolsover in early '52, we really went into action there because for the first time we had the challenge of designing a new industrial organization around the Gloster-Getter—the continuous mining machine they were introducing there. Moving from observation into action was a tremendously exciting thing. (p. 12)

We travelled to the Tavistock Institute archive at the Wellcome Library in London in December 2017, partly to investigate the validity of Emery's point of view. Did the Tavistock researchers switch from observation to action research and the design of self-managing groups at Bolsover? To answer this question, we will first make a small digression. The next section looks at the use of the so-called 'Gloster-Getter' continuous mining machine in the Bolsover Colliery.

The *News Chronicle* of Monday 3 March 1952 reports that the Gloster-Getter has just been developed for 'continuous mining' by a local mining engineer:

Now, a 43 – year-old mining engineer, William Vincent Sheppard, has put into operation, in a fairly typical British pit, a new way of working the system of 'continuous mining'. The idea is to mechanize everything from cutting, loading and conveying from the face to the pit top. The machines are worked by three continuous shifts. Instead of the orthodox



pattern of 'one shift—one task' each Bolsover turn does a bit of everything ... cutting, drilling, 'shooting' and loading. (p. 2)

The new Gloster-Getter machine in Bolsover arouses the Tavistock researchers' interest. This time, access to the Bolsover Colliery is via a higher level of the employers' association (Wilson, Trist & Bamforth, 1951, p. 2). The researchers observe what is happening down the mine at Bolsover and interview local trade union representatives and miners:

The pattern as it is at the moment may be summarized as follows. There has appeared a socially cohesive face-work group with a longer period of work life at the face and a different pattern of underground security from that associated with conventional longwall. The men on the new face are in process of being reskilled as all-round workmen ...

From our observations on the face, from what the union representatives said in interviews, and the men in the canteen, it was clear that a new spirit of co-operation has come into being. People helped each other. 'On the longwall we only did our own job.' In the new system there was no isolation. Everyone had membership ... (p. 12)

The researchers' observations indicate that local management and the miners organized the work in a different way, which they termed 'all-in shift team' working (p. 2), after the introduction of the new 'continuous mining' technique. In these groups, the miners performed different functions in shifts, supported each other in dangerous situations and exercised 'responsible autonomy' (p. 5). The new way of organizing the work was also significant for family and social life outside work. This can be seen in a report on 'The Role of Social and Psychological Factors in Current Mining Problems' from the Tavistock Institute (May 1951):

... There was evidence that the new system had already been perceived to have beneficial effect on the non-work life of the community. Now friendships are being made. People that never had a chance of getting to know each other's families visit each other's homes now. On the longwall you were either a back shift man or a filler. The new way of sharing out the shifts does away with all that. The split in the community caused under the old system was beginning to heal. (p. 6)

Productivity was increased by continuous mining, which made more than a fifth of miners redundant. The sources say that they could be transferred to other pits. Even so, the miners seem to have been generally happy with the changes, as local trade union leaders seem to have involved them in the process. Haynes (1953) writes:

One of the most remarkable features of the change-over was the whole-hearted support of the men despite the feature of redundancy. Full consultation before the plan was instituted, including mass meetings, helped smooth the way. The Union played a leading role in putting the system across (p. 366).

We are not fully convinced by this quotation, because it uses positive adjectives such as 'most remarkable', 'wholehearted' and 'full', not observations, to document the changes. As readers, we are left to believe in these interpretations.

Emery, above, described the trial of the socio-technical model at Bolsover as a move from mere observation to action. As far as we can see, in Bolsover, too, it is rather a case of the researchers doing 'accompanying research' in which they observe what new social organization the miners and local managers are developing. In Bolsover too, then, participation is about the miners taking part in self-managing groups. The researchers' observations are consistent with their investigations at Haighmoor. As such, this is an important step in the development of socio-technical systems thinking. However, we have been unable to find documentary evidence of a move from accompanying research to applied action research with the researchers helping to design new ways of organizing work in self-managing groups.

#### **4. Follow-up studies in the Durham collieries**

Section 4 will respond to two of the aims of the chapter. On the one hand, it will show that participation in the form of the introduction of self-managing groups in the Durham collieries is associated with tensions between miners, managers and researchers. They have different interests and knowledge, and they exercise power in different ways. On the other, the section will show that the STS research in the Durham collieries shifts from a more collaborative process to one driven to a greater extent by management and researchers. This shift is associated with a shift of theoretical perspective. The researchers go

from understanding the reactions of workers and managers in terms of a systemic framework to interpreting them also in terms of a psychoanalytic framework.

### ***Agreements and comparative studies***

The early studies were followed up by studies in several mines in North-West Durham, including the Manley mine (1955–58) (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963; Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1990) and the nearby Bramwell mine (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963). The Durham studies were carried out by agreement with the National Coal Board (NCB) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) (Tavistock Institute, Report, November 1955, p. 1). The Durham collieries exhibited a variety of technologies within a restricted geographic area. There were shortwall mines with traditional, non-mechanized technology, and conventional longwall mines (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963, p. 9). The researchers therefore had the opportunity to carry out comparative studies of the psychological effects of changes in the various socio-technical systems. The project was therefore also known as the Comparative Study of Mining Systems (Tavistock Institute, Report, January 1956, p. 1). The project was led by Wilson and Trist. Murray acted as middle-manager, while Higgin, Pollock and Herbst were junior researchers.

The studies examined a series of changes or change processes initiated by management and/or the miners. As at Haighmoor and Bolsover, this was therefore not a case of investigating actions initiated in a collaboration between researchers, management and miners.

Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock (1963) describe the studies as quantitative and qualitative case studies or pieces of fieldwork in which they used ethnographical and sociological methods such as key informants, participatory observation and interviews, as they had done at Haighmoor. The studies differ from Haighmoor, which was a single-case study, in adopting a comparative approach. They also differ methodologically on a number of specific points:

### ***Access to the mine***

The researchers obtained access to the mines in a different way than at Haighmoor. It was the Tavistock Institute that approached senior management at the Durham collieries. Management approved the project together with the miners' association General Secretary (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963,

p. 16). The researchers then met the managers of the local mine. Together, they agreed the aims of the project and how it would report. The miners were not directly involved in this part of the process.

It looks as though getting access to the mine through senior management helped to create a distance between the researchers and the miners. The researchers were being sized up. They did not win the miners' trust until the latter accepted that the project was not solely for the benefit of the coal owners or the trade union, that it would primarily serve a scientific end and that there would be a report back to participants (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963, p. 17).

### ***Participatory observation and interviews***

The researchers used interviews, as at Haighmoor, but they also made more use of participatory observation. They observed all shifts at the coalfaces (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963): 'Fieldwork was conducted by observation at the coal face on all shifts and by interviews with key informants at all levels from workmen to managers' (p. 17). Participatory observation is often defined as a continuum. At one end, it involves observing by participating in activities on an equal footing with partners in the field. At the other, it involves a more distanced observation in which researchers take part only as observers (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In the STS research, it takes an intermediate form in which researchers both observe and ask. The researchers also interview key informants at all levels, from workers to management. Some are interviewed at the coalface, others at the lodge (local trade union branch) or at local pubs and clubs. Interviewing is also done privately, because it proves difficult to do at the lodge (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963, p. 18). The researchers thus seem to have a methodological eye for the effect of different social environments on the quality of the interviews.

### ***Why do self-managing groups not become more widespread?***

In North-West Durham, too, the studies indicate that composite longwall working generates higher productivity and better quality of working life than conventional longwall. As Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock (1963) put it, 'Within the same longwall technology, composite organization was found to possess characteristics more conducive than the conventional to productive effectiveness, low cost, work satisfaction, good relations, and social health' (p. 291).

In early 1957, the Tavistock researchers switch from investigation to consultancy and recommend the introduction of composite longwall. In a study entitled 'Comparative study of some aspects of mining systems in a northern coalfield' of 19 January 1957, for example, they write:

**Two considerations are put forward for further considerations:**

- a. ... in low seam pits ... the introduction of a composite form of organization would give promise of increased production without added capital investment in equipment ...
- b. ... in low seam pits where higher mechanisation of faces is intended, advance introduction of composite methods of longwall working ... may be expected to facilitate the change-over and permit a smoother development of a social organisation appropriate to the technical system introduced. (Tavistock Institute, January 1957, SA/TIH/B/2/3/1/7, p. 6)

A key question for the nascent STS thinking in the British coal mines is why participation in the form of self-management in composite longwall groups does not become more widespread when, according to the studies, it brings both higher productivity and better quality of working life. The next section describes how miners and management have different attitudes to the different forms of organization. Some are critical of the composite method. Others are critical of the conventional organization. Finally, the researchers have views that, in some cases, diverge from those of both groups. The process of introducing self-managing groups therefore shows that participation is associated with tensions between parties with different interests.

***Managers and miners have different interests and views of composite longwall***

At the Manley colliery in North-West Durham, the miners and the local management had jointly decided in favour of the new composite way of working. Here, the miners' self-determination also meant that they decided for themselves who to work in a group with (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963, p. 491). Problems begin to arise when divisional management wants to transfer the positive experience of the Manley colliery to nearby Bramwell.

At first, the principle of group self-selection also applies at Bramwell. However, senior management begins to decide for itself how the groups are to be

composed and when they are to be changed. Management's reorganization means that there is soon only one of the old groups left, that there are continual changes in the new groups, and that the workforce is cut by a sixth (although they get work elsewhere in the mine) (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1990, pp. 242–245).

Local managers and miners further down the hierarchy point out that the use of top-down management is having major socio-psychological effects on group culture in the mines: 'Independently, the undermanager, an overman, and a faceworker used the same words to describe the consequences: "It breaks up teams that have worked together and doesn't allow new teams to build up in balanced ways"' (p. 245).

So, interests and views of self-determination differ between the local managers and miners on the one hand, and divisional management on the other. As well as these groups, there are other miners in the Bramwell pit who are apparently not interested in the Manley pit and composite longwall even though they live in the same village:

Few men on the conventional faces expressed themselves as in favour of composite work. The majority preferred 'one man-one task' assignments. What they disliked was 'chopping and changing jobs during a shift' and 'not knowing what job you would be doing when you came on'. (p. 241)

Participation in the form of self-managing groups is thus associated with tensions between different interests, not just between local and divisional management, but also internally among the miners and among the different management teams of the mines. For example, some local management teams argue against introducing a composite principle in the Durham mines. Tensions arise especially over who has the power to decide which organization and which group composition should prevail.

### ***Resistance: The researchers' psychoanalytic view of the miners' and managers' reactions***

The Tavistock researchers try to understand the negative reactions of miners and managers to composite longwall. First, they look to socio-psychological factors for explanations as to why some local management teams argue against the introduction of a composite principle in the Durham mines. According to

Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock (1963), it is due to the management's lack of understanding of the socio-psychological dimension and the significance of social learning in experiments:

One of the most striking findings was the lack of dissemination of the experience ... not only in neighbouring pits, but even in the same pit and sometimes in the same seam ... because the vigilance of the colliery management in disseminating technological experience did not extend to the socio-psychological dimension. As yet, there was no establishment in the work culture of the idea of social learning through operational experiment. (p. 226)

They then attempt to understand the miners' reactions. At Bramwell, there is a large group of miners who seem to be more concerned with ensuring the predictability in the work that the conventional way of organizing provides. Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock (1990, p. 491) write that it is 'to a large extent already determined' that problems will arise. Finally, Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock (1990) attempt to understand events in the Bramwell pit in terms of a psychoanalytic theory of resistance:

This paper describes and analyzes an episode in an action research project undertaken by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in the British coalmining industry that continued, with interruptions, for eight years during the 1950s. It shows how what Bion (1961) called the 'hatred of learning through experience' all but defeated an innovative collaborative endeavor by occasioning conflicts in which management and labor regressed to traditional adversarial positions. (p. 476)

We find it striking that the researchers understand the reactions as an example of resistance and regression in terms of Bion's concepts of unconscious group processes and 'hatred of learning through experience':

In the terms introduced by Bion (1961) for the description of unconscious group processes, basis assumption fight/flight (baF) had been mobilized and suffused the behavior of the group. Management and worker fought each other in common flight from the problems that had to be solved in the real task situation. (p. 490)

Thus, the researchers conceive of the problems at Bramwell in terms of a psychoanalytic theory of defence. The miners and local managers are perceived as individuals who regress and show resistance in the form of ‘adversarial positions’ and ‘hatred of learning’ instead of practising ‘an innovative collaborative endeavor’.

In the specific situation at the Bramwell colliery, the expected productivity increase does not materialize. Around 3 months after the start of the experiment, an Area Labour Relations Officer—a kind of HR consultant—arrives at the mine. It is apparently someone trusted by both sides. This leads to a new agreement. The researchers also understand the subsequent significant productivity increases in terms of Bion’s psychoanalytic thinking:

In week 12 the mood on both sides changed after the visit of the Area Labour Relations Officer. In Bion’s terms, basic assumption fight/flight had now been replaced in the emotional life of the group by basic assumption dependence (baD), and in this modality a settlement was reached with the help of a ‘wise and benevolent’ figure representing the higher authority of the Area General Manager—an extremely ‘good object’ to everyone in the pit. Within three weeks there was a dramatic improvement in productive performance with the target reached ... (p. 490)

The Tavistock researchers do not support their psychoanalytic interpretation with documentation from Bramwell. We find it surprising, for example, that they focus particularly on possible psychological explanations. We think the problems could also be due to different interests and different exercises of power being at stake between local and divisional management, for example, and among the miners themselves. Moldaschl & Weber (1998, p. 363) make a similar point. One cause could be that the miners did not feel sufficiently involved in the Bramwell mine, i.e. they turned against a sort of enforced self-management. We understand the researchers’ psychoanalytic interpretation as an example of a predominantly researcher-driven process in which the researchers make use of their power of definition. It therefore seems that a shift takes place from a predominantly collaborative approach at the Haighmoor pit to a predominantly researcher-driven approach with a psychoanalytic interpretation of the reactions at the Bramwell mine in Durham.



### *The Tavistock researchers' view of power*

So far, it might seem as though the socio-technical systems researchers understand difficulties in diffusing organizational innovations such as composite longwall purely in terms of a theory of psychological defence. Trist & Murray (1990a) also point to changes in power systems: 'Change strategies have to allow for the fact that working through such difficulties takes time. Moreover, intensive socio-technical change threatens existing power systems and requires a redistribution of power' (p. 31).

For example, Trist (1981) mentions that supervisors—frontline managers—lose the position of power associated with their traditional management position in the conventional organization. In the composite organization, they move to more of a servicing role vis-à-vis the work groups. At the same time, some middle-management strata can be cut in a composite organization (Trist, 1953, p. 15). Trist (Fox, 1990) also points to a systemic understanding. He states that the early studies in the 1950s encountered obstacles particularly from management levels just above those who had been involved. For example, if a project had been supported by area managers, the divisional management would attempt to contain or encapsulate the results. He gives two examples of this. One is from Haighmoor, where he (Fox, 1990) recounts:

... So our early experiments were encapsulated, a wall was built round them, and you couldn't get through that wall ... We started in Ken Bamforth's pit, and they stopped it at the level of the division board, because they didn't want attention drawn to this thing. (p. 267)

The other example is from Bolsover:

... the area manager had invented this system of continuous mining ... and he started to meld it himself with his trade union secretary ... The division board refused further communication with us. (p. 267)

In July 1951, Wilson, Trist & Bamforth (1951) submitted their report on the Bolsover experiment, asking the coal industry management to contribute suggestions and criticism. Nine months later, on 12 March 1952, the new chairman of the National Coal Board (NCB) had still not approved the report. Two months later, the NCB refused to support a new Tavistock project. The researchers' conception of power seems not, however, to have included reflections on

their own way of positioning themselves vis-à-vis the miners and the local management. They had previously stressed the importance of collaborating, i.e. listening and asking, and of understanding organizational conditions in relation to the surrounding systems. Trist & Murray had done the same in their description of the internal power struggles in the new Tavistock Institute. We see no consideration of the way the researchers positioned themselves uppermost in an asymmetric relationship in their interpretation of the miners' and managers' reactions at Bramwell—especially as they were trained in analysing their own countertransferences. Can their psychoanalytic interpretations be understood as an early example of a conception of researchers as experts who know better and who make use here of their power of definition? There is some indication that the STS researchers bring an understanding of conflict and power into their view of organization, but not into their understanding of the research process. The STS researchers maintain that self-management or responsible autonomy is superior to traditional management. However, socio-technical systems principles do not find wider application. Several sources indicate that powerful forces are ranged against STS principles of self-management (Trist, 1981, p. 14; Van Eijnatten, 1998). This is the case both at various levels of coal industry management, among the trade unions and among rank-and-file employees. 1950s bureaucracy and authoritarian management principles presumably also helped to bring about this reaction.

## 5. The new paradigm

This section looks at the overall understanding of the new socio-technical paradigm that eventually resulted from the Tavistock colliery studies. In relation to the first aim of the chapter, the paradigm can be seen as an attempt at a comprehensive description of co-determination in self-managing groups in an organizational setting. In relation to the chapter's second aim, it can be seen as an attempt to create a theoretical counterweight to Taylorism.

We begin by looking at three different ways in which the paradigm contrasts with Taylorism. Firstly, it emphasizes autonomous groups with flexible/multi-functional workers as opposed to semi-skilled workers, i.e. individual workers each with their own competency and function. Secondly, it accentuates organizational choice as opposed to the technological imperative of Taylorism, where the technical system alone determines the organization of work. Thirdly, it stresses an optimal match between the socio-psychological and tech-

nical systems in which neither of the two systems is to be sole arbiter (Trist, 1981). By way of conclusion, we enquire whether the new paradigm can be characterized as participatory.

### *STS versus Taylorism*

As mentioned, Bamforth invites Trist to come with him to the Haighmoor colliery in 1949. Not until later does it occur to Trist (1981) that they are witnessing the beginning of a new paradigm of the organization of work:

As became clearer later, what happened in the Haighmoor seam gave to Bamforth and myself a first glimpse of the ‘emergence of a new paradigm of work’ (Emery, 1978a) in which the best match would be sought between the requirements of the social and technical systems. (p. 9)

After many years of investigations, Trist (1981, p. 42) is able to formulate the difference between the old Taylorist paradigm and the new socio-technical paradigm:

Table

<i>Old Paradigm</i>	<i>New Paradigm</i>	
The technological imperative	Joint optimization	1
Man as an extension of the machine	Man as complementary to the machine	2
Man as an expendable spare part	Man as a resource to be developed	3
Maximum task breakdown, simple narrow skills	Optimum task grouping, multiple broad skills	4
External controls (supervisors, specialist staffs, procedures)	Internal controls (self-regulating subsystems)	5
Tall organization chart, autocratic style	Flat organization chart, participative style	6
Competition, gamesmanship	Collaboration, collegiality	7
Organizations' purpose only	Members' and society's purposes also	8
Alienation	Commitment	9
Low risk-taking	Innovation	10

In the same text, Trist (1981) defines seven principles of STS thinking. In the following section, we present the seven principles of the new socio-technical systems paradigm by combining them with the above model.<sup>6</sup> We then discuss the overall open systems-theory understanding behind the paradigm. We have chosen to provide a detailed description of the seven principles, because they underlie the thinking behind later approaches such as the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project (Chapter 5).

### *The optimal match (joint optimization)*

Row 1 of the model concerns a fundamental principle of STS. It involves creating the optimal match between the technical or technological system and the social or socio-psychological system. The technical system includes the degree of mechanization among other things. The social system includes job roles, organization, payroll systems, training and supervision, work culture etc. The psychological aspect includes interpersonal relations and fundamental assumptions about groups and group behaviour as described by Bion and others (Trist, 1981, p. 23). The aim is to create the match between these systems that yields the best result for the organization, the workers and society (row 8 of the model).

The STS research in the collieries could be read as a classic example of a Golden Age mentality that celebrates ideals of workmanship from pre-mechanized shortwall working and wants to reintroduce them as a response to the alienating effect of mechanization in conventional longwall working (line 9 of the model). On the basis of their investigation of change processes, though, the researchers emphasize that it is not possible simply to transfer all the principles of shortwall working to industrialized longwall production.

A key principle of shortwall is that the groups decide their own membership. This differs from Taylorism, where groups are assembled and altered by management. Self-selection is often termed the 'marrow principle' (Trist, Higgin, Murray, Pollock, 1963, p. 256). The researchers point out that this principle of the socio-psychological system cannot stand alone as happened in some of the change processes. It may be that the skillset of such a self-selected group does not match the technological demands. In the pits concerned, there were significant productivity improvements. However, the researchers take the view

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6 The figures in the right-hand column are ours. We use them below to refer to rows in the model.

that even better results could have been obtained if it had been gone about in a more socio-technical way; that is, by seeing what demands were imposed by both the technological and the socio-psychological system. It therefore does not suffice to listen only to the socio-psychological system, letting the workers decide for themselves the new composition of the groups. The technological demands imposed by the new organization as regards skills must also be asserted. The optimal match therefore requires a focus on both systems and their interplay (Trist, Higgin, Murray, Pollock, 1963, p. 256).

Conversely, the researchers consider that the Taylorist version of the technological system fails to take account of the special working conditions in mines. There are a number of specific skills, associated with particular tasks, that can be learnt in a short time. There is also a body of knowledge about dealing with special conditions underground. This means knowing what to do if unforeseen problems arise. This knowledge can only be learnt through experience extending over a long period (Trist & Bamforth, 1951, p. 23). The mass production that mechanization brings, modelled on ordinary industrial production, comes up short against the unforeseen problems that are an everyday occurrence for miners.

The STS researchers, then, are critical of Taylorism. They believe it has contributed to the creation of the current problems in the British coal mines. They also take exception to Taylorism's reduction of miners to an extension of the machine. This is the sixth STS principle (row 2 of the model), described by Trist (1981) as follows: 'It treated the individual as complementary to the machine rather than as an extension of it ...' (p. 9).

In this way, STS may be said to position itself between Taylorism and the Human Relations school. One cannot, as Taylorism did, allow the socio-psychological system to be determined solely by the technical system. Nor can one focus just on the social system, as the Human Relations school appears inclined to do (Moldaschl & Weber, 1998). To put it in overall terms, then, STS seems to combine the perspectives of the miners, the engineers and the psychologists.

### ***Work group autonomy or self-regulation***

Row 5 of the model highlights the idea of autonomy. This refers to the work group being able to regulate its own work and not subject to control by supervisors or specialists. This third principle is expressed by Trist (1981) as follows: 'Internal regulation of the system by the group was thus rendered possible rather than external regulation of individuals by supervisors' (p. 9).

The idea is that, in principle, self-regulation makes for responsible workers (row 9 of the model) who see each other as working partners rather than as competitors (row 7 of the model). At the same time, it entails a flatter organizational structure (row 6 of the model) in which not only the organization's interests, but also those of the workers and of society, are taken into account (row 8 of the model).

### *The multi-functional worker*

A basic idea of STS is to develop workers' skills (row 3 of the model). In Taylorism, the focus in times of growth is on increasing the number of semi-skilled workers with a particular skill, who can then be shed during downturns. In the new paradigm, in contrast, the focus is on developing and extending the workers' skills so that they can deal flexibly with changing work situations (row 4 of the model). This is the fourth principle of STS, articulated by Trist (1981) as follows:

A design principle based on the redundancy of functions rather than the redundancy of parts (Emery, 1967) characterized the underlying organizational philosophy which tended to develop multiple skills in the individual and immensely increase the response repertoire of the group. (p. 9)

### *The flexible work group*

A self-regulating group of multi-functional workers is in principle a flexible group able to work optimally (row 4 of the model) and innovatively (row 10 of the model). The fifth principle of STS thinking is about emergence. This implies that the group should be capable of using their judgement in unforeseen situations. Trist (1981) writes of the fifth principle: 'This principle valued the discretionary rather than the prescribed part of work roles' (Jacques, 1956, p. 9).

It corresponds to the principle known elsewhere as 'minimal critical specifications' (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963, p. 269). It means, for example, that an organizational developer should only design what is necessary. The rest remains open, because it will change through interaction with its environment. As such, it also encompasses the seventh principle, that of variation (Trist, 1981): 'It was variety-increasing both for the individual and the organi-

zation rather than variety decreasing in the bureaucratic mode' (p. 9). Here, one might almost say that STS thinking anticipates later struggles against work involving the risk of RSI (repetitive strain injury).

### ***A systems theory approach***

The principles presented are all incorporated into a larger systems theory framework. The first two principles indicate the overall approach explicitly. We have therefore chosen to separate them from the above-described work organization principles. Trist (1981) presents them as follows:

1. The *work system*, which comprised a set of activities that made up a functioning whole, now became the basic unit rather than the single jobs into which it was decomposable. (p. 9)
2. Correspondingly, the *work group* became central rather than the individual job-holder. (p. 9)

The first principle is that all forms of work are seen in relation to the larger work system. The second is about a view of work groups that focuses more on the work group as a whole than on the individuals in the group. The socio-technical approach understands itself as an open systems theory way of thinking. This means that an organization is seen as a system consisting of the interplay among multiple systems, such as the social, the psychological and the technical. At the same time, it engages in an interplay with its environment, understood as bigger systems. It is therefore a crucial tenet of open systems theory that no system can be understood in isolation. For example, the technological system cannot be understood independently of the social system. An organization cannot be understood independently of its environment. Furthermore, the social and technological systems engage in an interplay with the surrounding system and therefore cannot be understood separately.

### ***Some conditions for successful change processes***

Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock (1963) point out that, from a socio-technical systems perspective, a weakness of conventional Taylorist organization is that it neglects the socio-psychological system.

They then write that it does not suffice to proceed step by step if one wants to generate changes in an organization. Experience from the British coal mines

shows that an organizational change calls for a preliminary socio-technical study. Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock (1963) put it like this:

To proceed one step at a time and to try again what has previously succeeded is the most commonly adopted approach to the practical management of change situations. Though having the merits of cautious empiricism in entering complex situations, where the unknowns are many, it has little power to detect the patent effect of local changes on wider systems ... Such an [socio-technical] approach, however, would have entailed a much more comprehensive initial analysis than any likely to have been made in the prevailing 'ethos' of the management climate. Action would have been necessary at seam rather than at face level and in terms which took into account socio-psychological as well as technological factors. (p. 235)

So, one cannot make do with feeling one's way forward on the basis of previous experience. Freire & Horton's (1990) principle that 'we make the road by walking' also seems insufficient from an STS point of view. The conclusion of the research into change processes in collieries, then, is that a thorough preliminary analysis needs to be made of the possible changes in larger systems in order to select the optimal framework of understanding for the change process. This, as far as we can see, is the basis for speaking of 'organizational choice'.

At the same time, it appears to be crucial to be aware that a small change in one system nearly always diffuses in unforeseen ways to other systems, e.g. from a mine to the whole Area. Support and active leadership are therefore required from the largest possible system if the changes are to succeed:

Not only does the total pit system become involved, but the use of Group and Area resources. The rapid expansion in the size of the implicated system is one of the main constraining forces inhibiting the introduction of change in ways likely to be maximally effective. The hypothesis is put forward that the successful implementation of change requires the exercise of continuously active leaderships at the level of the largest directed implicated system. Whatever their point of initiation, the most successful change projects in the experience of the research team were those which had explicit Area sanction and active Area support. (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963, p. 224)



STS, as an open systems theory approach, thus underlines the necessity of the following in relation to change processes in organizations:

- to take both the technical and the socio-psychological system into account;
- to carry out a preliminary socio-technical analysis of possible changes in larger systems to enable selection of a suitable system;
- to practise active support and leadership from the largest possible system;
- to be aware that even the smallest changes diffuse in unforeseen ways to other systems.

STS thus makes an early contribution of a theoretical understanding of the interplay between smaller local change projects and their embedding in larger systems, and of an emphasis on holistic thinking embracing the significance of centrally anchored leadership and support.

### ***Adaptation of organization and environment***

Overall, open systems theory thinking is about gaining a realistic picture of the interplay or adaptation between organization and environment. As Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock (1963) put it: ‘Considering enterprises as “open sociotechnical systems” helps to provide a more realistic picture of how they are influenced by and able to act back on their environment’ (p. 6).

Van Beinum (1997), who worked with Tavistock and later worked on the Industrial Democracy Project in Norway, writes in a similar vein that the new organizational paradigm is about another way of generating adaptation between organization and environment: ‘... a new organizational paradigm ... The theoretical point of departure is based on open-systems thinking and is concerned, in particular, with the significance of the adaptive capability of social systems’ (p. 573). He underlines that an organization must be adaptive because the environment is constantly changing. Van Beinum distinguishes two forms of adaptation: the old, conventional or bureaucratic way relied on each man (m/f) taking on one function. It sought to ensure adaptation ‘by adding extra parts to the system—overcapacity of parts’ (p. 573). The new composite approach understands the employee as multi-functional, i.e. as someone who can switch between multiple functions. This is the above-described principle of ‘overcapacity of functions’ (p. 573), also emphasized by Trist (1981) as ‘redundancy of functions’. The new type of organization thus seems to have a built-in mechanism for adaptation to a changed environment.

However, the efforts of socio-technical systems thinking to bring about change are unfolding within certain larger systems at a particular time. The new way of organizing seems to be characterized by increased efficiency and improved quality of working life. Nevertheless, a larger system such as the National Coal Board is making decisions that tend in other directions (Trist, 1981, p. 17). At the same time, Trist (1981) understands the STS approach as a pronounced collaborative tendency. In the USA and UK of the 1950s, the zeitgeist is against it:

As the last years of the postwar period came to a close in the early fifties, the mood of society changed from collaboration, which had fostered local innovation, to competition and an adversarial climate in management-labor relations, which discouraged it. No further instances of alternative patterns were identified. (p. 20)

Self-managing groups therefore appear to evolve in an interplay with bigger organizational and societal systems that may counteract their continued existence and development.

### ***A participatory paradigm?***

The Tavistock researchers (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1990, p. 476) portray the new paradigm as a more democratic organization of work. It is characterized by self-regulating work groups with multi-functional employees, as opposed to Taylorism's externally determined technocratic/bureaucratic, organization.

In terms of the history of ideas, we understand the socio-technical systems perspective as a child of a postwar consensus approach with its emphasis on democracy. Moldaschl & Weber (1998) write that socio-technical systems thinking overlooks factors involving power and conflicts of interest:

... the possibility that a principal conflict of interests between the actors in the company might exist is left more or less out of consideration in the theoretical model of 'joint optimization', the significance of power and control is left in the dark ... (p. 364)

A consensus approach as we conceive it does not mean that conflicting interests are necessarily excluded, or issues of power left in the dark. At Haighmoor,

Bolsover and Manley, the miners played a part in the reintroduction of some of their traditional organizing principles established over generations of short-wall working. This meant that they regained self-determination over day-to-day production. It also makes sense here to speak of organizational choice, because local management and employees chose between conventional and composite longwall production.

Moreover, we have shown that the Tavistock researchers had an eye for involving conflicting interests and power. This happened with their account of developments at the Tavistock Institute, where they describe a power struggle between old and new groups. They do the same in their understanding of the process in Yorkshire. Here, they describe the conflicting interests between the miners, local management and researchers on the one hand, and management further up the coal industry hierarchy and the mineworkers' union on the other. Against this background, we question Moldaschl & Weber's interpretation of STS as merely consensual.

It occurs to us, though, that the participatory paradigm's understanding of democracy has a limit. Self-management seems to end when the Tavistock researchers advocate transfer—that is, applying the principles of self-managing groups to other mines independently of the miners' views. The researchers (Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock, 1963) recommend working conferences. These are about behaviour and attitude correction for miners and local managers who cannot see how it would be in their interests to bring in self-management. The researchers interpret their conduct as exemplifying regression and resistance. In these cases, there seems to be no question of organizational choice. Rather, it is a case of the researchers employing a power discourse that instructs others to be autonomous. We therefore see a movement from spontaneous to enforced autonomy, a point we will examine in more detail below.

## **6. Socially engaged accompanying research: between research 'on' and research 'with'**

Section 6 returns to the second aim of the chapter. It starts out from Trist and his colleagues' understanding of their research as action research.

We will argue in philosophy of science terms that the STS research in the early phase can be understood as an example of socially engaged accompanying research. It studies the miners' and local managers' own change processes and forms of organization. The later STS research moves in the direction of ap-

plied research. This change is connected with a shift in the perception of group self-management. We interpret this as a shift from spontaneous to enforced autonomy, and we link it with a change in the researchers' way of positioning themselves.

### ***Socially engaged social science research as action research?***

In very general terms, the Tavistock researchers characterize their work as socially engaged social science research. It is concerned with urgent societal problems that it wants to help solve. This was the case during the Second World War, for example, and it is also a feature of the postwar research in the collieries. As Trist himself (Fox, 1990) expresses it:

... That grew out of work that my colleagues and I at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations had been doing towards the end of World War II and in the immediate postwar years ... We wanted to expand that and to transfer the clinical basis of that work into an extended social field of operations in key problems that might arise in British industry or in government, voluntary organizations, hospitals—it didn't matter what (p. 260) ... We were trying to engage with real problems of society. (p. 266)

At the same time, Trist and colleagues understand their work as action research:

I used to look with longing at what I called the 'white-coated peace', the tranquility of the white-coated scientists working in the lab. But that was not for me. I didn't have a white lab coat. I was in the messy, ambiguous, problematic stuff that you have to endure if you are going to be a psychologist .... I had to go into it. I had experiential learning in the field.

Participant-observer stuff ... My whole research life has been based on experiences of that kind. That's where I got my baptism of fire ... I became a field-involved action researcher from day one. (Fox, 1990, p. 263)

The quotation indicates that Trist sees himself as an action researcher and that he distinguishes between work in peaceful laboratories and messy, ambiguous experiential studies in the field. It also suggests that Trist does not seem to distinguish between action research and participatory observation.

In an earlier project on unemployed people in Dundee, Trist describes in Fox (1990) how he gained access to the field, in this case by living close to the unemployed:

We repeated that in Dundee. I had to go and live in a social settlement which was very highly accepted by all kinds of people, move round among the unemployed in the government offices everywhere, become a known face, and have intelligible ends. And then I could say, 'Look, I have come here from the university to reside in this settlement, but I want to do research on you. Now, will you accept this? We are independently funded, it is not the government, it's not this, it's not that. It's an independent foundation, and our results will be published independently. We are going to learn a lot about each other. I can't do it at all unless you believe that what I do is acceptable to you. Everything I do will be public to you.' That is why I call this action research. (p. 262)

Here, too, Trist describes his research as action research. He sees it as a form of collaboration in which the parties learn from each other while the researchers study the situation of the unemployed. He calls the latter 'research on you'.

### ***Action research as a combination of action and research?***

Trist and colleagues, then, understand their socially engaged social science research as action research (Trist, 1981; Fox, 1990). As they see it, this means that researchers investigate change processes in close collaboration with local actors and the field. In the early phase, the STS researchers investigate the change processes and organizations initiated by the miners and local managers themselves. This approach deviates from the Harwood studies in Chapter 3. There, the researchers moved their experiments from the laboratory to the organization. They tested predetermined theories of groups and participatory management in a series of experiments initiated by management and researchers. The action research at Harwood thus became an example of applied research.

Lewin (1946, 1947b) defines action research as a combined study of experiments (action) initiated in research projects (research). Understood in this light, then, the STS research is not action research, because it combines others' actions (action) with the researchers' investigation (research) of them.

As we have said, Trist does describe their STS research as action research. To him, it therefore does not mean learning processes based on jointly initiated actions with jointly set objectives. Rather, it is socially engaged social science research. This research undertakes investigations of change processes among miners and management, and develops theories of socio-technical systems on the basis of experience gained. We do not, therefore, understand this as an example of action research in the early Lewin mould, combining action and research. We see it, rather, as the study and documentation of experience gained with organizational change processes—experience that can be used as the basis for action research.

### ***Action research as a combination of action, research and participation?***

Later, action research was defined as a combination of action, research and participation (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Reason & Bradbury, 2001, 2008).

We have found examples of participation only in relation to the practical dimension at the Haighmoor and Manley mines, where the miners apparently took an active part in the choice of means of organizing the work process. Our analysis has also shown that the miners had influence over the way in which the researchers used participatory observation and interviews.

Generally, we have found no examples of participation in the theoretical dimension of the research process. It is the researchers who design the research process. They develop the theory of STS on the basis of a division of labour between them, the miners and the local management. The latter two groups take part in case studies or field studies as key persons, informants and local decision-makers. The researchers follow the miners' new self-managing practice, which is made the object of observation and theorizing. The miners and local managers do not take part in the research process as co-producers of knowledge.

Our assessment is, therefore, that STS cannot be characterized as an example of action research by this later definition. We have found no examples of a combination of action, research and participation in relation to the theoretical part of the research process. Only to a limited extent does participation take place in relation to its practical part, in the organization of the work.

It is therefore doubtful whether the STS research can be understood as action research, whichever of the two definitions one chooses.

### ***Early STS research between research ‘on’ and research ‘with’***

We regard the early STS research in British coal mines, then, as socially engaged social science accompanying research in which the researchers investigate local change processes and organizations.

They do this in close collaboration with local actors, using ethnographically inspired methods. It also appears that the researchers use their socio-psychological knowledge in ways involving identifying themselves with the miners’ working conditions while at the same time acting as researchers. It is therefore our interpretation that they do not act as researchers who ‘just’ objectivize others by making them the object of observation and accompanying research. They also stress the socio-psychological importance of building relationships—to gain access to the field, for example, and to generate usable knowledge. Here, they also draw on the experiential approach previously applied in the collaborations with officers (WOSBs) and traumatized POWs (CRUs) during the Second World War. Overall, therefore, our assessment is that the early STS accompanying research is on a continuum between research ‘on’ and research ‘with’ (Heron & Reason, 2001, 2008). The researchers observe and investigate the miners’ organization and their change processes. We interpret this as them conducting research ‘on’ the others. They do this by collaborating with them over an extended period during which they also listen to them. We interpret this as an example of collaborative research, i.e. as research ‘with’.

This empathetic form of participatory observation and interview is part of socially engaged accompanying research. It thus shares with action research an emphasis on the importance of local collaboration between partners and researchers in reciprocal learning processes (Phillips & Kristiansen, 2013).

### ***The later STS research as applied research?***

Some miners and local management teams want to maintain a conventional form of organization. Their reactions against the introduction of composite longwall are made the object of psychoanalytic interpretation. This is the case in the later STS research, where the researchers understand the conflict in the Bramwell colliery, for example, in terms of Bion’s psychoanalytic theory of defence in groups (Bion, 1961). In the same colliery, the object of the researchers’ investigations changes. Previously, they had investigated the miners’ spontaneous change processes in self-managing groups as ways of solving

everyday problems. At Bramwell, they study the introduction of self-managing groups, something determined by management.

In connection with this, the researchers move away from a more equal collaboration and from attempts to understand the others. They appear to position themselves uppermost in an asymmetric power discourse in which they make use of the power of definition and a predetermined theory of groups. The late STS research thus appears to move in the direction of applied research.

Overall, we understand this change as an example of research 'on'. It contrasts with the early STS research and Trist's stress on the way the Tavistock researchers went out into the field, listened, asked and learnt in connection with the organization of the WOSBs during the Second World War.

## 7. Conclusion

The first aim of the chapter concerned the practical dimension of the research process. The analysis of participation has pointed to two circumstances. Participation in self-managing groups consisted of far-reaching co-determination for the miners in autonomous, functionally flexible teams. It was the form of social organization developed in certain mines by local management and miners. The research results indicated an optimal match between this organization and longwall production, because it provided both high productivity and improved working conditions. The analysis has also indicated that the introduction of participation in self-managing groups was associated with tensions between parties with different interests. Participation in the form of the exercising of power played a key part in these cases, e.g. in determining the spread and composition of groups. Not only, then, does power figure in our understanding of participation; it figured also in that of the Tavistock researchers, who described, for example, attempts by management higher up to contain local projects. The researchers' understanding of power did not, however, encompass their own use of the power of definition.

The second aim concerned the theoretical dimension of the research process. The analysis has shown that a shift occurred in the STS research between the early studies at the Haighmoor colliery and the later ones in the Durham mines. The research moved from a more collaborative process to a more researcher-driven and management-driven one. This shift coincided with a change in access to the mines from access via local management to access via senior management. In the early phase, there was a limited form of participa-



tion in the research process. For example, the miners had influence on the application of methods. The National Coal Board (NCB) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) were systematically invited to critique draft reports, for example.

It can therefore be said that some local miners and management teams developed the practical dimension of the participatory paradigm, i.e. composite longwall, but that they do not seem to have had any particular influence on its theoretical design.

Regardless of whether action research is defined as a combination of action and research, or of action, research and participation, we understand neither the early nor the late phase of the STS research as action research. Rather, it is a case of research on changes and organizations. The early and late STS research differ in the researchers' relationship with local managers and miners. The early STS research combines research 'on' the others' innovations with collaboration 'with' them. The late STS research seems to a greater extent to have been practised as research 'on' and as applied research. We have found no examples of it questioning self-management as an ideal, or enforced autonomy or the use of predetermined theories.

Our overall assessment is that the STS research moves on a continuum between research 'on' and research 'with' in the direction of 'on'.

## Reflections

In this chapter, we have sought to argue that a shift takes place in the researchers' relationship with local miners and managers. At first, they adopt a curious, enquiring and collaborative attitude; later, they use psychoanalytic interpretations. Does the argument that the STS researchers move from a more learning to a more implementing position hold up?

We have no reason to doubt the researchers' enthusiasm on encountering self-management principles in the Haightmoor colliery or their use of ethnographic methods such as participatory observation. After that, though, we begin to have doubts. On the one hand, we were moved when we read Haynes's (1953) description of 'full consultation' involving mass meetings, with the trade union playing a decisive role in the implementation of the new way of organizing at Bolsover, and Trist's (Fox, 1990, p. 268) similar description of mass meetings of 1,200 miners with the then divisional manager from the National Coal Board and trade union leaders putting the question of the con-

tinuation of the experiments to those assembled. On the other hand, we cannot know who specifically took which decisions or how the researchers may have been involved in them. The same doubt may be raised regarding the Durham mine studies. Divisional management decides that it wants to transfer the success at the Manley mine to Bramwell. We can see that the researchers have a psychological interpretation of the problems of implementing this transfer. We can also see that the researchers propose working conferences, i.e. attitude-correcting conferences, on the basis of experience at Bramwell. However, the sources do not show what the researchers actually did or whether these conferences were held.

Moreover, the researchers' psychoanalytic interpretations and their proposed conferences are based on a theory developed in a non-organizational context. We cannot tell whether they questioned whether a theory developed in a therapeutic context can be transferred to, and applied in, an organizational one. Nor can we tell whether they problematized Bion's theory, which positions the researchers' theoretical insight above the locals' practical insight and wishes.

We ran into a similar problem in an earlier project at Bang & Olufsen. We were developing a theory of interpersonal organizational communication hypothesizing that changes could be observed in speakers in their communication, e.g. in employee development interviews. We were so in love with it that we ignored a junior employee who had a different experience of his first employee development interview. Our theory therefore acted as a sort of self-referential exercising of power (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2004). As far as we can see, something similar applies to the STS approach.

## **Chapter 5**

# **Industrial democracy: Experiments in Norway in the 1960s**

### **What and why**

Chapter 5 is about a national organizational development project focusing on industrial democracy in Norway in the 1960s. Industrial democracy was understood as employee representation in the boardroom and as increased co-determination on the shop floor. The project was called the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project (NIDP) or the Cooperation Project. It was inspired by the socio-technical analysis developed by the Tavistock researchers. The chapter is about increased participation in the form of the introduction of self-managing groups in organizations. We will analyse the first and fourth experiments in the Cooperation Project and also bring in examples from experiments in the Norwegian Merchant Navy in 1966.

The chapter will show that changes take place in the experiments along the way. Lessons from the first experiment are applied in the fourth experiment, when the researchers move from acting as outside experts in socio-technical analysis to taking more unobtrusive advisory and support roles.

No decisive paradigm shifts appear to take place along the way. Across the projects, action research is practised as applied research based on predetermined hypotheses about the correlation between increased influence, positivity and democracy.

The experiments indicate a democratic paradox. On the one hand, this is a case of shop-floor democracy and increased participation. On the other, the experiments are practised as democracy from above, with employers' associations, trade unions, local management and researchers determining for the workers what self-management is to be.

We hope that readers will be able to use this chapter to consider two questions in particular in relation to their own action research projects.

The first question is what one does, as an action researcher, about employees who do not want more co-determination. The NIDP researchers wanted to introduce industrial democracy, with self-managing groups, for as many workers as possible in Norway. This is an issue we have also described in connection

with the Tavistock Institute's later experiments in the British collieries. How does one strike a balance in the dilemma between running projects on others' behalf and taking their wishes as the point of departure? We ran into a similar dilemma in a project of our own on employee-driven innovation in teams, where some teams did not want to take part because they came to work to earn money, not to engage in development.

The second question concerns the limits of the knowledge one brings to a project as a researcher. We present some researchers who start out acting as socio-technical experts on the employees' work lives, and later act as sparring partners. The expert role causes problems with support for the project and trust in the researchers: the workers do not think the researchers know their local reality. Do the action researchers have confidence that the locals' knowledge can enrich the results of a project? Is it possible to strike a balance in this power dilemma between being experts and being sparring partners?

## 1. Introduction

It is not only in Norway that industrial democracy was topical in the 1960s. In a great many West European countries, increased employee participation had come onto the agenda as a possible alternative to a Taylorist way of organizing. Industrial democracy was understood as employee representation in the boardroom and increased co-determination on the shop floor (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a).

As already mentioned, the project was called the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project (NIDP) or the Cooperation Project. It was supported and initiated by the Norwegian Employers' Confederation (NAF), the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) and the Norwegian Government. Researchers, led by Thorsrud, designed the action research programme that was attached to the Project. They were initially from the Institute for Industrial Environmental Research (IFIM) at the Norwegian Institute of Technology (NTH) in Trondheim, and later from the newly established Work Research Institute (WRI) in Oslo.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Einar Thorsrud, a psychologist and former company CEO, was in contact with Trist and Emery of the Tavistock Institute in London. He had overall responsibility for the research in the Collaboration Project; in the 1960s, he became Director of the newly established

The Project was in two phases. The first was about increased employee representation in the boardroom in organizations; the second was about increased participation and democracy among workers in organizations. The Project was financed by the NAF, LO and Norwegian Government. This chapter is concerned only with the second phase, which began with a series of experiments at various companies in the south of Norway. The chapter is about two of these experiments: the first, at the steel company Christiania Spigerverk, and the fourth, at the Eidanger Saltpetre Works. We will also bring in examples from experiments in the Norwegian Merchant Navy in 1966.

### ***Aims***

The chapter will argue that the projects are marked by a democratic paradox. On the one hand, this is an instance of shop-floor democracy, i.e. increased participation. On the other, it is practised as democracy from above, with the NAF, the LO, local management and researchers determining for the workers what self-management is to be (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 15). This paradox, which has also been criticized by other action researchers (Elden, 1986, p. 243), can be seen as an example of the book's fourth perspective: that participation is the exercising of power in tensions between parties with different interests and knowledge. The chapter will also discuss the NIDP's understanding of action research. It is practised as applied research based on predetermined hypotheses about the correlation between increased influence, positivity and democracy. No decisive paradigm shifts take place between the first project and the later ones. Lessons from the first experiment do, however, influence the organization of the fourth experiment, when local 'action committees' are set up and gain more influence. The researchers also position themselves differently. They change from acting as outside experts in socio-technical analysis to taking more unobtrusive advisory and support roles.

### ***Structure***

The chapter begins by describing the background to the democratic endeavour (Section 2). It then analyses the experiments at Christiania Spigerverk and the Eidanger Saltpetre Works (Section 3). On the basis of these examples, the

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Work Research Institute (WRI) in Oslo, which took over research responsibility for the NIPD.

chapter discusses the democratic paradox (Section 4). It then argues in philosophy of science terms that the NIDP can be seen as an example of applied action research (Section 5). Finally, we summarize the chapter's conclusions and reflect on the validity of our inquiry (Section 6).

## **2. Background: the democratic endeavour**

After the UK, organizational action research developed particularly in Norway in the early 1960s. Below, we will show how a number of special conditions in Norwegian working life came together with theoretical inspiration from Tavistock's socio-technical analysis in Britain. This meeting led to experiments in industrial democracy.

### *The societal background to industrial democracy*

Ideas of industrial democracy had been dominant in Europe since the First World War. They were reinforced after the Second World War (see Chapter 2), when there was a heightened focus on democracy, e.g. with the establishment of the UN. This was also the case in Norway. During the Second World War, there had been cross-party collaboration on common interests. In 1945, this was embodied in what was known as the Joint Programme, drawn up by the Labour Party, the Farmers' Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party and supported by the Communist Party and the Christian Democratic Party. The Joint Programme proposed the establishment of local production committees of workers and managers, i.e. a form of works committee, later given concrete form by the NAF and LO (Stenersen, 1977).

In the 1950s, a series of interviews with representatives of the Norwegian Employers' Confederation (NAF) and the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) indicate that these bodies wanted more industrial democracy:

... there was a generally shared feeling that steps towards industrial democracy should be taken in order to bring Norwegian industrial life into closer accord with the democratic social life that individuals now enjoy, and also to create the conditions of fuller individual commitment that will lead to increased productivity and efficiency. (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970b, p. 189)

The NAF and LO seem to have had a dual aim. On the one hand, they wanted to create better alignment between a person's influence as an employee and their influence as a citizen in a democracy; on the other, they wanted to create the conditions for the individual fulfilment that can contribute to higher productivity and efficiency.

However, Thorsrud & Emery (1970b, p. 189) consider previous results achieved with works councils, production committees, suggestion systems etc. to have been unimpressive. In the early 1960s, action researchers from the NIDP conducted some initial interviews with foremen (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a). They showed that human resources were being used inappropriately in production and that workers on the shop floor felt alienated. The NAF, the LO and the Norwegian Government therefore decided to try out direct participation in industry, with the workers having more influence on work at their own level (Trist, 1981, p. 39). The NIDP thus came to focus on the issue of 'alienation in industry and utilization of human resources' (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 187).

Thorsrud & Emery (1970a, p. 16) understand alienation to mean that the workers on the shop floor feel they are on the outside, or not engaged. This alienation can be eliminated if a kind of responsible autonomy can be introduced in the form of self-managing groups.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to alienation, Thorsrud (1976, p. 80) lists a number of other factors in Norway forming the background to the NIDP projects. These are: increased criticism of centralized organizations; the discrepancy between political democracy and welfare in public life, and the lack thereof in working life; changes in people's values towards a demand for more meaningful work (Thorsrud, 1976, p. 78). Underlying the NIDP, then, is a shift of values towards more participation in organizations. Another cause of this value shift is that the higher level of education in the 1960s creates the expectation of more involvement:

Mechanistic, scientific management and extreme functional specialization offered relevant solutions as long as mechanization was the basic

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8 This understanding is distinct from a Marxist interpretation, in which alienation cannot be changed by reorganizing the work, e.g. into self-managing groups, because it results from the more fundamental circumstance that workers in capitalist production are not the subjects, but rather the objects of their own productions (Langslet, 1963).

principle of industrialization ... as the level of education goes up, the younger generation wants something more than money of work. In particular, they want to be involved in change itself. (Thorsrud, 1976, p. 77)

Together, these factors mean that employee participation comes onto the agenda in Norway and provides the historical basis for the NIDP as a project aiming for 'organizational change' and 'democratization at work' (Thorsrud, 1976, p. 78). In Norway as in the USA and UK, an increase in democracy and participation is associated with the development of organizations and productivity. A similar development is taking place at the same time in other industrialized countries of Western Europe.

### *The Joint Committee*

Shortly after the end of the war, there was an agreement on production committees; this sought to give wage-earners a greater degree of participation (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a). This can be seen as a first step on the way to changing their status in Scandinavia from workers to co-workers. Something similar happened in Denmark with the establishment of works committees, enshrined in law in 1947 (Knudsen & Bloch-Poulsen, 1979). In the same year, a law was passed in Norway on co-determination in public-sector companies; this paved the way for employee representatives on the boards of state-owned enterprises.

In 1961, the LO and NAF each set up a committee to study industrial democracy. Later, they established the 'Joint Committee for Collaborative Research' (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 11). They financed the first phase, on employee representation on boards, equally. The second phase, on shop-floor participation, began in 1964/65. It was jointly financed by the LO, the NAF and the Government.

Researchers, first from the IFIM and then from the WRI, were also represented on the Joint Committee. The NAF and LO left it to the researchers to draw up a programme for the action research that was added to the second part of the project (Reime, 1997). Thorsrud had overall responsibility for this task, which also involved other Norwegian and foreign researchers. For example, he invited Trist and Emery, both from the Tavistock Institute in London, to take part in the project (Thorsrud and Emery, 1970a, p. 11). In this way, the researchers used their network to build a bridge between the colliery experiments in Britain and the NIDP in Norway.



The situation in Norway, then, was different to that in the USA and UK, where organizational development projects were more limited. In the USA, it was an individual organization, the Harwood Factory, that contacted the action researchers. In Britain, there was a collaboration that developed specifically in the coal industry between the National Coal Board, the National Union of Mineworkers and the action researchers of the Tavistock Institute. In Norway, there was a national project, with pilot projects intended as the basis for the dissemination of ideas of industrial democracy to all sectors of employment in the country. This proved very difficult (Thorsrud, 1977; Trist, 1981).

In the Joint Committee, the LO, the NAF and the researchers agreed to carry out projects in four sectors: mechanical engineering (beginning in 1964), the timber industry (beginning in 1964), shipping (beginning in 1966) and the chemical industry (beginning in 1966). The Joint Committee also agreed that the companies chosen for the experiments would be fully informed and have the opportunity to stop after each stage (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a).

### ***Theoretical background***

The theoretical background to the NIDP derives mainly from the socio-technical systems perspective developed in studies of British coal mines. This foundation is developed further via the NIDP projects (Trist, 1981, p. 20). The NIDP thus continues the dual focus of the Tavistock tradition on the social and technical systems, and as such diverges from Lewin's more socio-psychological focus (Van Beinum, 1997, p. 575).

The interplay between the participatory expectations in Norway after the Second World War and the new STS theories from Tavistock led to a heightened interest in industrial democracy among the NIDP researchers. Thorsrud & Emery (1970b) define industrial democracy as follows: '... industrial democracy involves a sharing of social power in industry among all who are engaged in industry, as opposed to its concentration in the hands of a minority' (p. 188).

They add that democracy appears to include these conditions:

1. All men should be assumed to be equal ...
2. All men should have such freedom of movement in their daily lives that they may, if they desire, make an autonomous contribution to the life of the community ...

3. Leadership must be removable, and responsible, to the many ...  
(p. 188)

Thorsrud & Emery (1970b) thus define democracy by equality, autonomy and removable leadership. They stress that it can be difficult to achieve consensus on industrial democracy in a given social context: 'Unfortunately consensus disappears whenever people attempt to make industrial democracy a meaningful concept in a particular social setting' (p. 188).

The starting point for the field studies in the four sectors is an assessment of existing research in the field. According to Thorsrud & Emery (1970a), this indicates that there is a correlation between influence, positive attitude and democracy:

The bulk of available research results indicates that, the more the individual becomes able to exert control over his tasks and to see his contribution in context with that of his workmates, the more inclined he will be to take a positive attitude. This positive attitude will be apparent in various ways, not least in releasing personal initiative and creative ability, which are of fundamental importance to a democratic environment. (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 66; all quotations from this work are translated by the authors from Norwegian.)

The action research projects therefore take on the character of intervention research, in which the researchers carry out an intervention consisting of a changed organization of work. A form of partially self-managing group is introduced, giving the workers more influence, so that 'the individual becomes able to exert control over his tasks and to see his contribution in context with that of his workmates'. The researchers study the consequences of this influence. The projects are based on two hypotheses. One is that a more positive attitude will contribute to the reinforcement by the workers of the democratic environment in the organization and in political life. The other hypothesis concerns increased efficiency (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970b, p. 189).

Influence is therefore a vital key to understanding the NIDP. The project is critical of the bureaucratic organization of work, which rests on the principle that every man (m/f) performs one function. The new participatory approach rests on a different understanding of the worker. He/she cannot and must not perform only one function, but must be broadly skilled or functionally flexible.

He/she must be able to swap flexibly between multiple functions in groups, so as to be able to help others when they are up against it. Influence thus means that workers can perform multiple functions and that, in collaboration with others, they can determine the development of their own various skills in a flexible way as the situation demands. They can therefore help each other—in contrast to bureaucracy's 'one man (m/f), one job' principle. This understanding can be seen as a parallel to the Tavistock studies' distinction between the socio-technical and Taylorist-bureaucratic paradigms.

The new worker influence is expressed in the second phase of the Cooperation Project in six psychological job requirements. These are:

- the need for variation and content in the job;
- the need for continual learning (not just one-off training);
- the need to take independent decisions in at least some areas of one's own work situation;
- the need for mutual support and recognition among workmates;
- opportunities to see the connection between what one does at work and something meaningful outside work;
- the opportunity to see the job as part of a desirable future (not just through promotion).

(Roggema & Thorsrud, 1974, p. 18)

In a round-up of lessons learnt, Thorsrud (1977) puts forward a number of learning points for industrial democracy:

Trade unionists, managers, or researchers who have been involved in the democratization projects in industry know that these projects are part of a long and difficult process. Perhaps most important are not the specific things done, like redesign of jobs, improved training, information, and so on, but the way things are done, that changes are done by the people in their own work situations and not for people, that organizations and institutions are changed from the inside and not from the outside. The process of democratization cannot be understood and planned as a production process. It is more like a step-by-step learning process: two steps forward—one step backward. (p. 411–12)

This quotation seems to us to point to three key principles and challenges of NIDP:

First, that changes are generated by the workers and managers who make them ('changes are done by the people in their own work situations and not for people'). They are not to be made for them by others. There is a similar line of thought in Freire's pedagogy (Freire, 1970). It must be the oppressed's own pedagogy, not a pedagogy for the oppressed. A similar viewpoint is expressed by Heron & Reason (2001), who distinguish between research 'with' and research 'on'.

Second, it is emphasized that 'organizations and institutions are changed from the inside and not from the outside'. External action researchers cannot, therefore, generate change for those employed internally in organizations.

Third, that these democratic action research processes cannot be planned, but will constantly be characterized by tensions between planning and emergence ('The process of democratization cannot be understood and planned as a production process').

### **3. Analysis of two field studies**

Section 3 analyses and discusses two selected NIDP projects on the basis of the three principles of organizational action research projects set out above. Are the projects carried out by workers and managers at the companies? Are they carried out from within and not by external action researchers? Do they strike a balance between planning and emergence?

#### ***The first field study: Christiania Spigerverk***

##### ***The choice of the wire-drawing plant as a pilot project***

The action researchers get started on the first field study in 1964. The specific aim is 'to improve the conditions for personal participation' in accordance with the hypothesis of a correlation between influence, positive attitude and democracy (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 39).

The project takes place at Christiania Spigerverk in Nydalen (Marek, Lange & Engelstad, 1964; Thorsrud, Lange & Emery, 1965), an iron and metallurgy company making railway sleepers, reinforced steel, bar steel and iron and steel wire. The wire-drawing plant is chosen for a pilot project because there is thought to be potential for improvements there. The work is bureaucratically

organized in long wire-drawing lines with each man at his bench, with no possibility of helping each other in the event of a breakdown; there are individual piece rates and high personnel turnover. The conditions for a participatory project with self-managing groups therefore do not seem to be ideal (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 39).

It is the Joint Committee that takes the initiative on the project; it chooses the Spigerverk for two reasons. First, the plant is a national symbol of a company that has done well economically up to this point and has a good reputation. However, the transition to a new age of increased foreign competition is knocking at the industry's door (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 38). A reorganization of the bureaucracy therefore appears necessary. The participatory organization in the NIDP is intended as a response to these new challenges. Secondly, the Joint Committee assumes that beginning with an industry beacon like the Spigerverk will enhance the opportunities for disseminating the idea of the project in the important iron and metallurgy industry (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 37).

The experiment is planned to last three months. It is supported, not only by the LO and NAF, but also by local management and the local trade union. In addition, a series of agreements are reached with two groups of workers participating in the experiment. The agreements say that participants must not suffer a fall in pay, that they will get a bonus if productivity goes up, and that membership of the partially self-managing groups is voluntary.

***The researchers carry out a socio-technical analysis and propose reorganizing the work***

The researchers begin by carrying out a socio-technical analysis, which shows that there is very little contact between workers/operators, who each stand at their own wire-drawing bench. This organization and the individual piece-rate system do not, therefore, promote collaboration or flexibility. On the basis of this analysis and the overall hypothesis, the researchers put forward a proposal for a different way of organizing the work, involving 'partially self-managing work groups' (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 44). Among other things, the researchers propose a different work method where the operators are dispersed around different wire-drawing benches for which they are jointly responsible.

### ***The workers' reactions to the project***

At this point, the workers do not seem to have ownership of the project, making volunteers hard to come by (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a): '*Voluntary membership of the groups proved difficult to achieve. This despite the shop stewards doing their best to find volunteers*' (p. 47).

At one point, the local shop steward decides to call in the trade union president to drum up more enthusiasm for the project. It is apparently not easy for the participating workers to explain what the experiment is about:

The group members found it difficult to explain what the point of it all was and what the advantages were meant to be. The importance of the experiment to the development of more democratic working conditions in the department did not make much impression on the majority of the workers. They were, however, extremely concerned with protecting their piecework earnings (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 53).

Later, the researchers set up some trial groups based on the wire-drawing benches already operated by the workers. After a week, it turns out 'that the group members did not regard themselves as volunteers at all, but that they had stayed at their benches purely to avoid moving' (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 47).

Moreover, the trial participants were working in an area that was visible to non-participating colleagues. Towards the end of the project, the people in the two trial groups came in for criticism from their colleagues, who thought they were breaking the piecework contract (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 49).

### ***The researchers' evaluation of the project***

Despite these difficulties, the researchers can observe productivity improvements in the two groups when the right experimental conditions are in place (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 58). At the same time, they also eventually observe a more positive attitude, as posited in the overall hypothesis. Ongoing interviews with the workers show that more positive assessments are starting to appear. These relate to better division of labour within a shift, to increased contact with colleagues and to time going more quickly with the new group organization (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 56). For example, one of the workers says:

Yes, I'd say it's absolutely an advantage in my opinion, the way it is now ... There'll be more cooperation between the people doing the work. You have more contact with each other and you talk more, and after all you have a shared interest in the outcome. (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 59)

The researchers' overall perception is that the arrangement of using partially self-managing groups points in the right direction as far as the original hypothesis of a correlation between influence, positive attitude and democracy is concerned. The new group arrangement seems to point, albeit modestly, towards better division of labour, more job variety, learning opportunities, self-determination, recognition and mutual support, and to future opportunities not narrowly tied to promotion (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 66).

### *Participation from above*

One goal of the project is to provide the workers with more influence and generate better opportunities for collaboration between them. The project itself, however, is not aimed at collaboration between workers and researchers. The project has been defined by the Joint Committee, local management, the local trade union and the researchers. The latter have put forward a hypothesis, a theory and some methods that are to be tried out. For example, Thorsrud & Emery (1970a) write of the Christiania Spigerverk: 'Here in the company's wire-drawing plant, we tried out the research methods and the main theory we were working on' (p. 31).

This means that there is a definite division of labour between researchers and workers at the Spigerverk, in which the researchers try out predetermined theories and methods. The researchers are theoretical experts from outside who carry out the socio-technical analysis and draw up proposals for the re-organization of the work in partially self-managing groups. The workers are interviewed, but apparently not directly involved in this process.

This is, then, not a case of research participation in which the workers might contribute, say, their local knowledge of the organization of work at the Spigerverk. It is the researchers who design and implement the research process. They put forward proposals for an allegedly improved organization of work on the basis of theories and methods developed in Britain.

Our interpretation, therefore, is that this is a particular form of participation determined and introduced from above, i.e. that it is initiated by the researchers, trade union leaders and company management. This is why this

section is headed 'Participation from above'. It has been difficult to find examples describing what influence the workers had on the new organization of work and on the research process.

The fact that the project is researcher-driven affects communication between researchers and workers. It has the character of information, discussion and persuasion rather than of dialogue and co-production of knowledge. Apparently, the researchers want to inform the workers and convince them of the rightness of the project. This seems to cause problems with support for and participation in the experiment, as is apparent from the workers' verbal and non-verbal reactions in this quotation:

*Initiating the project at shop-floor level was far from easy, despite our having the support of top-level trade union leadership and company management. The workers in the department were dubious about the importance of the whole project seen in a national perspective ... Leaflets about the project lay unread in the cloakrooms ... They [the workers] all but said they were willing to take part in the experiment because the shop stewards were in favour ... While the project manager was presenting information about the project ... about 50 men sat and stared at the floor or looked out of the window (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 40).*

The researchers themselves have no practical experience of self-managing groups in a manufacturing company like the Spigerverk. It is therefore difficult for the researchers to win the workers' trust in their ability to act as expert authorities. As one of the workers puts it in an interview with one of the researchers:

The reason I was sceptical when it came to the group was perhaps that you were so very sure it would work, and I thought you had no practical experience, and I really doubted you could back up what you were saying. (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 51)

Thorsrud & Emery (1970a) ask self-critical questions about the researchers' position as outside theoretical experts relying on foreign results and not on local experience: '... in many ways, the research group let themselves be forced into a position where they were defending theoretical viewpoints that were basically supported by foreign research results' (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 73). Their self-criticism is reinforced by the fact that the local research lead-



er is a foreigner, one research leader lives in Trondheim and another in London, and there are therefore internal language-based communication problems between them and the workers (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 75). At the same time, there are also countervailing forces in the socio-technical system. For example, the workers are used to being trained to work alone as operators, each at his bench with an individual piece rate agreement (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 73, 76).

The researchers present these problems openly. They document them in the form of employee interviews in which they examine closely the actual interaction between researchers and workers. We have also considered whether it would at that time have been possible to dispel some of the scepticism they encountered by taking a different starting point. Could they, for example, have asked the workers whether they wanted improvements, and if so which? Could they and the workers together have built the project on more of a shared foundation? Such an approach could perhaps have led to the workers contributing knowledge of things such as the organization of work, and to the researchers asking questions about the limitations of their own position and knowledge as theoretical experts. But perhaps such questions could not be asked in the more authoritarian organizational hierarchy of the time?

In the next example, from Eidanger Saltpetre Works, we will show that some of these criticisms are taken into account in the way the project there is organized.

### ***The fourth cooperation experiment: Eidanger Saltpetre Works, Norsk Hydro***

#### ***Background and aims***

The fourth cooperation experiment begins at Eidanger Saltpetre Works in 1966. The overall aim of the project is to find some 'promising forms of cooperation that may set the pattern for the whole business organization' (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a). More specifically, the project is about:

- the workers learning to take more responsibility and show initiative;
- dissolving professional boundaries;
- making individual jobs more personally satisfying. (p. 139)

Thorsrud & Emery (1970a) understand the cooperation experiment specifically as a trial to see how an organization can implement an internal cooperation experiment with help from external specialists.

The Eidanger Saltpetre Works are on the Herøya peninsula near Porsgrunn in Telemark, with easy access to the sea and hence to transport. The plant was founded in 1929 by Norsk Hydro; in 1960, it was the biggest industrial workplace in Norway, with 6,500 workers. Today, the factory is a historic industrial park. It produced chemical fertilizer, i.e. artificial fertilizer, known as NPK and containing nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and sulphur.

During the Second World War, the factory was taken over by the Germans and bombed by the Allies, causing 57 deaths. After the war, the Government took over 45% of the former 'German shares', as they were known, in Norsk Hydro. From the 1960s, new technologies and products began to gain ground, generating a need for new knowledge and new skills and demanding more independence, flexibility and cooperation across old professional boundaries. Furthermore, the LO emphasized the need for the old, authoritarian systems, and the confrontations and struggles between managers and employees, to be replaced with new forms of collaboration (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 137).

The initiative for the experiment came from above, i.e. from the plant management, who had heard about the first NIDP experiments. It was also supported by the Norwegian Employers' Confederation (NAF) and the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), who were in touch with the local trade union on Herøya (p. 137).

### ***Organization of the cooperation experiment***

The cooperation experiment was carried out in the department that produced artificial fertilizer. It consisted of two factories: one already in operation and one under construction. In contrast to the experiment at the Spigerverk, the experimental area was screened off to ensure peace and quiet around the project. Permission was granted to experiment with organization, work roles and pay within the project framework, but the workers could not gain lasting advantages through the project (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 141).

In contrast to the experiment at the Spigerverk, a local action committee was set up, consisting of:

- the production department manager;
- a representative from the local trade union;

- a former foreman (supervisor) from the factory already in operation;
- three representatives from the personnel department, Norsk Hydro's headquarters in Oslo and the WRI in Oslo, respectively.

As far as we can see, unskilled and skilled workers were not directly involved in the action committee, but were represented by the trade union. The initiative for the project and the way it was organized thus point towards this being a form of democracy from above in which decisions were taken by management, by management appointees and by the trade union without any mention at this point in the project of direct worker participation (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a).

The action committee is an innovation as compared with the first project at Christiania Spigerverk. We interpret it as an example of a learning process in which the researchers attempt to generate local anchoring. The action committee was tasked with looking into a new work organization characterized by a greater degree of participation focusing on:

- a less strict division of jobs;
- a flatter organizational pyramid;
- better integration of production and maintenance (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 140; 1970b, p. 195).

These organizational ideas are in line with the previously mentioned perspectives regarding 'overcapacity of functions' from the Tavistock studies in British coal mines (Ch. 4).

#### ***Participation as discussion of proposals and two-way communication***

Right from the start of the experiment, the action committee saw it as important to provide regular information about the project. This was done through a variety of meetings: information meetings for all employees in the department to discuss the principles of self-managing groups, the new organization, the new jobs etc.; daily morning meetings of factory management, supervisors and hourly-paid workers' representatives; and general meetings giving information about production, bonuses and personnel matters. The action committee also frequently visited the factories to disseminate information and to identify, channel and solve problems (p. 144).

Thorsrud & Emery (1970a) write that the morning meetings, especially, meant: 'that all employees [could] ... discuss proposals for technical changes

with line management. When the proposals are accepted, as often happens, this usually results in rapid implementation of the measures' (p. 144).

It thus appears that the workers' participation in the organization of the project is practised as a form of ongoing discussion of proposals. During the process, there are examples of problems being solved locally and proposals being changed as a result of pressure from the workers. For example, a consultant project regarding a form of rationalization is put on hold.

This suggests that communication is practised not just as a one-way process—from an active action committee to a passive group of workers—but as a two-way process in which the workers have the opportunity to give information and feedback and to influence the process on an ongoing basis. This seems to us to be a relatively new view of communication, considering the period (Eisenberg, Goodall & Tretheway, 2010), when a more traditional view of communication would regard the parties as either senders or receivers. At Eidanger Saltpetre Works, they are instead apparently seen as active communicators, albeit with different decision-making powers. It also seems to be less a case of persuasion and more one of conversation, if we compare it with the communication practised between researchers and workers at the Spigerverk. This indicates that the researchers position themselves differently than at the Spigerverk via a greater degree of involvement of local knowledge. However, we have found no transcripts of actual information meetings, morning meetings or meetings with the action committee to support this interpretation.

### ***Action programme***

On the basis of these meetings, the action committee, together with line management, specialists and eventually the operators as well, draws up draft job descriptions and some draft guidelines for the new organization. In the first instance, the proposal is technology-based. Later on, psychological factors such as collegial relations and a sense of security are brought into it. The proposals concern:

- authorizing shifts to take on maintenance tasks for themselves;
  - giving shifts sufficient manpower that they can also cope with high workloads without calling for help;
  - organizing shifts in groups with a view to providing greater flexibility, rather than each man having set tasks;
  - improving operators' skills training, because process work is difficult.
- (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, pp. 145–46)

The proposals are treated as ‘working hypotheses’ in an action programme that is subsequently discussed with experienced process workers, managers, process control specialists, production and maintenance staff and researchers attached to the project (p. 146). The work of the action committee seems to be a process of inquiry in which they strive—in contrast to the research process at the Spigerverk—to take on board contributions from as many people as possible (p. 147). Here, too, the proposals point in the direction of self-managing groups with an ‘overcapacity of functions’ in order to ensure the greatest possible flexibility.

The process of inquiry also seems to include the on-the-job training that takes place as part of the project. Thorsrud & Emery (1970a) state that the training is changed. It is no longer to be top-down instruction in theory, linked to practice afterwards. Instead, instruction is bottom-up, proceeding from practice and the workers’ experience to theory, as was done at Harwood:

The trainers are surprised now at how much progress can be made this way, even with people who are getting on in age. The fact that in the learning situation we show respect for, and interest in, people’s first-hand experience has also brought about a completely different attitude to learning. (p. 151)

In its day, this form of experiential pedagogy, where workers’ local experience was recognized as productive, was presumably a new one in industry. It was probably also new for managers to act as teachers and pupils in the training.

### ***Participation in the research process***

Thorsrud & Emery (1970a) write that the researchers only agreed to take part in the project because the LO/NAF Joint Committee supported it and because it was also of interest outside Norsk Hydro (p. 135).

In this project, the researchers have a less prominent role than at the Spigerverk (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a). They contribute a template for a socio-technical analysis, although they have no ready-made technique for carrying it out (p. 167). They act as idea-givers and critics who, for example, deliberately put forward proposals that may seem unrealistic to experienced workers, in order to provoke new thinking. They also carry out ongoing data collection. This includes interviews carried out to map the conditions that need to be in place for a project like this one to work (p. 172).

It therefore appears that the researchers at Eidanger Saltpetre Works position themselves differently in relation to the workers than at the Spigerverk. They no longer act primarily as external theoretical experts presenting socio-technical analyses and design proposals. Rather, they act as devil's advocates, deliberately asking questions that seem unrealistic to experienced workers in order to make them think out of the box (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 146).

The researchers conclude that three conditions must be in place if experiments of this sort are to succeed. They must be supported by senior management. The partially self-managing groups must continually adapt and meet the demands of the environment. Management and shop stewards must cooperate with professional associations and with educational and research institutions (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 172–73).

We have been unable to establish to what extent the workers contributed to the research process. Nor do we know whether, and if so how, the action committee did so. The experiment suggests that participation in relation to the theoretical dimension of the research process only included the researchers, although, as mentioned above, they positioned themselves differently than at the Spigerverk.

### ***Results and evaluation***

The cooperation experiment in the screened-off area at Eidanger Saltpetre Works results in better integration of production and maintenance, where there has previously been a clear division of labour between the two areas. Skilled workers from the maintenance department begin working in the new self-managing groups, and the group tackles tasks such as cleaning and maintenance by itself. They do this to avoid waiting time and production downtime for cleaning etc. This also results in greater flexibility and more delegation, as groups or individuals such as operators are able to assume greater responsibility. This leads to the development of more on-the-job training and the ability to get expert help from colleagues. The latter contributes to a sense of security.

The experiment thus appears to succeed in the aims originally set. Three months after the end of the experiment, the workers emphasize that the project has led in particular to more variety and content in their work, to better learning and personal development opportunities and to more opportunity to take one's own decisions and take responsibility. The local trade union says that the experiment has contributed to solving several problems locally and

has generated more engagement among shop stewards and members. The group management emphasizes that production is now also about generating results by utilizing people's resources (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 165–66).

Several participants mention that a project like this cannot be run according to a predetermined method. For example, a chief engineer says that there can be no cookery book recipe for cooperation projects. Change processes need time and a certain kind of idealism (p. 171).

After the experiment, the action committee was disbanded, and the local department of the trade union was made responsible for maintaining the results. At the same time, short internal seminars were held at Norsk Hydro, as well as in the NAF and LO, to disseminate the experiment. Here, it was the factory's own people who spoke about the experiment. We have not found enough sources to conclude whether the cooperation experiment generated lasting results at Eidanger Saltpetre Works.

## **4. A democratic paradox?**

### *Introduction*

Section 4 examines the democratic paradox apparently embedded in the NIDP projects. Here, the democratic paradox means that somebody takes a decision to introduce what they call democracy on behalf of others who are not involved in the decision. In the NIDP, it is specifically a case of employers' associations, trade unions and researchers introducing self-managing groups on behalf of workers who are not consulted. Self-managing groups imply a flatter hierarchy, a less strict division of jobs and better integration of production and maintenance.

This section first summarizes the learning process that occurs between the first cooperation projects and the later ones, and then investigates whether our thesis of a democratic paradox holds up. We do this by discussing two other projects. One is a project at the Hunsfos factories in Kristiansand (1964–68), the second experiment in the Cooperation Project. The other is taken from a longer series of experiments in the shipping industry, beginning in 1966 and going beyond the Cooperation Project.

### ***Changes between the first and fourth projects***

Changes take place between the first cooperation project and the fourth. An action committee is set up with local management and representatives from WRI and Norsk Hydro as members. The group involves workers' local knowledge in the process along the way, although the workers are not on the action committee. This leads to new decisions. The communication seems to change from one-way communication with discussion and persuasion to two-way communication with inquiring dialogue. Our interpretation is that these are predominantly methodological changes. They point in the direction of a less top-down-driven process with incipient involvement of local knowledge.

The researchers also position themselves differently. They shift from acting as experts to also acting as devil's advocates. Thorsrud (1976) says of this shift that the researchers were neither 'servants nor privileged academics'.

In the first project, at the Spigerverk, it was the researchers who carried out the socio-technical analysis. The workers had the status of informants in the research process. In Section 3, we described this researcher-driven process as participation from above. As we have shown, this approach aroused scepticism in some of the workers. In the fourth project, at Eidanger Saltpetre Works, the researchers attempted to take these problems into account. It was no longer them alone who carried out the socio-technical analysis and put forward a work reorganization programme. This work was now transferred to a local action committee which carried out the socio-technical analysis, made proposals for the reorganization of the work and sought to involve shop-floor workers through regular consultations and discussions.

There was, therefore, a learning process in which there occurred methodological changes, and changes in the researcher's way of positioning themselves, between the first and fourth projects.

### ***What was unchanged?***

The changes did not include the organization of workers into self-managing groups or the project's hypotheses about them. These hypotheses related to a flatter hierarchy, an 'overcapacity of functions' and better collaboration between production and maintenance. The objective of introducing self-managing groups thus seems to have been predetermined by the company management, trade unions and researchers. It was they who set the objectives of self-managing groups and industrial democracy. Thorsrud & Emery (1970a) write,



for example, that it was the company managers and trade union leaders who were to set out the framework for a higher degree of participation in industrial democracy: '... [here, ] it was important that the right company managers and trade union leaders ... agreed in advance which workplace changes would be in line with their perceptions and views of industrial democracy' (p. 15).

Nor do the changes include the division of labour between workers and researchers in the research process. It is still the researchers who carry out the regular evaluations and investigate the conditions for the success of a cooperation project. The Action Committee especially seems to have been involved in the implementation of the strategy.

Important methodological changes thus occur between the first project and the fourth. The researchers also position themselves differently. However, our assessment is that the structure of the democratic paradox remains unchanged. It is still the NAF, the LO and the researchers who have the power to take crucial decisions on objectives, means and design. At the same time, the democratic paradox is adapted in a way that involves shop-floor workers and local knowledge to a greater extent.

### ***Does the democratic paradox continue in new projects?***

In this section, we inquire whether other projects under the aegis of the NIDP are also characterized by the democratic paradox and, if so, how it manifests itself.

We have chosen to discuss a well-known project under the aegis of the WRI that falls outside the Cooperation Project. This is one of many experiments in the shipping industry from 1966 onwards. We will also include examples from the second field experiment in the Cooperation Project, which took place at the Hunsfos Works north of Kristiansand between 1964 and 1968.

As mentioned above, the NIDP Joint Committee expected the positive results obtained with the new work organization to spread to other companies. This happened only to a limited extent. In 1966, the researchers behind the NIDP are approached by shipping industry employers' organizations and trade unions who have heard about the pilot projects. This leads to a long series of experiments in the shipping industry (Sætra, 2015). For example, a request from the Norwegian Shipping Federation (SAF) sets in train a project on the Høegh Mistral, a ship under construction. The project is financed by the SAF, the shipping line Leif Høegh & Co. A/S and the Norway Technological and Scientific Research Council.

The researchers set some conditions for the project. It must follow on from the NIDP experimental projects; it must be run jointly by the employers' association and trade unions, and it must be practised as field studies (Roggema and Thorsrud, 1974, p. 11). Content-wise, the shipping project is based on previous experience with the six psychological job requirements developed (as described above) in the second phase of the Cooperation Project, and on the Cooperation Project's general hypothesis of a correlation between greater influence, positive attitude and more democracy. We have chosen two questions on which to base our inquiry into whether—and if so how—the democratic paradox continues:

- who decides what influence means psychologically?
- who decides what influence means in a day-to-day organizational sense?

### ***Who decides what influence means psychologically?***

In 1969, the researchers begin a ship-based project on the Høegh Mistral. The ship is selected because it is under construction. This offers a better opportunity to create 'alternative organizational forms' (Roggema & Thorsrud, 1974, p. 26).

The researchers' fundamental position prior to this experiment is this: 'The researchers assumed that changes in working life should as far as possible be initiated and implemented by those who are themselves in the working situation' (Roggema & Thorsrud, 1974, p. 13).

The crew are not informed about the experiment until they come on board. One of them says in an interview: 'I see the whole thing as a new attempt at rationalization' (Roggema & Thorsrud, 1974, p. 39). The first round is characterized by crew members signing off, especially owing to frustration over the experiment (Roggema & Thorsrud, 1974, p. 57, 81).

The decision to introduce self-managing groups comes from above. It is not up for dialogue, but is presented as information, i.e. as a *fait accompli*. We interpret this as a sign of a democratic paradox. The remark about a rationalization attempt, and the many people signing off, suggest that there is dissatisfaction with the project. These things point to the book's fourth perspective regarding participation as the exercising of power in the field of tension between parties with different interests and knowledge. Later, though, the project is met with growing satisfaction by all parties (p. 170, 181).

In practice, the action committee that is set up turns out to have no representatives from among the sailors or ordinary engine crew (Roggema & Thorsrud, 1974, p. 26). The committee is established outside the regular organization of the ship and comes under the shipping line's chief operating officer. The captain, the chief engineer, the chief mate and the manager of the shipping line's training department are members of the group. The latter is the project coordinator. WRI's project manager attends the majority of meetings (Roggema & Thorsrud, 1974, p. 26). We therefore find it puzzling that Roggema & Thorsrud (1974) write that everyone involved took part: 'The most important thing was to establish *how we can work on new problems through participation by all concerned*' (Roggema & Thorsrud, 1974, p. 196).

A key component of the project is that the action committee agrees to create a shared common room with a bar. However, they reject a shared messroom (Roggema & Thorsrud, 1974, p. 27). The crew regard the shared common room as an important initiative (p. 53). It seems conducive to the esprit de corps on the ship (p. 102). It is regarded by some as the only positive thing about the experiment (p. 75). In practice, the common room becomes more the crew's room than the officers' (p. 135). Later, a shared mess is introduced on four other Høegh ships (p. 161). A change to the various onboard conditions that physically exhibit the hierarchy is also considered. However, this is abandoned because the ship is nearly finished (p. 192).

The project on the Høegh Mistral seems, therefore, to repeat the paradox of the earlier projects: the workers are not asked whether they want the introduction of a democracy that will decisively alter the hierarchy and forms of collaboration.

The researchers have similar problems getting the workers interested in the field experiments carried out between 1964 and 1968 at the Hunsfos Works. This is a wood pulp, cellulose and paper mill some distance north of Kristiansand.

The first problem relates to the way the researchers gain access to the factory. They enter into an agreement on the project in the same way as at the Spigerverk, i.e. with the plant management and the trade union. The researchers get the impression that the workers have a strong tradition of fending for themselves. The workers seem to regard the researchers as outsiders, and the researchers therefore have difficulty winning their trust: 'The researchers soon got the feeling that it would not be easy for an outsider to "win trust"' (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 80). Whether this has to do with the traditions

of the workers and/or with the researchers' way of accessing the factory, we are unable to determine.

Here, too, the researchers put forward their model of partially self-managing groups with psychological job requirements. For each one of these requirements, it is primarily the researchers who point to some specific proposed actions and reorganizations (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 86).

Similarly, there is a division of labour between researchers and workers with regard to the organization of work. In the first experiments, it is the researchers' theoretical knowledge, not the workers' experiential knowledge, that underpins the action proposals. The workers see the researchers as outsiders or foreign smart Alocs bringing pre-fabricated British models of changed psychological job requirements and changed ways of working in the form of partially self-managing groups:

Despite all the oral and written information provided via the company and the trade union, despite all the formal and informal discussions that were held, it was soon to become apparent that people in the department did not see the action programme as their own. A great deal of the information from the researchers had irritated them by its use of language and because they were, naturally enough, seen as foreign 'know-alls' (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 91).

Our interpretation is that, on the one hand, these were some radical, forward-looking, democratizing initiatives. On the other, they seem to have been implemented as democracy from above. The initiative for the Cooperation Project came from above, i.e. from the employers, trade union and researchers. This tendency was also evident in the organization of the actual cooperation experiments, in which, up to the experiment at Eidanger Saltpetre Works, it was the factory management and union leaders who defined the project. The same tendency can be seen in the ship projects, in which it is the SAF (Norwegian Shipping Federation), local management on the ships and a WRI representative who define the content of the project and hence what form influence would take for the workers psychologically.

### ***Who decides what influence means in organizational terms?***

The workers on the shop floor, on deck or in the engine room, then, do not seem to have had influence on the psychological job requirements, even though they

were the ones who were to have more influence. Does the same apply to the organization of work?

### *A less sharp division between work functions*

The organization follows the principle of ‘overcapacity of functions’. In practice, this means job enlargement and/or job rotation. This entails the individual worker, operator or crew member being trained to carry out multiple functions. In the Høegh Mistral experiment, it is called self-regulation (Roggema & Thorsrud, 1974, p. 179). Self-regulation consists of the sailors being able to make decisions among themselves without having to refer the question up. It also means that the former sharp division between maintenance and production is erased, as the operators are trained to carry out maintenance functions themselves (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 159). On the Høegh Mistral, for example, the repairman function is abolished as an independent role (Roggema & Thorsrud, 1974, p. 187). As we saw at the Spigerverk, this can generate better collaboration. It can mean increased horizontal communication, e.g. because data goes straight from operator to operator rather than having to go through the next management layer up, or because the new, self-managing groups tackle cleaning and maintenance tasks themselves, as we saw at Eidanger Saltpetre Works (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970b, p. 195).

In the experiment on the Høegh Mistral, this participatory endeavour is called ‘combined crewing’ (Roggema & Thorsrud, 1974, p. 30), i.e. crew who can carry out tasks both on deck and in the engine room. We cannot see that the socio-technical analysis was organized participatorily. For example, sailors and motormen were not asked how they would like to organize the work. It subsequently turns out that the engine room crew would like to work on deck, but not vice versa. The sailors are happy to work with the technology in the engine room, but they see having to clean and paint the engine as degrading (Roggema and Thorsrud, 1974, p. 121). This may indicate that the democratic paradox manifests itself here as redesign from above.

### *A flatter hierarchy*

A flatter hierarchy can mean that foremen’s ‘span of control’ is enlarged, forcing them to delegate more (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970b, p. 195). This means that they stop being troubleshooters and become, to a greater extent, coordinators (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, pp. 158–59). In some of the later ship projects (Roggema & Thorsrud, 1974, p. 187), the foreman role—i.e. the boat-

swain role—disappears. This development does not occur in the first project, at Christiana Spigerverk. In the fourth cooperation project, at Eidanger Saltpetre Works, the foremen and operators begin to take on greater responsibility.

### *Organization of workers into partially self-managing groups*

Our analysis so far points to a duality. On the one hand, content-wise, the efforts to introduce self-managing groups seem to be a radical innovation in the organization of work, especially when we take the historical context and the period into account.

A personal reflection: until his death in 1966, Jørgen's father worked as telegraph operator and master fisherman on the Dana, a small Danish marine research vessel. I remember the ship's hierarchy clearly. Furthest forward were the seamen, quartered two by two in cabins that stank of sweat, with no messroom of their own; the officers had their own cabins with carpets, and their own messroom with lino on the floor; the scientists had their own messroom, with deep-pile carpets both in the mess and in the individual cabins. On the top level of the ship, the captain had his own very large cabin with separate bedroom, mahogany furniture etc.

The ideas pursued in the NIDP ship projects are truly radical. On the other hand, this seems to be a case of participation or democracy being introduced predominantly from above and without taking local contexts into account. A key question, therefore, is what it means to be a partially self-managing group.

On the Høegh Mistral, influence is about contributing to decisions on methods or means of putting into effect decisions already taken or frameworks already set. In other words, it is about co-determination regarding implementation at the operational level. For example, we are told that 'the pace of change relating to fit-out and room layout should, as far as possible, be set by the seamen themselves' (Roggema & Thorsrud, 1974, p. 192). Elsewhere, the researchers talk about the sailors and motormen being more involved in planning, coordination and follow-up of tasks. This led to more learning than on a traditional ship (p. 168). In a 1973 interview, the captain describes this state of affairs as autonomy and as a distinctive feature of the Høegh Mistral project (p. 198).

In the field experiment at Eidanger Saltpetre Works, influence plays out through, for example, daily morning meetings with the participation of works management, foremen and a couple of representatives of the hourly paid workers, who take turns to attend (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 144). Here, influ-

ence in the partially self-managing groups seems to mean primarily that the workers can put forward proposals that are decided on in the action committee or at higher levels of the hierarchy.

Overall, the new organization seems to revolve around three fundamental characteristics: a less sharp division of work roles (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 140; 1970b, p. 195), a flatter hierarchy (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 140) and the organization of the workers into partially self-managing groups. These traits are apparently defined independently of the different local conditions existing in the individual organizations. The democratic paradox thus appears to continue.

## **5. Discussion of NIDP as applied research**

We have now discussed the overall aim of the chapter and shown that the projects are characterized by a democratic paradox. The projects are not carried out, as announced, by managers and employees. Nor are they carried out from within. Democracy is introduced from above by external action researchers, and the researchers' theoretical knowledge appears to take precedence over the workers' practical knowledge. In this section, we present a discussion in philosophy of science terms of the action research practised under the auspices of the NIDP.

In accordance with an understanding of action research as contextualized research, Thorsrud and researchers attached to the NIDP stress that one cannot simply use the same theory in a new context. For example, it is said of Eidanger Saltpetre Works that 'cooperation experiments cannot be conducted by buying a package of recipes and solutions' (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 167). The idea of partially self-managing groups was therefore not to be understood as a ready-made model, but as something provisional, i.e. as the best that research had come up with at the time in question (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 20). Thorsrud also stresses that the research process cannot be planned in advance; it must be seen as an emergent learning process (1977, p. 411–412). The NIDP research also seems to have the character of emergent learning and method development, e.g. in the form of action committees and local consultations.

Essentially, our interpretation is that we are dealing with what amounts to an understanding of action research as applied research based on a particular division of labour between researchers and partners. It is the researchers who bring a British theory of partially self-managing groups that is then applied in

Norway. It is the researchers, too, who want to try out some predetermined hypotheses about a correlation between influence, positivity and democracy, and some predefined psychological job requirements. Management and workers do not appear to have had influence on the choice or development of theory or design. In some places, the experiments are also portrayed as applied research. This is the case, for example, at the Spigerverk, where we are told that ‘the companies’ management must try out the new principles’, just as the researchers themselves must try out methods and theory (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a, p. 27, 31). The same applies to the ship-based experiments, of which Roggema & Thorsrud (1974) write: ‘We proposed a *change strategy* involving using field experiments and applied research to “feel our way forward” in the desired direction, in a rapidly changing environment’ (p. 13).

It is the researchers who determine the aims and the study design, and then, as we have seen in the course of the analysis, they themselves study the results of their interventions. We see no indication of participatory research (Elden, 1986) where workers on the shop floor, on deck or in the engine room are involved in the research process. For example, we are not told of conversations in which workers act as co-inquirers. Essentially, they are allotted the status of informants in the researchers’ experiments. For example, they give feedback on why they don’t support the project, as was the case at Christiania Spigerverk and the Hunsfos Works.

It does not appear to have been a case of action research as a combination of research, action and participation (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Heron & Reason, 2001, 2008). Overall, the research process in the Cooperation Project therefore appears to be applied research ‘on’ rather than research ‘with’. We understand the Cooperation Project and the ship projects as a form of action research combining action and research. The Cooperation Project comes to take the form of an organizational development project characterized by applied research with ongoing development of the design.

The analysis of the two field experiments, at the Spigerverk and at Eidanger Saltpetre Works, shows that action research as applied research continually creates problems in the interaction between researchers and workers. Researchers have difficulty accessing the factories. They are met with scepticism.

A continual methodological development takes place during the process. The researchers also change their way of positioning themselves in relation to the workers. We understand the researchers’ positioning as a consequence



of their use of action research as applied research. It is the researchers who define the hypotheses, design and psychological job requirements that they want to try out in the various organizations. This positions them uppermost in a hierarchical relationship with the workers. We understand the change in their way of positioning themselves in the course of the projects as an attempt to change the relationships in a more equal direction, one that paves the way for the involvement of local knowledge. We interpret this as an example of the researchers' third basic hypothesis: that action research processes cannot be planned in advance.

Essentially, the NIDP projects do not raise the question of how knowledge can be co-generated along the way in a research process. Nor was it, perhaps, possible to ask that question at the time. A possible answer to the question could have implied two radical changes.

First, it would have meant a break with the conception of action research as applied research. This might perhaps have led to the development of a more dialogic understanding of knowledge production in action research processes based not only on action and research, but on a linkage of action, research and participation. At the time, the development of participatory action research was sporadic, both in Norway and internationally. This development first took off in Europe and the USA in the 1990s, in the work of Greenwood & Levin (1998), Heron & Reason (2001, 2008) and others.

Second, it would have queried the researchers' position of power as those at the apex of a knowledge hierarchy who alone defined the agenda for the research process. Our assessment is that this discussion is still needed in organizational action research.

## **6. Conclusions**

It is our interpretation that the Cooperation Projects contain a democratic paradox: a contradiction between the introduction of partially autonomous self-managing work groups, democracy and cooperation on the one hand, and the way in which the research process proceeds as a democratic project imposed from above on the other. Van Beinum (1997) talks about a form of 'enforced democracy'. In an overall perspective, the projects change in two ways especially: they increasingly involve local knowledge and experience in the factories by establishing the so-called action committees to implement the strategy. The researchers also position themselves differently.

At the same time, there are conditions that remain unchanged. Generally, in the first and fourth projects, there is a limited form of participation in the theoretical dimension of the research process. At the Spigerverk, where the workers had only the right to be consulted, they were excluded from direct participation in the research process. Their role was to take part in the testing of the researchers' predetermined hypotheses, theories and redesign programme.

At Eidanger Saltpetre Works, the use of the action committee can be understood as a form of participation aimed at inquiring into the practical reorganization of the work and drawing up a programme for it. The action committee members may in a sense be said to act as local co-inquirers in the research process as regards methodological development. As mentioned, the workers take part only in consultations and discussions. Neither at the Spigerverk nor at Eidanger Saltpetre Works are the workers invited to take part as local co-inquirers in the research process.

In the Cooperation Projects, then, there is a division of labour between collaborative partners and researchers as regards participation in the theoretical dimension. The research process cannot be characterized as participatory, although the circle of local actors as co-inquirers seems to be expanded in the fourth experiment. They have no influence on the theoretical basis, aims, design, evaluation or dissemination of the project.

In the course of the projects, a lesson emerges. It appears that the researchers gain a greater understanding of the importance of involving local knowledge (Thorsrud, 1976). Seen in the context of the time, this lesson can be regarded as radical if one compares it with, for example, widespread theories of learning from the same period, in which people were understood as passive recipients, as in the so-called 'petrol-pump attendant' pedagogy.

The NIDP projects were carried out in organizations where there had previously been a hierarchical and authoritarian management style, presumably organized on Taylorist principles. The NIDP projects had a broad perspective, focusing on socio-psychological as well as technico-rational systems. The NIDP projects were also based on a broad collaboration across the NAF, LO and local management. They aimed at democracy both in the workplace and in society. They practised emergent bottom-up-learning that broke with traditional one-way pedagogy. Viewed in relation to the historical context, these were radical innovations.

## Reflections

In this chapter, we have argued that the NIDP represents a form of applied research implemented as a democratic paradox. We assert that the researchers' position of power is evident in that they do not problematize the theory they apply. In this case, the applied research thus becomes part of the democratic paradox. The question is whether our argument is valid.

It is our interpretation that the NIDP researchers have a particular theory that is determined in advance. We base our interpretation on the fact that, to a large extent, the researchers use the theory from the Tavistock studies at British coal mines. At all events, we cannot see any crucial differences. Moreover, the researchers themselves speak of 'applied research' and of wanting to 'try out' the theory.

The weakness in our interpretation is that we cannot know whether the reason the NIDP researchers talk about applied research is that they are in a context where theories must be usable and able to generate results. Nor can we know for sure that the theory does not merely have the status of a hypothesis, so that trying it out could lead to a falsification. At the same time, the researchers themselves write that 'cooperation experiments cannot be conducted by buying a package of recipes and solutions'. They present the theory as something provisional and assert that the research process cannot be planned. They speak of 'feeling one's way forward'.

This reflection is not aimed at the use of applied research in organizational action research projects. Our critique is that it is unclear whether NIDP applies the theory as something predetermined or makes it the object of inquiry.

Is it true that the NIDP projects can be interpreted as a democratic paradox? There are a number of arguments against this interpretation. The NIDP researchers themselves present documentation of some of the limitations of their approach, such as the lack of support and trust among workers and seamen. The researchers also seem to learn from the course of events in the early projects, so that they alter their methodological approach and their way of positioning themselves. This could suggest that the NIDP researchers themselves were on the way to identifying certain contradictions in their project.

There are also a number of factors indicating that the interpretation of the NIDP projects as the manifestation of a democratic paradox is valid. The rank and file on the shop floor, on deck or in the engine room have no direct influence within the local action committees in any of the projects. As we have said,

the researchers document the lack of support, but they do not ask generally whether this could be to do with their research approach, their use of predetermined hypotheses and theories. Nor do they ask whether or how their access, going as it does through employers' associations and trade unions, is affecting their results.

This indicates that, although the NIDP researchers seem to be on the way to identifying certain contradictions in their projects, they do not ask fundamental questions about the way they exercise power. Seen in the context of the time, they introduce radical democratic projects that resonate. Seen from a modern perspective, their exercising of power is not problematized. There are, therefore, arguments both for and against our interpretation.

## Chapter 6

# Democratic dialogues—Dialogue conferences in Norway and Sweden in the 1980s

### What and why

Chapter 6 is about democratic dialogues. They are the core of some organizational development projects carried out in Norway and Sweden from the early 1980s onwards. The projects are a continuation of the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project described in Chapter 5. Industrial democracy is no longer understood as the introduction of a new work organization in the form of partially self-managing groups, but as employee participation in a special change process consisting, essentially, of democratic dialogues in which the employees themselves contribute to defining problems, objectives and actions in the development of their organization. Democratic dialogues thus adopt, not a structural perspective, but a processual one. They understand participation to mean taking part, not in self-managing groups, but in democratic dialogues. We see this as a participatory innovation. It is no longer the researchers who tell the employees and their line managers how best to organize their work. It is the researchers who create the framework for a process in which employees and managers must find out for themselves what works best for them and how they can continue this organizational learning.

The chapter seeks to demonstrate what this processual perspective means in practice by analysing an experiment at a Swedish factory. What degree of participation do employees and local managers have in the practical and theoretical dimensions of the action research? Do they have co-influence or co-determination over the practical change process? How do they participate in the theoretical inquiry into the change process? The chapter discusses these questions in relation to concepts such as deliberation, dialogue, power and organizational communication.

Initially, democratic dialogues are based on Habermas's understanding of dialogue as something that, ideally, rests on everyone being equal and willing to defer to the 'strangely unforced force' of the better argument. The chapter discusses whether such an understanding is applicable in an organizational

context. We hope the chapter will inspire reflection in relation to readers' own action research projects, particularly in relation to the following questions:

How do we document action research processes? The processes are transient. Like, say, stage plays, they cannot be repeated in exactly the same version. What choices do we make in order to capture, document and analyse these processes? Who describes how the processes have played out? Who has the power of interpretation and definition to tell the 'story' of a project? Questions like these become key if we want to demonstrate how a project proceeds and not merely recount it.

What do one's values mean in practice? We hope this chapter will inspire readers to cast a critical eye over their own buzzwords and values. For example, many action researchers talk about democratization and dialogue. A key positive buzzword in this chapter is 'democratic dialogue'. What does it mean?

## 1. Background

Democratic dialogues are a continuation of the NIDP (Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project). In the development of industrial democracy, the NIDP had, as previously mentioned, a number of debatable characteristics:

- In the first projects, the researchers acted as external experts able, using socio-technical analysis, to tell the employees in the organizations which form of work organization would work best for them.
- The researchers focused on participation as a structure, i.e. a redesign of the organization in the direction of partially self-managing groups.
- The researchers had a tendency to implement a general theory in such a way that partially self-managing groups took on the character of a universal answer, whether they were dealing with the iron industry, the shipping industry or something else.
- Despite their great efforts, the researchers had no great success in diffusing the results to other companies.

At the Work Research Institute (WRI) in Oslo, these factors bring a new generation of action researchers onto the scene over the following decades. They include Gustavsen, Engelstad, Eikeland and Pålshaugen (Eikeland & Finsrud, 1995). They bring about the second phase of the development of industrial democracy, which focuses on democratic dialogues. Neither chronologically

nor in the circle of those involved is there a clear division between the first phase and the second. Rather, there is a shift over time, with a certain continuity of personnel. Engelstad, for example, is active in both the socio-technical phase and the democratic dialogue phase. The new tendency evolves in both Norway and Sweden. It receives a boost when, in 1982, the two sides of industry in both countries conclude agreements on greater co-influence for the workers (Engelstad, 1995, p. 163). The parties decide to initiate and support a series of projects aimed at ‘increasing value added by means of broad participation’ (Pålshaugen, 2002, p. 165). In Norway, this results in the Work Research Institute (WRI)’s Network Programme for Business Development, also known as the WRI Programme; in Sweden, it results in the Karlstad Programme (1986–92) based at Karlstad University College, which was part of the LOM (Leadership, Organization, Co-Determination) Programme (Engelstad, 1995, p. 161).

### ***From structure to process***

In an introduction to the development of action research in Norway, Levin (2006) describes the shift from the socio-technical approach to the democratic dialogue approach as follows:

The original socio-technical approach invited to a strong expert dominance. Methods and conceptual models were advocated and controlled by the researchers, and even if the intention was to invite broad participation, the methodological apparatus was quite limited in terms of participation ... At WRI, the focus soon was turned towards large-scale conferences. (p. 173)

The aim of the democratic dialogues or ‘large-scale’ dialogue conferences is to bring together employees from all levels of one or more organizations. They are to define the organizational problems, propose actions to be initiated and follow them up themselves. It is ostensibly the employees themselves who inquire into what they want to be changed. There is a shift from using external socio-technical experts to internal employees when it comes to defining local problems and drafting solutions to them (Elden, 1986, p. 243). Participation is thus a matter of employee participation in democratic dialogues.

Especially at the beginning, the understanding of dialogue is derived from Habermas’s (1981) theory of communication, which sees dialogue as an ideal

characterized by an open and dominance-free conversation (Gustavsen, 2001; Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986). Other sources of inspiration come later, such as the older Wittgenstein, Foucault, constructivism and pragmatism (Pålshaugen, 1998, 2002, 2004; Shotter & Gustavsen, 1999; Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996).

Elden (1986) describes the new tendency as reflecting a shift from empowerment understood as structure to empowerment as process. Empowerment is no longer about taking part in a partially self-managing group, but about participating and learning in a democratic dialogue:

The common purpose of these methods was the creation of ways in which workers could study and change their own organizations ... for the first time, inquiry and change were controlled by participants rather than by those representing a higher authority—that is, by higher-level managers or sociotechnocrats. (p. 243)

Gustavsen (2011) describes the evolution from empowerment as structure to empowerment as process as follows:

- From an emphasis on implementation (of something given ‘from before’ or ‘from outside’) to an emphasis on local learning and local constructivism
- From a split between demonstration and diffusion to a merger of demonstration and diffusion
- From single organizations to various configurations of organizations as the prime unit of change
- From single source to multisource learning
- From initiatives for change directed primarily towards conditions internal to each organization, to initiatives directed primarily towards relationships between organizations
- From an emphasis on ‘leading edge cases’ to an emphasis on lifting the middle
- From a material to a communicative perception of autonomy
- From psychological forces to institutional expressions of ‘the good work’. (pp. 472–73)

Gustavsen, then, understands empowerment as a multifaceted learning process that is constructed in relations between multiple organizations. Here, he



takes a constructivist and communicative view of the process, focusing on the good working life.

### ***Participation in democratic workplace dialogues***

In the original NIDP approach, industrial democracy was associated with influence in the form of partially self-managing groups. In the new phase, according to Gustavsen (2011), industrial democracy is about taking part in open, democratic workplace dialogues:

There is of course no sharp dividing line between this [material] perception of autonomy and a way of looking at autonomy that links it more strongly to the notion of free communication, or the ability to participate in open workplace dialogues (p. 477).

Gustavsen & Engelstad (1986) understand democracy in democratic dialogues as a processual, generative or communicative concept: 'In this interpretation, the concept of industrial democracy becomes identical to generative capacity, or the general ability of people to develop solutions to problems of technology and organization' (p. 104).

Pålshaugen (2002) talks about a shift from a more representative to a more participatory understanding of democracy. In the participatory version, democracy means that employees take part in ongoing dialogues in the workplace. Their proposed improvements can potentially serve to qualify the decisions subsequently taken in the ordinary collaborative and management bodies.

According to Gustavsen (2011), the significance of this distinction between the material, structural or representative and the communicative and processual is growing greater in modern knowledge organizations. He regards it as impossible to have a single, centrally imposed standard in a knowledge organization. Local, participatory democracy is needed here. This means the employees themselves on different levels of the hierarchy playing a part in generating the desired changes towards what they understand as a good job:

The key event in this context was the introduction of the agreements on development, where the need to focus on work organization, co-operation, and local leadership was emphasized, without the parties centrally arguing certain forms of organizations being better than other forms.

Instead, they followed up on the principle behind participative design—to see to it that all concerned could become part of the process—and introduced, in this context, communicative instruments such as a certain kind of conference. (p. 477)

As a matter of principle, then, democratic dialogues focus on participatory processes, local learning and local management, rather than on predetermined general solutions such as self-managing groups.

## 2. Aims and structure

In this chapter, we ask what view of participation finds expression in the democratic dialogues in the period from 1981 to circa 1992.<sup>9</sup> We do this by looking at who and what is included, and who and what is excluded.<sup>10</sup> More specifically, we ask:

Who takes part and makes decisions in democratic dialogues, and what form of participation is involved?

How do democratic dialogues relate to questions of power, dissensus and backstage processes? Is a Habermasian understanding of dialogue usable in an organizational context, and what understanding of dialogue and communication are we actually dealing with?

How does collaboration take place between organizational members and researchers, and what role does research play in democratic dialogues?

### *Aims*

The chapter has three aims:

The *first* aim concerns organizational participation. How do employees and managers take part in the practical dimension of the action research process? Here, we show that democratic dialogues mean that employees can make proposals. Decisions on change processes and on employees' proposals regarding them are taken in the ordinary management forums, including works committees. Organizational participation thus means that there is co-influence, not co-determination; there is deliberation, not decision.

The *second* aim concerns participation in research. How do employees and managers take part in the theoretical dimension of the action research process? Here, the chapter argues that employees and managers take part in processes designed by the action researchers. The processes essentially consist

of democratic dialogues that take place in dialogue conferences, among other places. These dialogues, which are organized by the researchers, do not seem to be up for dialogue. In the original NIDP movement, the partially self-managing group structure is not up for dialogue with management and employees. In both cases, therefore, no questions seem to be asked about the researchers' use of the power of definition. The participatory paradox seems to have moved from structure to process. Instead of a particular structure based on self-managing groups, a particular process based on democratic dialogues is used.

The *third* aim is about problematizing the application of a Habermasian understanding of dialogue in organizations. The chapter argues that this is a consensus understanding that assumes that everyone is equal. Hierarchy, power and strategic communication, characteristic of organizational communication, seem to be excluded from democratic dialogues. The chapter thus demonstrates one pole in particular of the book's sixth perspective: that participation unfolds in the tension field between consensus and dissensus.

In addition, the chapter discusses whether the form of action research that is practised through democratic dialogues can be seen as applied sociology or as applied philosophy of language, and whether research is involved.

## **Structure**

The chapter is in nine sections:

Section 1 describes the background to democratic dialogues.

Section 2 presents the aims, perspectives and structure of the chapter.

Section 3 describes how democratic dialogues are organized on a three-phase model consisting of foundation, project development and institutionalization.

Section 4 analyses some experiments that took place at the Avestad Sandvik Tube (AST) factory in Storfors in Värmland, Sweden, as part of the so-called LOM programme in the period 1988–90.

Section 5 discusses the first aim of the chapter. It concerns participation in the practical dimension of the research process. It discusses participation as co-influence (deliberation in the weak sense) and as co-determination (deliberation in the strong sense).

Section 6 discusses the second aim of the chapter. It concerns participation in the theoretical dimension of the research process and the researchers' power of definition.

Section 7 discusses the third aim of the chapter. It concerns a problematization of the application of a Habermasian understanding of dialogue in organizations.

Section 8 discusses generally how democratic organizational action research can be characterized.

Finally, we summarize the chapter's conclusions and reflect on the validity of its arguments. Here, we touch on the weighting of the relationship between empathy and critique in this chapter (see Section 9).

### **3. The organization of democratic dialogic development processes**

#### *The purpose of dialogues*

Gustavsen & Engelstad (1986) describe democratic dialogue conferences as new forms of participation and as ways of changing working life. The conferences are based on work experience, with broad participation by managers and employees from one or more organizations, plus researchers. The conferences are organized on a three-phase model: foundation, development organization and institutionalization (Engelstad, 1995; Pålshaugen, 1998). Democratic dialogues are a key part of all three forms of organization.

The purpose of democratic dialogue conferences is not to come up with organizational solutions to internal problems in the participating organizations (Pålshaugen, 1998). The purpose is presented slightly differently depending on who is writing:

Gustavsen & Engelstad (1986), writing from a Habermas-inspired understanding of dialogue, see democratic dialogues as an attempt to build generative processes characterized by broad participation and learning. As Gustavsen (2011) puts it: 'While the road to new forms of work organization originally was seen as the implementation of new criteria for job design, the ideas dominating today focus on learning, broad participation and a strong link between productivity and innovation' (p. 463).

Pålshaugen (1998) writes, from a constructivist perspective, that democratic dialogues have a discursive purpose. They can contribute to reorganizing discourses in organizations. This can be done, for example, by organizing processes that can get management and workers talking to each other in new ways, thus helping to initiate new activities:

Rather than trying to bring to light or construct models that simulate 'solutions' of organizational problems in a certain enterprise, such as a factory, from within the social scientific discourse on work organizations, one tries to organize a new type of discourse between management and workforce with the aim of inspiring concrete suggestions about new forms of organization and practical activity in the enterprise. The establishment of such a new type of discourse may be called a reorganization of the discourse in the enterprise. (p. 21)

These two definitions of democratic dialogue show that Gustavsen, Engelstad and Pålshaugen all give a central position to language, communication and dialogue.

### ***Organization as a three-phase process***

All research and development projects within this approach are based on democratic dialogue and broad participation (Engelstad, 1995, p. 162). As mentioned, the projects follow this model:

- Foundation
- Project development, also known as development organization
- Institutionalization.

#### ***The foundation phase***

The foundation phase is in two parts: a recruitment or project development conference for selected participants, and a dialogue conference for staff in one or more organizations. Recruitment conferences have a limited number of participants. Selected managers, trade union representatives, key figures from various organizations and researchers all meet to prepare a dialogue conference to be held later for all staff in the participating organization or organizations (Engelstad, 1995).

The people taking part in the subsequent dialogue conferences vary. In some cases, the so-called 'vertical slice' principle is followed (Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986, p. 107). This means 4–10 people from a company meeting a similar number of people from 4–6 companies in the same industry or region to discuss specific problems and desired improvements. The attendees represent three strata of the hierarchy (workers, managers and executives). Later, they

meet at two follow-up conferences distributed over two years (Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986).

In other cases, the dialogue conferences include all employees and managers (Pålshaugen, 2002), so people are no longer represented by colleagues. Below, we focus on this form of dialogue conference.

Dialogue conferences take various forms. Typically, there is a plenary for all staff, followed by group sessions with a follow-up plenary. The questions are: ‘*What are the main problems of this enterprise?*’ and ‘*What would you like the enterprise to look like in the future?*’ (Pålshaugen, 1998, p. 181). There is a series of dialogues differentiated by topic and participants: ‘... it may be said that the framework of a dialogue conference is formed by *what* is discussed and by *who is doing the discussion*’ (Pålshaugen 1998, p. 30).

The conferences often consist of between three and five sessions with parallel group discussions and subsequent plenary (Engelstad, 1995). The first session typically takes place in participants’ own department. It deals especially with what the department sees as ‘a desirable future’, ‘current obstacles’ and ‘possible solutions’ (Engelstad, 1995, p. 194). The topics are then discussed in parallel in a number of sub-groups organized on a variety of principles. These sessions are considered to constitute the core content of the dialogue conferences and take up around two-thirds of the time (Engelstad, 1995, p. 195).

The conferences often proceed according to this model:

The conference leaders give brief instructions on the topic to be discussed in sub-groups, the principles governing the discussion and the changing division into groups. Johansson-Hidén (1994, p. 77), for example, describes the principles of group discussions as follows:

**Rules of play for groupwork:**

- Everyone takes part in the discussion. From time to time, take turns around the table, so that everyone can have their say.
- Base the discussion on your work experience. Everyone’s experience is of equal value.
- Ask frequent follow-up questions to make sure you have understood each other.
- The group does not need to agree. Different views can be presented.

**The presentation**

- Present the discussion in bullet points on overhead slides.

- Nominate a presenter to give a brief explanation of the points.
- A person can be nominated as a presenter only once during the conference.  
(p. 77; all quotations from this work are translated by the authors from Swedish.)

So, there are brief feedback reports from successive rapporteurs ('presenters'). There are no questions during these reports, other than corrections from the individual rapporteur's own group and clarifying questions (Engelstad, 1995, p. 192).

Our assessment is that the main activity in the foundation phase is a dialogue conference for all staff. At this, everyone takes part in mapping problems and resources. The conferences normally last one or two days. The researchers' task is to ensure that the process is driven forward and that everyone can have their say. The conferences are no longer about generating practical results in the form of a new structure to organize work in partially self-managing groups. Nor are they about generating theoretical results. They are about generating a new discourse in which staff can participate in a democratic dialogic development process. In this, with the help of the researchers, they can themselves define problems in their organization and prepare draft action plans (Gustavsen, 2001, p. 18). This continues in the next phase:

### ***The project development or development organization phase***

The second phase is project development. Also termed the 'development organization', it consists *inter alia* of follow-up dialogue conferences (Engelstad, 1995, p. 162).

Pålshaugen (1998) understands the development organization as a contribution to establishing an internal public sphere in the organization:

The development organization—and the dialogue conferences as part of it—involves an attempt to organize a public sphere in the company, supplementary to the company's and the employees' other bodies, and thus also supplementary to the traditional discourse formation in companies. (p. 40)

Pålshaugen (1998) says that many of the problems considered in the development organization have been considered earlier. In his interpretation, they

have not been managed or solved because they were only considered in small, unofficial settings, not in a shared, internal public sphere. He sees it as one of the strengths of the development organization that it reorganizes the discourse. This gives day-to-day irritations and problems more importance, making it harder to do nothing to solve them.

The development organization consists of several different organizations (Engelstad, 1995): production groups, where the members of a group or department meet to discuss improvements; production plenaries, which are expanded departmental committees for all employees; and the 'Company Development Committee' (p. 63), a strategic forum including management representatives. Project workers are attached to the development organization. They are foundation funded, and they help management and employees with the practical side. The production groups are intended to be a three-month experiment. After that, the organization decides locally whether, and if so how, to carry on with the development organization.

#### *Institutionalization and network organization*

Phase three is institutionalization. This ideally includes a network organization, in which the organization enters into collaboration with other organizations, perhaps in the same industry or the same region, in order to exchange experience and keep development efforts going (Engelstad, 1995, p. 162).

Institutionalization, then, is about anchoring the development organization in the organization henceforth, and about expanding a network including other organizations (Engelstad, 1995). Institutionalization is not intended to be a fixed template that must, or can, be applied everywhere. Rather, it is an experimental template (Pålshaugen, 1998, p. 112). We have been unable to find literature describing this phase in more detail. Pålshaugen (1998), too, says that the phase is poorly described.

Engelstad (1995, p. 173) considers that these three phases seem to have set the template for all projects since 1986.

## **4. An example of democratic dialogue**

### *Documentation of democratic dialogues*

It has been difficult to find documentation showing how democratic dialogues are carried on in practice in organizational action research projects. This is



true both of the Norwegian projects initiated by the Work Research Institute (WRI) in Oslo and of the Swedish LOM projects initiated by Karlstad University College. Gustavsen (2001) explicitly argues against making the process the object of research, as this might reduce participants to research subjects.

Our literature search shows that much has been written over the years about open democratic dialogues and about process and communication. Very little in this literature shows how open democratic dialogues and communication in the development organization are carried on in practice among the employees themselves, between them and their supervisors, between the supervisors and senior management, between them and the researchers or with other stakeholders.

We have thus looked in vain for empirical studies that capture and document process and communication in democratic dialogues. These might perhaps be in the form of transcripts of audio-taped or video-taped conversations, meeting minutes or records of interviews with participants about their own accounts and perceptions of the process. Johansson-Hidén's (1994) dissertation on group communication patterns in democratic dialogues is an exception. Drawing *inter alia* on Bales's (1950) sociological analysis model of group interaction processes, known as interaction process analysis (IPA), she inquires how group communication proceeds in a democratic project.<sup>11</sup>

This study notwithstanding, we are left with several unanswered questions. Are democratic dialogues open in practice? What conceptions underlie the assumption that it is possible to carry on dominance-free dialogues in organizations characterized by hierarchy, power and strategic communication (Deetz, 2001; Eisenberg, Goodall & Tretheway, 2010)? What goes on backstage, i.e. outside the official settings, at dialogue conferences (Goffman, 2010, 1992)? Is it possible, with the help of rules of dialogue, to exclude backstage communication from the internal organizational public sphere, and is it desirable?

This section is therefore based on experiment reports incorporating field notes and diary entries written along the way by the researchers, and on interview and questionnaire studies evaluating how the experiments worked. We have chosen to write about a single LOM project at the AST factory, Avestad Sandvik Tube AB. AST is in Storfors in Värmland, Sweden; it has just under

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11 The IPA model was developed in experimental laboratories at Harvard in the early 1950s, at a time when there was a focus on research into small group communication.

100 employees at the time in question. It makes seamless stainless steel pipes. This project has been chosen because it is described in detail in reports by Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén (1990, 1992),<sup>12</sup> who took part in the project. There are also summary evaluations written by other researchers who did not take part in the project directly but were part of the effort to develop democratic dialogues (Engelstad, 1995) or took part in the evaluation of them (Naschold, 1993).

### ***Higher productivity and increased employee satisfaction at AST***

The organizational action research project at AST begins in 1988/89. The project results in the employees gaining greater decision-making power. This happens on night and weekend shifts, for example, which they end up running by themselves, without supervisors (Engelstad, 1995, p. 201). At the same time, productivity and employee satisfaction go up:

In the project period, an increase in production volume from approximately 600 to 1600 tonnes of pipe per shift team was achieved, with a small reduction in the quantity of waste as a percentage of production. The manning level ... remained around the same even after production went up. Short-term absenteeism in the production department fell from 6.0% to 3.3% In 1991–93. Interviews with workers also showed that working conditions had improved during the period. (p. 201; all quotations from this work are translated by the authors from Norwegian.)

How was it done?

### ***Building a development organization***

The project goes through the three phases described above: foundation, project development and institutionalization (Engelstad, 1995, p. 162). Here, we will focus on the first two phases and the establishment of a development organization, because the third phase is not described in detail.

Project development conference

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12 This chapter does not take account of possible different understandings of democratic dialogues in, for example, the work of Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, and that of Gustavsen, Pålshaugen and others.

The project begins with a project development conference in Karlstad in November 1988, attended by management and trade union representatives. Here, they discuss what is to be worked on at the forthcoming dialogue conference (Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, 1990, p. 14). At the project development conference, which the action researchers also attend (Engelstad, 1995, p. 198), the management and the trade union representatives set the following objectives for the process:

- improved information and communication both between different groups and parties and with each employee;
- a higher technical level, both mechanically and as regards personnel and knowledge. (Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, 1990, p. 14).

Next in the process, a development organization is set up. It consists primarily of annual dialogue conferences, workplace groups, a strategy forum, a prioritization group, networking links with other companies, and documentation.<sup>13</sup>

#### Dialogue conference

The first dialogue conference for all staff is held as a full-day conference in September 1989. The objectives set by management and the trade union representatives at the project development conference are used as a starting point. The objectives are expanded, but the original objectives still seem to have top priority (Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, 1990, p. 14). The process for the coming year up to the next dialogue conference in October 1990—another all-day event for all staff—is also determined.

### Workplace groups

After the first dialogue conference, workplace groups, an important part of the development organization, are set up. These are weekly get-togethers or group meetings at the workplace, with more or less everybody taking part. There are eleven groups, which report on topics and improvement proposals to a prioritization group. With regard to the two overriding objectives, improvement of information/communication and raising of the technical level, the workplace groups seem to have focused especially on the technical/mechanical improvements (p. 15).

### Strategy forum

The key decision-making body in the development organization is the so-called *huvudmanngruppen* or principals' group. Engelstad (1995, p. 198) describes it as a 'strategy forum'. It consists of the factory manager (known as the RO manager, meaning 'Result Area Manager'), the Head of Production, five trade union representatives and two researchers, Räftegård and Johansson-Hidén. The group holds monthly meetings and follows up on progress in the development organization and in the strategy discussions. From Räftegård and Johansson-Hidén's (1992) description, this forum seems to be the core body of the project:

The principals' group is the top decision-making forum of the development organization. Among the principles the group works by is that decisions must be made as close as possible to those concerned. Decisions, especially strategic ones, are taken after comprehensive discussions, with 'going round the table' a constant routine. If agreement cannot be reached in the group, the decision is taken by the RO manager. (p. 14; all quotations from this work are translated by the authors from Swedish.)

### The prioritization group

If the principals' group is the strategic forum, the prioritization group can be said to be the tactical forum. It is this group that decides which of the workplace groups' proposals are to be implemented.

The group consists of the chief technology officer, the head of production, the head of the maintenance department and acting supervisors (Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, 1990). Very few proposals are rejected by the prioritization

group as being too expensive (p. 15). Engelstad (1995) emphasizes that many proposals are implemented:

During the year up to the next dialogue conference, about 380 proposals were registered, about 70% of them concerning technical/mechanical improvements. The fact that nearly 60% of these proposals have already been put into effect is testament to the good progress made in the development work. The researchers' evaluation conversations with the eleven groups also showed that management and the great majority of employees regarded the new working arrangements positively. (p. 199)

#### Networking links

Inter-organizational work, i.e. exchange of experience with other organizations, does not seem to have been carried on systematically in the beginning (Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, 1990, p. 10).

#### Documentation

Documentation means that there are written minutes of all meetings, so that the workplace groups can see the prioritization group's priorities. Further to this is the researchers' work as part of the development organization.

Continual adjustments are made during the process. There is apparently a democratization of the way the development organization is organized, in that the 1992 dialogue conference is planned 'by a conference planning group appointed *ad hoc*' (Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, 1992, p. 11). Similarly, a little further on in the process, the researchers train the other members of the strategy forum to undertake evaluation conversations—periodic conversations with the workplace groups about the progress of the project—themselves (Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, 1992, p. 19).

In February 1991, the strategy forum decides that participation in workplace groups is optional, but stresses that one will, in the nature of things, lose influence by not taking part (p. 11). Throughout the forums of the development organization, the effort to generate democratic dialogues is characterized by the following rules of play (Engelstad, 1995):

The most important rules are:

- (1) take turns to speak (i.e. the most articulate talk less and listen more, and the silent talk more and perhaps 'sleep' less);

- (2) wrap up discussion of individual questions (i.e. disagreement is allowed, and letting discussions get stuck on particular points is a waste of time);
- (3) ask follow-up questions, e.g. when a point is unclear (i.e. help to raise mutual understanding and strengthen the coherence of the discussions). Extensive experience suggests that, if these rules are applied, the dialogue will probably also work (p. 205).

The researchers' focus on processes

The work of the researchers is part of the development organization. The research questions of the project are as follows: 'The research objective is, on the one hand, to develop and review forms of action research; on the other, to develop and critically review aspects of dialogue-based development' (Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, 1990, p. 2; all quotations from this work are translated by the authors from Swedish).

The collaboration with AST depends on a division of labour in which the employees take care of the content, i.e. the concrete problems that the organization wants the development organization to solve, while the researchers take care of the actual research process. Their focus is on communication, i.e. dialogue, procedure and learning. The researchers describe their own role in terms of three focal points: dialogue, form and congruence (Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, 1990):

The researchers' chosen roles, or approaches, can be summarized in three keywords:

*Dialogic thinking* means that, rather than providing the analyses and solutions of design thinking, the researchers provide questions and reflections during the process. Local learning and locally appropriate solutions are believed to be achievable through critical questioning.

We seek to position our theoretical knowledge as complementary to the practitioners' knowledge. This means that, when we take part in dialogues (in the principals' group, at the dialogue conference or during evaluation conversations), any theoretical input from us is restricted to very brief explanations, mainly concerning the idea of democratic dialogue and the principles of good group communication. We also try to apply these ideas and principles carefully to our own presentations by,

for example, letting people take turns to speak around the table, inviting follow-up questions and asking about work experience.

*Form thinking* may apply more widely than content thinking. The way to a meaningful, effective and communicative development organization may lie through forms of dialogue and action. In these questions of form, we see ourselves as full participants, but it should be noted that our input is generally aimed at clarifying and supporting the development process—not at providing ready-made solutions ...

Finally, *process congruence* is another keyword, imposing restrictions on, primarily, the researchers' evaluation methods. The idea is that what is said and done must be in accordance with the process and its objectives ... We conjectured that it might be disastrous if, after analysis, the researchers were to clarify ... where the problem 'actually' lay, or if we as discussion leaders controlled (inhibited) dialogues and responsibility. (p. 12)

In the original NIDP industrial democracy projects, the researchers acted as socio-technical experts. In the democratic dialogues, the researchers act as process facilitators. They seem to be careful to adapt their models of democratic dialogue and good communication to the organization. They do this by asking questions and creating congruence between the declared values of the project and their theories-in-use.

The three keywords by which the researchers work—dialogue, form and congruence—are summed up by one of the action researchers (Räftegård, 1991) in the term:

'procedural approach', thus emphasizing, *inter alia*, that the researchers' actions are focused on the procedures of the process, not its content. Our interest is in studying and testing a dialogue-based development organization—not in *directly* changing, for example, the production organization, the working environment or the management system. (Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, 1992, p. 22)

## **5. Participation in the practical dimension of the research process: deliberation and decision**

In this section, we respond to the first aim of the chapter, concerning the way employees and managers participate in the practical dimension of the action research process.

The analysis of AST and the description above of the researchers' ways of relating show that Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén (1990, 1992) are aware that there must be congruence between the declared values of the project and the researchers' practice. From the reports on AST and other literature, we have not been able to see how the researchers communicated in practice. Were they controlling, for example, or were they true to their dialogical principles? Did they encounter any dilemmas in finding a balance between their role as process facilitators and as spokespersons for particular solutions as to content? How did they manage the workers' reactions to the rules of play for democratic dialogues? We cannot answer these questions, and have therefore chosen to focus on what the researchers, Räftegård and Johansson-Hidén, did in their studies.

### ***Participation as voice***

The researchers continually inquire whether the employees feel able to put their views forward, i.e. whether they have voice and feel heard: at the 1990 dialogue conference, for example, after each group discussion, they ask 'Did you have a proper opportunity to put forward your views in the various group discussions today?' (Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, 1992, p. 10). 85% or more respond that they have had 'proper' or 'quite good' opportunities.

Similarly, of the strategy group's evaluation conversations with the workplace groups, we are told: 'On a four-point scale, 95% stated that they always or (in some cases) almost always had a real opportunity to put forward their views in the workplace group' (Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, 1992, p. 35).

Something similar holds for the evaluation conversations held by the researchers with all the workplace groups. These conversations are about the workers' knowledge of the development work, about the workplace groups as an instrument for tabling problems, about the opportunity to conduct democratic dialogues and about their effect on day-to-day work (Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, 1990, p. 17; quotations from this work are translated by the authors from Swedish).



The researchers meet the whole workplace group to inquire into the opportunity for democratic dialogue. They first show some overheads that explain what the concrete rules of play for democratic dialogue are all about. They are about such things as ‘everyone’s participation, the value of work experience etc’ (p. 19); about how ‘people should take turns to speak around the table’ and ‘everyone’s experience is equal etc’ (p. 23). The researchers then ask: ‘Is it possible to discuss this, and do you?’. Nine of the eleven groups answer with an unambiguous ‘yes’, while two groups cannot confirm it (p. 19).

All the questions in the above examples are about voice, i.e. about the right to express one’s own views and suggestions. They are not about choice, i.e. whether an employee feels their decision-making power has increased. As we have said, decisions are taken in the strategy forum and the prioritization group, i.e. by management rather than in the workplace groups. The night and weekend teams, who gain wider decision-making power by working without a foreman, seem to be an exception to this. Moreover, the group that plans the dialogue conferences is enlarged.

This tendency applies not only to day-to-day work in the organization and the workplace groups’ ongoing work on improvements; it applies also to the establishment of the project scope. It is the trade union and the management team who, at the project development conference in Karlstad in November 1988, set out the priority topics and objectives that are to be considered at the dialogue conference in September 1989. To the best of our knowledge, the dialogue conference starts from the question, not of *whether* to work with these objectives, but rather of *how* to implement them.

Something similar happens when it comes to communicating about the project. The factory manager, a supervisor, the metalworkers’ union branch chairman and a researcher present the AST Storfors project at a national LOM conference in May 1990. Apparently, no employees take part in the presentation.

On the one hand, then, democratic dialogue seems to work to the great satisfaction of the employees in the sense that they feel they are heard and have voice.<sup>14</sup> On the other, no co-determination seems to be involved. Decisions are taken at higher levels of management, including collegial bodies. It is therefore hard for us to discern adherence in practice to the principle that

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14 Evaluation conversations show that some employees want to have direct contact with the strategy forum or to take part in its work (Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, 1990, p. 21).

decisions should be taken as close as possible to those affected. The question is, of course, what is understood by ‘as close as possible’ to those affected.

### ***Separation of deliberation and decision***

There appears to be a division of labour in the ongoing work. With few exceptions, it is the researchers who investigate and evaluate how the projects are working in relation to the original objectives, including whether the employees feel they are being heard. Along the way, the researchers train members of the strategy forum to carry out evaluation conversations themselves.

The overall view of participation thus seems to rest on a separation of deliberation and decision. This manifests itself methodologically in the questions that are asked and in those that are not. A recurrent question in the researchers’ inquiries is whether employees have felt that they were being heard during the project. As we have said, the employees are not correspondingly asked whether they feel they have co-determination.

Something similar applies to the absence of questions about the way the dialogue played out in practice. Apart from Johansson-Hidén’s (1994) dissertation, we have found no examples of inquiry into practice. We find this odd, because a pragmatic or discursive view of language is advocated elsewhere. The pragmatic view of language means essentially that one acts when one uses language (Austin, 1962); the discursive view is that one constructs other spaces and relations through other ways of using language (Gergen, 1997; McNamée & Gergen, 1999; Phillips, 2011).

### ***Deliberative democracy and co-influence***

Overall, therefore, we understand the AST project as a weak form of deliberative democracy (Fraser, 1992, p. 13) in which deliberation and decision are separate. As an ordinary employee, one can take part in dialogues that may culminate in proposals and advice, or may have the character of consultations. As an employee, then, one has voice. However, the dialogue does not in itself have the power to decide. Decisions are taken in the strategy forum and the prioritization group, i.e. at management level. This is true both of the initial decisions on scope or aims, and of subsequent decisions on possible implementation. As far as we can see, there are no employees on these decision-making bodies.

In response to the first aim of the chapter, our assessment is therefore that, in the democratic dialogue tradition, democracy, dialogue and participation are about co-influence and not about co-determination (Pålshaugen, 2002, p. 154). Participation in democratic dialogues in organizations is thus a matter of voice, not of choice (Cornwall, 2011).

## **6. Deliberative democracy and democratic dialogues in organizations**

Section 6 discusses the second aim of the chapter, concerning participation in the theoretical dimension of the action research. It will show that employees and managers take part in dialogic processes designed by the action researchers. Because of the lack of documentation, it is hard to say anything about the way participation took place in practice in the research process.

The section begins with a more detailed presentation of deliberative democracy, which will provide a basis for understanding democratic dialogues. Next comes a section on democratic dialogues in organizations, based on an analysis of some of the thirteen pragmatic rules of discourse on which democratic dialogues are founded. Along the way, we will adduce examples from our own action research projects.

### ***Can deliberative democracy be transferred to organizations?***

Something the original Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project and the democratic dialogue project in Norway and Sweden have in common is that they strive to narrow the gap between the bourgeois-liberal democracy of the political sphere and the lack of democracy in the organizational sphere (Gustavsen, 2001; Pålshaugen, 1998; Thorsrud & Emery, 1970b).

Democracy, as understood in the context of democratic dialogue, is seen not as representative, but as participatory. It is not about being represented on the bodies of the political sphere, but about participating in public discussions oneself. This form of democracy is termed participatory or deliberative (Gustavsen, 1992; Pålshaugen, 1998).

Deliberative democracy is usually seen as the opposite of self-interest, negotiation and the use of power (Mansbridge et al., 2010, p. 64). It can be seen as the Enlightenment ideal of a democracy based on reason's insight into the

common good. Mansbridge et al. (2010) describe the regulative principles of deliberation as follows:

There is considerable consensus among theorists on many of the regulative ideals of deliberative democracy ... The deliberation should, ideally, be open to all those affected by the decision ... The participants should have equal opportunity to influence the process, have equal resources, and be protected by basic rights. The process of 'reason-giving' is required and central ... In that process, participants should treat one another with mutual respect and equal concern. They should listen to one another and give reasons to one another that they think the others can comprehend and accept. They should aim at finding fair terms of cooperation among free and equal persons. They should speak truthfully. The criterion that most clearly distinguishes deliberative from non-deliberative mechanisms within democratic decision is that in the regulative ideal, coercive power should be absent from the purely deliberative mechanisms. Participants should not try to change others' behavior through the threat of sanction or the use of force. (pp. 64–65)

Linguistically, the regulative principles of deliberation are described in the passage quoted by repeated use of the modal verb 'should', indicating how the principles ought ideally to operate, e.g. in the absence of power, through ideals of argumentation, openness, equality, respect etc. The passage quoted contains a duality. On the one hand, dialogue participants should refrain from imposing their positions on others ('not try to change others ...'). On the other, a series of norms are set regarding how they should ideally communicate, e.g. openly, respectfully, truthfully.

As mentioned, a distinction is drawn in deliberation theory between strong and weak deliberation (Fraser, 1992, p. 134; Mansbridge et al., 2010, p. 65). Strong deliberation means that the deliberations culminate in binding decisions. Weak deliberation means that meanings can be co-created and recommendations made. The analysis of participation in the project at AST in Section 5 showed that employees had voice and could make recommendations, but did not have choice and could not take decisions. We interpret this to mean that democratic dialogues can be understood as a weak version of deliberation.

Deliberative democracy presupposes that citizens are in some sense equal. Transferring this conception from the political sphere to an organization there-

fore seems to presuppose that everyone in an organization is in some sense equal and that power is absent. Perhaps this is why Gustavsen & Engelstad (1986) stress that participation in organizational democratic dialogues presupposes that everyone is equal in having workplace experience: 'The encounters are now designed to function primarily as a training ground in democratic dialogue and broad participation based on work experience' (Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986, p. 102).

Democratic dialogues seek to transfer Habermas's (1984) principles of the ideal, dominance-free dialogue from the civic public sphere to the organizational sphere. This is done through the creation of internal organizational public spheres such as dialogue conferences, workplace groups, production groups etc.

From our perspective, there are some crucial contextual differences between the civic public sphere and the public sphere in organizations. Having workplace experience in common does not mean that everyone has the same formal or informal status in an organization. Political leaders are customarily elected by the citizens, while company managers are more or less never elected by the employees. In other words, transferring the concept of deliberative democracy to organizations seems to presuppose that inequality and structural organizational power can be excluded or eliminated. We will return to this in Section 7.

### ***Democratic dialogues in organizations***

#### ***Dialogue as rational discourse: thirteen rules of discourse***

Gustavsen & Engelstad (1986), citing Habermas, define dialogue as an 'open discourse'. They hypothesize that the most rational solutions to problems arise through examination of arguments in dialogues, understood as open discussions (Gustavsen 2001). These dialogues have as their subject, not the problems of the political sphere, but experience from work. Gustavsen (1995, p. 96) does not see Habermas's (1973) conception of a dominance-free dialogue as an ideal immediately applicable to working life. He argues that democratic dialogues can act as a learning space for co-influence based on work experience. They can bridge the gap between 'the micro and the macro levels of democratic development', i.e. between the organizational and political levels, and mediate between a theoretical and a practical discourse (Gustavsen, 2001, p. 102). In this dialogue, the researchers' theoretical discourse meets the em-

ployees' practical discourse. The organization therefore need not take on the researchers' theoretical discourse.

Inspired by Habermas, Gustavsen (2001) defines thirteen rules of dialogic discourse, which are also termed 'orientational directives' (Shotter & Gustavsen, 1999, p. 15). Gustavsen (2001) writes that the choice of these thirteen criteria is 'pragmatic'. The crucial thing is 'what works'. The thirteen rules of discourse seem to constitute the basis of the democratic dialogues at the dialogue conferences. Our discussion of them below is organized thematically, asking: what is understood by dialogue? What contributions are legitimate in public arenas? What are the principles of the Nordic consensus model?<sup>15</sup> We analyse the use of language in the thirteen rules of dialogic discourse on which democratic dialogue conferences are based. We would have preferred to analyse the actual communication and interaction in democratic dialogues, but we have been unable to find video or audio recordings, transcripts or minutes of conversations documenting how democratic dialogues are carried on in practice.

Along the way, we discuss the rules in the light of some practical experiences of what we have seen to work, and not work, in our own dialogic organizational action research projects. We also bring in contextualizing theories of dialogue, organizational communication and the 'backstage' and 'frontstage' in order to position democratic dialogues in a landscape of dialogue and communication theory.

### ***How is dialogue understood?***

The first rule of discourse is: 'The dialogue is a process of exchange: ideas and arguments move to and fro between the participants' (Gustavsen, 1992, p. 3). The first rule suggests an understanding of communication as a two-way process ('process of exchange') between parties who exchange ideas and arguments (Eisenberg, Goodall & Tretheway, 2010). Such a definition is not immediately compatible with dialogues understood as generative co-creation processes. In contrast, Johansson-Hidén (1994, p. 12) argues for an understanding of communication as a co-creation process.

The first rule raises another question. We are unsure why the term used is 'dialogue' and not simply 'conversation' or 'communication'. The criterion does

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15 Our presentation of the order of the rules of discourse deviates from that of Shotter & Gustavsen (1999), which is given at the end of the chapter.

not specify whether dialogues have special features distinguishing them from negotiation, for example (Eikeland, 2006, p. 220).

Theories of dialogue gained acceptance in communication theory from the 1990s onwards in the USA and Europe especially (Anderson, Baxter & Cissna, 2004; Anderson, Cissna & Arnett, 1994; Baxter, 2011; Deetz & Simpson, 2004; Phillips, 2011; Stewart, Zediker & Black, 2004). Here, researchers worked with a variety of theories of dialogue inspired by Buber, Bakhtin and Bohm, for example, rather than by Habermas (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Bohm, 1996; Buber, 1957, 1994). Among other things, they discussed whether dialogue should be understood as a special form of conversation (Buber; Bohm) or whether all conversations are dialogues (Bakhtin). Some of these theories were taken up in action research, which studied how dialogues work in practice in organizations (Ospina et al., 2004; Pedersen & Olesen, 2008; Phillips, 2011).

It puzzles us that advocates of democratic dialogues do not position their understanding of dialogues within a landscape of communication and dialogue theory, because communication and dialogue are key concepts in this approach.

#### ***Definition and discussion of legitimate contributions in public arenas***

Gustavsen & Engelstad (1986) stress that not all contributions are included as legitimate statements:

... the outcome of the conference is built primarily on what emerged in the official arena ... Public issues are the only legitimate ones ... Resource persons [researchers] act only on the public scene ... Analyses, problem solving, and decisions have to build on what emerged through the public proceedings ... Personal grievances and frustrations ... should, as far as possible, be kept out of the encounters. (pp. 109–10)

The quotation indicates that only arguments presented in public discussions at conferences are included in the process. The researchers take part only in the conversations in this public space. As is well known, Goffman (1992, 2010) distinguishes, in his microsociological theories of social interaction, between the 'frontstage' and the 'backstage'. The dramaturgical term 'frontstage' denotes the performance of roles on stage, i.e. in the public space. The 'backstage' is defined by preparation and evaluation of the role performance and by relaxation and recharging. Our interpretation is that democratic dialogues only

intend to include frontstage contributions. What happens backstage 'should as far as possible' be kept out of public dialogue meetings. This might mean communication during breaks about how the dialogues are going in the public space. Also excluded are contributions with personal, emotional content.

The quotation also shows that it is the researchers who apparently have the power of definition enabling them to decide what is to be included in the dialogues. It points to a paradox: the researchers want open dialogues based on everybody's work experience while at the same time apparently defining in advance what the dialogues are to be about and what is to be excluded.

We do not understand how backstage communication and personal emotional reactions can be excluded from having significance (Gustavsen, Hansson & Qvale, 2008, p. 70). Although these aspects are not addressed in the official conversation space, this does not necessarily mean that they are absent. They may be present as silent voices, for example. As well as on Goffman, our argument is based on an understanding of organizational communication as a complex form of communication containing many simultaneous layers and aspects: socio-psychological, tactical, strategic and contextual, for example (Alvesson, 1996; Cheeney, Christensen, Zorn & Ganesh, 2004; Deetz, 2001; Eisenberg, Goodall & Tretheway, 2010; Hallahan et al., 2007; Stacey, 2001, 2007).

With these clarifications, which seem to exclude backstage discussions and personal emotional reactions, we are sceptical as to whether all participants get the opportunity to have voice. Are democratic dialogues an example of deliberative democracy in its weak version, as we have said above? We also have difficulty understanding whether and how, in their practice or in theory, democratic dialogue researchers can avoid the multiply contextualized organizational communication that involves power, political games and strategic communication such as alliances and exclusions.

We have chosen to illustrate this problematic with a single example: during an action research project, we were present at a conversation between a CEO and his executives and managers. We believed it had the character of dialogue, i.e. that it was a joint inquiry with no decision taken in advance. Afterwards, we interviewed one of the executives, who said: 'When my CEO has asked three questions that point in the same direction, I know full well which way it's been decided we'll go'. We had not understood this during the conversation, because we had heard the questions as open, not as leading, i.e. strategic questions. We learnt that our limited knowledge of the organizational



context meant that we had missed layers of the conversation that the executive had understood. We therefore realized that it was not sufficient to focus on the form of communication. In the context, an apparently open question functioned as a strategic question.

### *The Nordic consensus model*

The twelfth discursive rule reads: ‘The participants should be able to tolerate an increasing degree of difference of opinion’ (Gustavsen, 1992, p. 4).

In both this and the other rules, modal verbs are used to express a number of normative requirements. In the twelfth rule of dialogue, the modal verb ‘should’ is used. It indicates a necessity or obligation to develop a particular behaviour or competence that has to do with tolerating difference. We cannot see how this normative rule has been formulated on the basis of what works in practice. Rather, we regard it as an ideal that participants ought to live up to.

The thirteenth principle reads as follows:

The dialogue must continuously produce agreements which can provide platforms for practical action. Note that there is no contradiction between this criterion and the previous one. The major strength of a democratic system compared to all other ones is that it has the benefit of drawing upon a broad range of opinions and ideas that inform practice, while at the same time being able to make decisions which can gain the support of all participants. (Gustavsen, 1992, p. 4)

This thirteenth rule, too, is about a normative obligation. Dialogues ‘must’ produce ‘agreements’ on joint action. The rule argues that the democratic system can draw on many viewpoints while at the same time making joint decisions that everyone supports. We interpret this as expressing a consensus approach.

We find no documentation to show how participants with presumably different interests can reach agreement, or how the researchers make the rule work in practice. As readers, we are told how we must read rules twelve and thirteen. This is done by means of the imperative ‘note’ (‘Note that there is no contradiction between this criterion and the previous one’). We do not perceive the use of the imperative as an invitation to dialogue. We interpret it as an example of the researchers making use of their power of definition to stipulate how the discursive rules are to be understood. One argument against our

reading of rules twelve and thirteen might be that this is a chance example or slip of the pen that might, perhaps, be a translation issue. Our analysis in this section and in Section 7 indicates that the use of modal verbs appears to be a general pattern.

The consensus approach is in line with Gustavsen's (2011) assessments of the Nordic model:

The Nordic model was based on the idea of reducing conflicts in working life through pooling the measures available to, respectively, the employers, the unions and the government, resulting in substantial packages covering a broad range of measures and institutions. With less conflicts productivity would increase, making room for wage increases, reduction in working time, and welfare programs (p. 466).

Gustavsen (2011) sees the original industrial democracy projects, and the more recent democratic dialogue projects, as part of the Nordic model. This mindset exemplifies a corporate striving for consensus in which trade unions, employers' associations and government join forces to raise productivity through conflict reduction.

We have great sympathy with the way the NIDP and democratic dialogues take up the challenge of the democratic deficit in organizations after the Second World War. We are, though, sceptical about their solutions. This is the case whether we are looking at representative democracy with representatives on company boards, at democracy from above in the form of partially self-managing groups, or at deliberative democracy with the opportunity for co-influence. Our scepticism derives from our practical experience in action research projects of creating space for many different voices and interests and of generating opportunities for them to find out whether they can work towards shared goals through a democratic process of inquiry and decision making (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2013, 2014a, 2016).

In Section 6, we have examined the second aim of the chapter, which concerns the way managers and employees participate in democratic dialogues. The analysis of the rules of play of democratic dialogues in organizations shows that it is the researchers who define the content of the discursive rules and the way in which conversation is conducted. They do this on the basis of a normatively justified value set that manifests itself linguistically through repeated use of modal verbs. The researchers argue that the discursive rules are

chosen because they work in practice. However, we have been unable to find empirically based literature documenting that they were developed from practice or substantiating why and how the rules work in practice.

Gustavsen (1992, p. 112) writes that the dialogic principles ought generally to be no more than indicative and should themselves be open to dialogue. We have searched in vain for literature that problematizes the rules of play of democratic dialogue, e.g. by querying what and who is excluded from democratic dialogues and who defines their content. Thorkildsen (2013), however, demonstrates contradictions between an official project report and the exclusion of some of the participating voices in a democratic action research project. Our overall interpretation in respect of the second aim is therefore that the participatory paradox seems to have moved from structure to process. Instead of a particular structure based on self-managing groups, a particular process based on democratic dialogues, defined by the researchers, is used. Both seem to be instances of participation as the exercising of power, without it being stated explicitly.

## **7. Participation and exclusion**

Section 7 discusses the third aim of the chapter. This concerns the consequences of applying a Habermas-inspired understanding of dialogue in organizations. In particular, we query an understanding of participation based on equality. We take two overall approaches to this. One is pragmatic and involves discussing the question in the light of our experience and knowledge from practice in organizational action research projects. The second is theoretical and involves asking what overall view of organizational contexts, power and dialogic learning spaces is implicit in democratic dialogues. Against this background, we consider whether the rules of play of democratic dialogue can contribute to the suspension of existing organizational contexts. Can they ensure that everyone dares, or wants, to say what they think?

### ***The exclusion of inequality?***

A key principle of Habermas's (2005) ideal of dialogue concerns equality:

Thus the rational acceptability of a statement ultimately rests on reasons in conjunction with specific features of the process of argumentation itself. The four most important features are: (i) that nobody who could

make a relevant contribution may be excluded; (ii) that all participants are granted an equal opportunity to make contributions; (iii) that the participants must mean what they say; and (iv) that communication must be freed from external or internal coercion so that the “yes” or “no” stances that participants adopt on criticizable validity claims are motivated solely by the rational force of the better reasons (p. 44).

Gustavsen argues that the ideal of equality cannot be transferred to organizations. At the same time, the ideal of all participants being equal and all contributions legitimate seems to be replicated in some of the discursive rules. Rules four and eight, for example, state: ‘All participants are equal ... All arguments which pertain to the issues under discussion are legitimate. No argument should be rejected on the ground that it emerges from an illegitimate source’ (Gustavsen, 1992, pp. 3–4).

### ***The elimination of inequality between management and employees?***

The idea of the dialogue conferences is that all participants must be able to express themselves and should take part actively. This is conveyed by the use of the modal verbs ‘must’ and ‘should’ in rules two and three:

It must be possible for all concerned to participate. (Gustavsen, 1992, p. 3)

This possibility for participation is, however, not enough. Everybody should also be active. Consequently each participant has an obligation not only to put forth his or her own ideas but also to help others to contribute their ideas. (Gustavsen, 1992, p. 3)

The conferences are organized with changing sub-groups (Gustavsen & Engestad, 1986), giving everyone the opportunity to speak and be heard. The rule that everyone is equal seems to rest on the assumption that all employees and managers dare, or want, to say what they think. In an organizational context, however, communication frequently takes place strategically (Guldbrandsen & Nørholm, 2016; Hallahan et al., 2007), as we demonstrated in the example of the apparently open question in Section 6. This means that there may be conflicting, and unspoken, agendas of many kinds. Can the researchers ensure that everyone becomes equal by setting rules of play stipulating that people

speaking only from work experience and that everybody's opinions have the same value?

Gustavsen & Engelstad (1986) write:

If the experiences made in the encounter [at the Dialogue Conference] can feed back into the everyday relationships in the enterprise, the encounter has performed a mediating function, i.e., between a hierarchical and a more democratic pattern of organization. (p. 102)

We find it hard to imagine that staff set aside their awareness of their organizational role and of their own and others' positions in an organizational hierarchy when they enter the democratic dialogue venue. Will a shop-floor worker see his/her manager as an equal because they enter into a new way of organizing conversations? Will a manager be confident that he/she can involve employees in incomplete deliberations? Can participants take this 'more democratic pattern of organization' back with them to the organization? We have had practical experiences of a different kind, when Danish employees, managers and executives maintained their positioning of themselves and others during a variety of action research processes. For example, we have known managers to use the dialogue training in a project to evaluate staff (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005). We have seen a management team reproduce a particular performance culture in the dialogic learning space (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2008). We realize, too, that we as outside researchers had been too slow to understand the importance of staff's internal relations and the contexts in which the project was embedded (Dalgaard, Johannsen, Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2014). We cannot believe that our experience is radically different to that in Norway or Sweden.

At the same time, we have the impression that the democratic dialogue researchers argue that it is possible to eliminate the importance of organizational hierarchies by means of particular sub-group configurations at dialogue conferences. For example, they put representatives of one company's management together with representatives of another's workers:

For instance, the confronting of management in one enterprise with the workers in another can have clear advantages from a democratic perspective. Particularly for management, it can be of basic importance to confront people who are in a position of subordination, but not to them.

In this way, the general differences in status do not prevent the workers from making their points as clear as possible. (Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986, p. 110)

Is it possible for the researchers to determine whether the employees are saying what they think or that what they think can be said in the given context? If so, how? On the face of it, we would assume that some employees from company X would hold back from expressing certain views in front of managers from company Y. They might be afraid that the managers would pass on the information to the management of company X—and vice versa. This might happen backstage at dialogue conferences, for example, even if it does not happen frontstage in the public dialogues. We ourselves have known there to be big differences between what is said frontstage and what is said backstage. Managers and employees alike frequently come out with criticism one-to-one during breaks, but do not pursue it in the plenary in front of their colleagues.

We therefore imagine that the principles of dialogue as a whole could be seen as an invitation to dialogue with unintended effects. For example, we have seen how statements in action research processes were later used against the employees who made them to carry out reorganizations that were not to their advantage (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005). We therefore fear that some of the participants in the dialogue conferences may have felt that they were in a safe space with enlarged boundaries of organizational freedom of speech. Here, they may have put forward views that they subsequently came to regret. We are surprised that the democratic dialogue researchers do not address such ethical considerations in their publications. We also note that, in the passage quoted above, Gustavsen and Engelstad mention only the advantages of organizing dialogues in the way that they do ('have clear advantages', 'it can be of basic importance', 'the general differences in status do not prevent the workers from...').

### ***Are democratic learning spaces power-free spaces?***

The dialogic rule about equality also raises the theoretical question of how, as an action researcher, one understands the learning spaces one constructs with one's partners (Wicks & Reason, 2009). Democratic dialogues seem to rest on the assumption that it is possible to suspend the significance of organizational contexts. Here, one can apparently create democratic learning spaces in which everyone has an equal opportunity to express themselves and to be heard.

Several communication theorists argue, as do we, that such learning spaces are always pre-contextualized (Aragon, 2012; Asdal & Moser, 2012; Neidel & Wulf-Andersen, 2013; Nordentoft & Olesen, 2018; Phillips & Kristiansen, 2013; Stacey, 2001, 2007). The same is true of action researchers who work from a systemic perspective (Burns, 2007, 2014). From these perspectives, the organizational context(s) will always be present in any project when researchers meet participants, because they bring them into the learning venue with them. The learning context is already embedded in larger systems (Kristiansen, 2013). This came out in an action research project in a municipality, for example. Just before meeting us, a team had had a project they had spent six months working on turned down. The executive board argued that the municipality needed to cut costs. The team's motivation to take part in a new project was therefore at rock bottom. Another team dealt with tax in the Citizen Service department of a municipality. They came up with new solutions in an action research project. The solutions became irrelevant when a ministry approved a structural change that moved the tax service to another town, just as we were wrapping up the project (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2013).

We realize that these examples are different to the inter-organizational dialogues and subsequent decisions that figure in democratic dialogues. There too, though, we assume that there are larger organizational, political, economic and societal contexts that affect such projects (Thorkildsen, 2013).

Gustavsen (1992) asserts, with reference to Foucault: 'Since power manifests itself in the discourse, the problem of power becomes—as a point of departure—one of differences between discourses—between those infected by power and those which are not' (p. 110).

We are puzzled by this reading of Foucault (2000), who talks about power being exercised at all times. In Foucault, there are therefore no power-free spaces or positions. All discourses are forms of power, which is exercised, with specific effects, through relations. To us, the quotation above seems rather to embody a reading that might, for example, take Habermas (1973) as its point of departure. He ideally distinguishes between power-free and non-power-free conversations.

It also looks as though democratic dialogues rest on an assumption that employees are regarded as an equal, homogeneous group. What might be the consequences if local knowledge is seen from a power perspective in which there are not just employees, but employees with different interests and competences? Or if different expert positions, competing to define what the under-

standing of work and change is to consist of, are also to be found among the employees?

In contrast, we regard participants with different hierarchical positions as of equal value, but not as equal. We understand any discourse as a power space, and participation as a way of exercising power that changes during the process (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011). This is true of a dialogic discourse, too. Our starting point, then, is that it is not possible to construct power-free learning spaces. Even in such spaces, partners and action researchers exercise power. In the AST project, for example, it was the researchers who defined how the parties were to talk to each other at the conferences.

The eleventh principle is an invitation to metacommunicate about roles and authority: ‘The workrole, authority, etc. of all the participants can be made subject to discussion—no participant is exempt in this respect’ (Gustavsen, 1992, p. 4).

As action researchers, we have seen executives being reluctant to criticize their CEO because they knew that we knew the CEO from previous projects. Not until a long way into the process did they come out with criticism in front of us—but still not frontstage. We have also known employees to make critical remarks during breaks, i.e. backstage, perhaps about a manager, a colleague or a worker, that they did not wish to repeat in plenary, i.e. frontstage. Finally, we have participated in training contexts where CEOs or executives have shown up managers in a collegial forum, causing us to intervene (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005). We therefore have no confidence that the eleventh principle can act as a realistic rule of play for dialogue in a training context already embedded in larger systems in which everybody exercises power.

### ***The elimination of inequality between employees and action researchers***

On the one hand, according to Gustavsen (1992), action research has similarities with clinical medicine, psychoanalysis and education in its attempt to link theory and practice. On the other, he sees a crucial difference in that doctor and patient, analyst and analysand, teacher and pupil are as a matter of principle not equal, whereas researchers and participants in democratic dialogue conferences supposedly are: ‘In the position underlying the LOM programme [*Ledelse, Organisation, Medbestemmelse*, i.e. Leadership, Organization, Co-determination] it is a point to make those concerned into what can be called “strong subjects”—they are in all respects equal to the researcher’ (Gustavsen,



1992, p. 114). In this section, we inquire how democratic dialogues understand the equality of action researchers and participating organizational members, as stated in the quotation.

Management, trade union and action researchers have set the overall objectives of the action research process. The action researchers determine the process design, involving dialogue conferences. It is they who define the content of the rules of play for dialogues and who make them into values for employee communication. This is apparent, for example, in the frequent use of modal verbs to describe the principles, where collaborative partners are seen as the object of the researchers' speech acts:

- All participants *should* be active
- Their participation *must* be oriented toward relevant tasks
- The participants *must* ... seek expression largely through these collectivities
- Work experience *must* be the basis for participation
- Conferences *must* express a merger of the two main dimensions: dialogue and work experiences (Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986, p. 108, italics ours)

Democratic dialogues are therefore not just collective forums, but normative forums in which a particular value set is practised. We have found no examples of employees contributing to determining this value set. While the original industrial democracy endeavour can be interpreted as researcher-driven applied research, the democratic dialogue endeavour seems to be characterized by the researchers' conference design and their value definition. We do not interpret this as reflecting an equal relationship between partners and action researchers. We understand it as a power relation between them, one in which the action researchers apparently hold the power of definition to determine the rules of democratic dialogues.

Gustavsen (1995) has a different understanding. He describes a shift in the researcher's role from expert to someone on an equal footing with more of a support function:

In the mid-1970s a model emerged based on placing the researchers and those with whom the researchers collaborated in each project on a more equal footing as concerns influence over the definition of problems and development of solutions ... The movement towards changes in the role

of research has continued beyond the phase of balanced collaboration ... the moving forces are the workers themselves while research can perform a supportive role (p. 86).

### ***Is there a best argument?***

A key aspect of the democratic dialogue concerns its Habermasian focus on the 'strangely unforced force' of the better argument:

The ideal speaking situation precludes systematic distortion of communication. Only then does the strangely unforced force of the better argument prevail, which allows the methodological review of claims to be objectively used and which can rationally motivate the decision of practical questions. (Habermas, 1971 p. 137) (own translation from German).

This implies that, as a participant, one must defer to others' better arguments, as stated in the tenth principle: 'Each participant must accept that other participants can have better arguments' (Gustavsen, 1992, p. 4 (cf. 2001, p. 19).

Gustavsen (2011, p. 472) among others, in his critique of the first phase of industrial democracy, emphasized that it depended on a universal understanding of the correct model of partially self-managing groups. As far as we can see, a similar critique can be applied to the efforts of the second phase to make industrial democracy into democratic dialogue. From what Archimedean (i.e. universally valid) point is one meant to be able to determine what is 'better'? We are surprised that Gustavsen speaks in the above-quoted passage of 'better' and not simply 'other' arguments, given that democratic dialogues are elsewhere positioned within a constructivist discourse (Shotter & Gustavsen, 1999).

Moreover, from our perspective, 'better' will always be a power issue in an organization. In one of our action research projects, for example, this manifested itself in the question of when the project should begin (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2013). The management team thought it would be best if the project could begin straight away. Some of the employees felt it was best to wait. Everyone was sure they had the best argument. Who was to decide what was in the organization's best interest? How could we avoid it becoming an expression of the particularly general? This is a concept taken from Adorno (1951). It means that special interests manage to present themselves as gene-

ral, i.e. as the best for the organization. In the project in question, the start date was chosen by means of exhaustive negotiations with all parties (11 teams, management and action researchers) in an attempt to let everyone have their say and be co-determining.

### ***Summary***

The analysis in Section 7 shows that democratic dialogue researchers argue from Habermas that employees, managers and action researchers all engage in dialogues as equals. The Habermas-inspired discursive rules of play are portrayed as a general norm set that all are expected to follow. The analysis also shows that it is the researchers who define the content, design and use of this norm set. The analysis therefore indicates a democratic paradox, because everyone is said to be equal, while it is the researchers who have the power of definition in relation to dialogues.

The analysis also indicates that power as a practical and theoretical concept seems to be absent from democratic dialogues. This may have many consequences for partners at all levels, as we have sought to illustrate through examples. Overall, the absence of power means that democratic dialogues come to argue for a consensual understanding of dialogue in which interest differences, different competences, and organizational functions and conflict appear to play a less prominent role.

Finally, the analysis shows that democratic dialogues do not seem to take account of the significance of the organizational contexts in which the projects are embedded. We argued above that dialogues do not act as a power-free space where everyone is equal, and that inequality—between management and employees, among employees internally and between staff and action researchers—cannot be eliminated by dialogic rules of play. This is the case only in Habermas (1971), who emphasizes that he is talking about an ideal.

## **8. Exclusion of research from democratic dialogues?**

Having addressed the three aims of the chapter, this section now moves to a philosophy of science level to discuss the understanding of action research inherent in democratic dialogues.

### *Phronesis before episteme*

Toulmin writes in the introduction to Toulmin & Gustavsen (1996) that action research is about moving beyond theory and changing organizations through participation:

Action research and clinical medicine share methodological problems ... *for a reason*. Both kinds of research are aimed at practical effects, not theoretical rigor: both seek the kind of knowledge Aristotle called phronesis ('practical wisdom') more than episteme ('theoretical grasp'). Participatory action research is judged by practical results, not by theoretical propriety: indeed, one hope of the present book is to improve its effectiveness, as practice ... (p. 3)

If one takes a literal reading of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where 'episteme' is defined as 'scientific knowledge [which] exists of necessity [and] is therefore eternal' (1968, p. 332), one can hardly disagree with Toulmin. On the other hand, Aristotle's concept of episteme can nowadays be said to be an empty one, because there are surely no modern sciences concerned with what exists of necessity and is therefore eternal and immutable. We are therefore inclined to assign 'episteme' a modern meaning, defining it as theoretical knowledge, while, like MacIntyre (1988), we see phronesis as practical wisdom.

Toulmin & Gustavsen (1996, p. 207) understand theoretical or scientific knowledge as generalizable. As organizational action research is hard to generalize, it cannot produce theoretical knowledge.

In our view, the theoretical knowledge generated by action research cannot claim generalizability in a strict sense. This does not exclude it from the field of the sciences. Such a criterion would also exclude a significant part of the humanities, for example. In our view, theoretical knowledge in the social sciences and humanities is characterized by a different form of reliability and validity. For example, Bryman (2008) speaks of trustworthiness and authenticity. We understand generalizability, as part of trustworthiness, to be a softer form of the transferability of results. For example, Kvale (1997) speaks of analytical generalizability, and Geertz (1973) of thick, unfolded description.

According to our understanding, organizational action research is both phronesis and episteme. It has three types of aim, encompassing practical, organizational/methodological and theoretical knowledge (Bloch-Poulsen, 2010). Phronesis equates to practical and organizational knowledge; episteme

to theoretical knowledge. If we look at these three aims in relation to democratic dialogues, there could be:

- a practical aim, perhaps the establishment of new organizational routines or the generation of a changed discourse in the organization;
- an organizational aim, especially the development of new methods for the dialogue conferences;
- a theoretical aim, e.g. the creation of a more precise understanding of the conditions for action research.

When Toulmin & Gustavsen (1996) focus on action research as phronesis, they exclude, as we understand it, the theoretical aim (episteme). Gustavsen (2001) also writes that the aim of organizational action research is not to carry out a (theoretical) analysis, but to create a draft action plan for practical improvements: ‘This underlines that research is a partner in a coalition, not a body to gain special knowledge or sit in judgment on the other actors ... The outcome is a work agenda, not an analysis’ (p. 21).

Pålshaugen (1998) writes below about the twofold task of action researchers:

... at the theoretical level there is a dual research task for action research in work organizations: both to contribute to the development of new forms of understanding among members of the work organization in a way which can be of help for practical improvements; and, in addition, to develop a new understanding of the methods and instruments that are used to attain this, i.e., of the role of action research itself in the development of such methods and instruments. (p. 20)

In this quotation, we cannot see that Pålshaugen has an independent theoretical aim beside the practical (‘to contribute to the development of new forms of understanding among members of the work organization in a way which can be of help for practical improvements’) and the methodological (‘to develop a new understanding of the methods and instruments that are used to attain this’).

The conception of action research as phronesis also manifests itself in the way democratic dialogue researchers speak of researchers. They are described as project workers with special ‘process managing competences’ or as ‘conference leaders’ (Pålshaugen, 1998, p. 46); as ‘stage director’ or ‘conference

designer' (Pålshaugen, 2001, pp. 212, 214). Räftegård (1991, pp. 5, 7) calls the researchers '*The process-facilitating generation*' or 'Procedural Facilitator'. Gustavsen (2001, p. 24) writes of 'the contribution of research through the design of the dialogue process itself'. These descriptions of the researchers' roles indicate that they are understood especially as facilitators of the process. One consequence of this may be that the action researchers seem to have no theoretical research question that goes beyond the methodological or processual.

The focus on phronesis—practical and methodological knowledge—and the exclusion of episteme—theoretical knowledge—has led Scandinavian interaction research to criticize democratic, dialogic action research as being mere consultancy (Svensson, Ellström & Brulin, 2007, p. 247). We also find it hard to see whether—and where—research enters the picture, or why democratic dialogues are termed research. This point has been made by others, e.g. Eikeland (2006). Although phronesis is theory-based, we fail to see how it is theory-generating.

### ***Democratic organizational action research as applied sociology?***

We have already mentioned that, according to Gustavsen, there seems to be a definite difference between the doctor/patient relationship in the clinic and the action researcher/participant relationship in democratic dialogues. Doctor and patient are not equal; action researcher and participant are. What action research and clinical medicine have in common according to Gustavsen & Toulmin (1996), though, is that both focus on concrete cases and attempt to improve them: 'In short, action research shares two features with clinical medicine: 1. It focuses on concrete cases in particular times and places; 2. It tries to improve the current modes of operation in those situations' (p. 211).

Toulmin & Gustavsen (1996) understand action research as a clinical practice: 'What I am suggesting is, simply, that we regard social science as a clinical *science*, and action research as a clinical *practice*: so putting sociology in a similar relation to action research that (say) physiology has to clinical medicine' (p. 212).

This understanding of the relationship between science and action research can, as we understand it, be illustrated as follows:

Table

<b>Science/theory</b>	<b>Clinical practice</b>
Episteme	Phronesis
Sociology	Action research
Physiology	Clinical medicine

We understand action research in democratic dialogues as applied science. i.e. as a clinical practice. It appears to take Habermas's philosophy of language and apply it to practice. We have been unable to find examples of dialogue between theory and practice. The question is, though, whether we are dealing here with applied sociology, as the democratic dialogue researchers themselves appear to believe. In favour of such an assessment is the fact that the overall endeavour in democratic dialogues is to address the societal problem of a disparity between a person's democratic influence as a citizen and their limited influence as an employee. Then again, there seems to be a built-in hierarchy in which applied philosophy of language appears to have a more fundamental status than does applied sociology. This is the case, for example, with the application of Habermas's philosophy of language-based ideal of dialogue, which underpins the rules of play for democratic dialogue. The application of these rules in an organizational context seems able to eliminate a key sociological question concerning power. Perhaps it would therefore be more accurate to characterize action research in democratic dialogues as applied philosophy of language?

If action research is made into a clinical practice, it may—as shown in the analysis in the previous section—mean that a number of organizational aspects are excluded: first, the non-rational aspects of dialogues are excluded, as are conversations that do not take place in public arenas. Second, a number of processual understandings are excluded. Lewin's socio-psychological perspective might be an example. His research indicates *inter alia* that better anchoring of the results of action research processes is obtained if the employees are involved in making decisions and not, as in democratic dialogues, only in making proposals. Another example might be the exclusion of emergent aspects concerning the way relations change along the way because the parties continually position themselves and others in changing configurations. Roles and relationships are not set once and for all prior to the process. Also excluded, thirdly, is a psychodynamic relational perspective focusing on the transference and countertransference between action researchers, managers and employ-

ees that played a key role in the Tavistock tradition (Trist & Murray, 1990b). Fourth, an organizational communications perspective focusing on strategic and tactical communication, organizational contexts and communication patterns, including emergent power relations between action researchers, employees and managers in organizations, is excluded.

## 9. Conclusions

This chapter on democratic dialogues in Sweden and Norway has three aims:

The first aim concerns participation in the practical dimension of action research. On the basis of an analysis of the AST example, we have shown that participation means that employees have co-influence but not co-determination over change processes. Participation in organizations thus means deliberation in the weak sense, or voice—but not decision, or choice.

The second aim concerns participation in the theoretical dimension of the research process. The analysis has shown that employees take part in democratic dialogue processes designed and defined by the action researchers. It is also the researchers who evaluate how the process is working and who inquire whether employees feel they are being heard. The analysis has also shown that the researchers do not inquire how the actual communication takes place in projects. Their research is about evaluation of results. The analysis of the discursive rules points to a participatory paradox. On the one hand, the researchers speak of open, democratic dialogues. On the other, they alone seem to define how these dialogues are to operate and how they are to be changed.

The third aim concerns the problematization of an understanding of dialogue based on the application of Habermas's philosophy of language-based theory of dialogue in organizations. The analysis has shown that there seem to be no crucial differences between Habermas's ideal of dialogue and Gustavsen and Shotter's (1999) dialogical rules of play, except that the latter have a higher degree of concretization. Moreover, particular aspects concerning difference, emotions, power and strategic and backstage communication appear to be excluded.

We are impressed by the wide national scope of both the WRI projects in Norway and the LOM projects in Sweden. Finally, we welcome the results. For example, as reported by the employees themselves, the case of AST brought markedly improved productivity and improved working conditions. At the



same time, the employees stated that they had had good or very good opportunities to make their views known during the development process.

In our view, though, there are a number of fundamental problems associated with organizational action research based on democratic dialogue. These concern the understanding of dialogue, democracy, communication and research. Here, we have considered what the democratic dialogue researchers write in the literature consulted, but also what they do not say.

### ***Dialogue***

Dialogue is defined, following Habermas, as open discussions in public arenas. Arguments are put forward and tested on the assumption that everyone is participating on an equal footing on the basis of their experience of working in organizations (Gustavsen, 1995, p. 90).

Dialogue therefore seems to be identical with a conversation, negotiation or communication based on rational arguments. We have found no theoretical deliberations as to how dialogue is understood. Is dialogue a noun, i.e. a special form of conversation? Is it an adjective, i.e. a special quality in a conversation sequence? Are all conversations dialogues? We would therefore like to see a positioning of democratic dialogues in relation to other theories of dialogue and a reason for the choice of Habermas.

### ***Democracy***

Democratic dialogues are inspired by theory on the weak form of deliberative democracy.

Democratic dialogues presuppose that the concept of deliberative democracy is transferable to organizations. One principle of organizational communication theory is that organizations are characterized by hierarchies, which mean that not everyone has an equal say. Organizational communication is also characterized by strategic and tactical communication, in which not everything is said. Finally, organizational communication is characterized by relational power between managers, employees and action researchers, as well as by structural and economic power. Our assessment, therefore, is that concepts of democracy or deliberative democracy are problematic in organizations. Practically and theoretically, our view is that it is idealistic to imagine that hierarchy, power, inequality and strategic and tactical communication can

be eliminated with the help of rules of democratic dialogue. If they can, we would like to see documentation of how this is feasible.

Democratic dialogues include only those conversations that take place in public arenas, and they seem to strive to achieve consensus. On the basis of empirical evidence, e.g. at AST, we cannot show whether critique is included in these endeavours. Our studies, and those of others, indicate that critique is often excluded. This may mean that conversations and recommendations are based on a mainstream discourse that habitually identifies the general interests of the organization with the particular interests of management. Do democratic dialogue researchers distinguish in theory between democratic and non-democratic dialogue? If they do, how will they ensure this distinction in practice?

### ***Communication***

Democratic dialogue researchers emphasize that they focus on process and communication. The understanding of communication generally follows either Habermas or a pragmatic, constructivist approach.

With few exceptions, the researchers explicitly refrain from inquiring into the communicative processes that could show how democratic dialogues work in practice. We are therefore unable to determine accurately what consequences these overarching communication theory-based approaches have in relation to practice. This puzzles us, because democratic rules of play are ostensibly meant to be chosen on the basis that they work in practice. Because of this lacuna, we have had to raise more questions than we can conclusively answer in this section.

We therefore lack an overall picture of how democratic dialogue researchers understand the interplay between communication and organization in practice and in theory (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2017a).

### ***Research***

Democratic dialogues have been criticized for excluding research. Democratic dialogue focuses on learning. This was evident at AST, for example, where proposals for improvement led to new initiatives during the process. We have searched in vain for overall theoretical research questions originating in the organizational learning around democratic dialogues. We have only found general considerations such as that, the more the researchers held back, the

greater the probability that the organizations would get their action plans set in motion. Nor have we found critical reflections continuing the tradition of the NIDP projects, which presented concrete examples of challenges, mistakes etc.

Our assessment is therefore that democratic dialogues are about facilitation of processes rather than inquiry and research into them and through them. This means that democratic dialogues can be seen as a reflective consultancy version of organizational development, in which participation becomes involvement. We have difficulty finding evidence for the view put forward by e.g. Elden (1986) of democratic dialogues as participatory research with an emphasis on local theory: 'Empowering participation as a process rather than as a structure leads to self-managed learning through changing one's own organization. Workers thereby create their own workplace according to their local theory' (p. 244).

## Reflections

In this chapter, we have examined the tendency in organizational action research known as 'democratic dialogues' in the period 1981–1992 in Norway and Sweden.

The chapter has a number of problems. Perhaps empathy has given way to critique, partly because we have not allowed for the contextual circumstance that this form of action research takes place under the tripartite auspices of government, employer and worker organizations. Our critique is also derived from our practical and theoretical experience of organizational action research projects and our knowledge as, respectively, communication researcher and historian of ideas. That experience has taken us to other places, especially in our view of power and participation in dialogical action research processes.

We therefore want to stress that we see the processual approach in democratic dialogues as a participatory step forward, because it gives employees and managers greater opportunities for influence. At the same time, we welcome the results of the project described. Productivity goes up, night and weekend shift workers operate without foremen, and there seems to be widespread satisfaction at being heard in the project. Finally, we note how extensive in scope the democratic dialogue projects are, both in Sweden and in Norway.

Another limitation is that we have had no access to documentation in such forms as audio or video recordings of dialogue conferences. Our discussion has had to be based solely on field notes, reports, a single systematic study of com-

munication (Johansson-Hidén, 1994) and a number of articles, anthologies and books of a more theorizing nature. As such, we have had to rely on narratives of practice, not on more direct documentation of practice.<sup>16</sup> The chapter is therefore of debatable validity if intended as a presentation of democratic dialogues in practice.

Democratic dialogue representatives argue against inquiry into the actual processes of interaction. As discussed, they reject inquiry into the research process on the grounds that it will objectivize others, i.e. managers and employees. We do not understand this argument. As we have shown, they claim that action researchers, managers and employees are equal. Why, then, is it the action researchers alone who make the decision not to inquire into the research process? Could action researchers, managers and employees not deliberate on this together? And why does the argument invoke consideration for the others? Could video or audio not be used to capture sessions showing the interplay between action researchers, managers and employees, even though the action researchers are in charge of the processual side and the employees are in charge of the content?

A third debatable aspect of the chapter is our critique of the fundamental concept of democratic dialogues: that everybody is equal. We reject this as an illusory assumption that can mislead employees into believing that they can express themselves safely. Could one not imagine a meaning of 'equal' that would make sense even in organizational action research processes—perhaps 'of equal value'? On this point, we are in doubt. On the one hand, the relationship between managers, employees and action researchers is characterized by hierarchies and alliances in progress. On the other hand, we have examined whether dialogical moments can occur during action research processes in conversations between managers, employees and us as action researchers (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005). Transient moments when the importance of the hierarchies seemed suspended. Not the hierarchies themselves, but moments when we had the feeling of speaking eye to eye. When differences in decision-making power, educational level etc seemed to play no part. When people spoke from their diverse experience and possibly conflicting perspectives (Kristiansen, 2013). But can we be sure? Are the parties congruent, or just organizationally congruent (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005)?

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<sup>16</sup> Here, we disregard the fact that video recordings are not a direct reproduction of reality, but an interpretation of it (Alrø & Kristiansen, 1997).

In a way, this is the same dilemma as characterizes the so-called Buber-Rogers dialogue of 1957 (Anderson & Cissna, 1997). Buber claims that one cannot have a dialogue between a therapist and a client, while Rogers claims that his therapeutic experience demonstrates the opposite. Overall, though, we are more inclined to think in terms of organizational inequality and inequality in action research, both from a theoretical understanding of power as omnipresent, and from our extensive experience of transient dialogical moments being subsequently swept away by inequality and changes in the organizational context. It might be the appointment of a new manager, for example, or a restructuring, or outside authorities cancelling with a stroke of the pen the decision made in the transient moment.

## Appendix

The thirteen principles of democratic dialogues read as follows (Gustavsen, 1992, pp. 3–4):

1. The dialogue is a process of exchange: ideas and arguments move to and fro between the participants.
2. It must be possible for all concerned to participate.
3. This possibility for participation is, however, not enough. Everybody should also be active. Consequently each participant has an obligation not only to put forth his or her own ideas but also to help others to contribute their ideas.
4. All participants are equal.
5. Work experience is the basis for participation. This is the only type of experience which, by definition, all participants have.
6. At least some of the experience which each participant has when entering the dialogue must be considered legitimate.
7. It must be possible for everybody to develop an understanding of the issues at stake.
8. All arguments which pertain to the issues under discussion are legitimate. No argument should be rejected on the ground that it emerges from an illegitimate source.
9. The points, arguments, etc. which are to enter the dialogue must be made by a participating actor. Nobody can participate 'on paper' only.

10. Each participant must accept that other participants can have better arguments.
11. The workrole, authority, etc. of all the participants can be made subject to discussion—no participant is exempt in this respect.
12. The participants should be able to tolerate an increasing degree of difference of opinion.
13. The dialogue must continuously produce agreements which can provide platforms for practical action. Note that there is no contradiction between this criterion and the previous one. The major strength of a democratic system compared to all other ones is that it has the benefit of drawing upon a broad range of opinions and ideas that inform practice, while at the same time being able to make decisions which can gain the support of all participants.

## Chapter 7

# Pragmatic action research—Projects in Spanish cooperatives in the latter half of the 1980s

### What and why

This chapter is about pragmatic action research, an approach developed by Davydd Greenwood and Morten Levin in which action research is seen not only as a combination of action and research—i.e. of practical change and theoretical innovation—but as a combination of action, research and participation. Greenwood and Levin understand pragmatic or participatory action research to mean that employees, managers and action researchers have influence on both practical and theoretical knowledge production. Together, on the basis of their diverse interests and knowledge, they generate the research process and its results. For this reason, Greenwood and Levin also term their approach co-generative research.

In the incarnation of democratic dialogues that we described in Chapter 6, there was a certain division of labour. The practical side was entrusted to employees and managers. In pragmatic action research, the action researcher is described as a ‘friendly outsider’. He or she actively contributes theoretical and methodological knowledge, but also input and proposed solutions to practical organizational problems. Therefore, Greenwood and Levin also term their approach pragmatic action research.

In the incarnation of the Norwegian industrial democracy project that we described in Chapter 5, there was a different division of labour. In the early projects, the researchers were experts not just on theoretical issues, but on practical ones, too. They were socio-technical experts who also determined the principles on which the production process should be organized. Greenwood and Levin emphasize that they are not experts on practical issues. They stress that researchers, employees and managers have different knowledge and interests, that theoretical and practical knowledge are coordinate, and that these different forms of knowledge contribute to the solution of complex problems.

The aim of the chapter is to come closer to an understanding of what this coordinacy means in practice. The chapter therefore inquires and discusses what the prefix ‘co-’ in ‘co-generative research’ means. What does it mean to

seek to co-generate a new practice in a democratic way and at the same time generate valid theoretical knowledge? How do managers and employees become co-researchers?

Specifically, the chapter examines a participatory action research project carried out in Mondragón between 1985 and 1991. Mondragón is the name of some cooperatives in the Basque Country in northern Spain, where managers and employees were also co-owners.

The research part of the project was led by Greenwood. It is described by him and some of the participants, and he has also discussed it in texts written with Levin as an example of their joint participatory approach.

Today, it has become commonplace to speak of involvement, participation, co-production and co-generation in connection with change projects in organizations and in other contexts. We hope the chapter can be used for reflection on what co-generation and the other concepts mean in relation to the reader's own projects. How is co-generation defined theoretically? How is it carried out in practice? In an organizational context, works committees were introduced in a number of European countries after the Second World War. They are still in operation. Are they examples of democratization, and/or just another way of managing? Similar questions can be asked of the term 'co-generative'.

## **1. Background**

### ***Participatory, democratic, emergent and pragmatic***

From the 1980s onwards, a number of action researchers begin to understand action research as participatory. In the USA, this is true, for example, of Whyte (1991), who edits an anthology on participatory action research. In Britain, Heron & Reason (1985, 2001, 2008) introduce the concept of 'co-inquiry', which Reason (1994) combines with participatory action research. In Norway, Elden & Levin (1991) write a paper presenting the concept of co-generative research. Linking Norway and the USA, Chisholm & Elden (1993) edit a special action research issue of the international British journal *Human Relations*, and Greenwood & Levin (1998) publish a textbook on action research in which action research is also understood as participatory. There is a corresponding tendency in development studies (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Hickey & Mohan, 2004).



On the face of it, one might think the designation ‘participatory action research’ tautological, since any action research should be participatory by its nature. As we have seen in previous chapters, however, and as Greenwood & Levin (1998) point out, a good deal of action research cannot—or can only with difficulty—be characterized as participatory.

Greenwood et al. (1992) understand their action research as participatory; inspired by Whyte (1991) among others, they describe it as participatory or as PAR. Greenwood & Levin, in their later (1998) collaboration, call their action research ‘pragmatic’.

This chapter focuses on a particular incarnation of participatory action research, described as ‘co-generative research’ and developed by Greenwood & Levin (1998) in particular. They define action research as a unit consisting of three dimensions: research, action and participation:

AR [action research] refers to the conjunction of three elements. Research, action, and participation ... AR aims to increase the ability of the involved community or organization members to control their own destinies more effectively and to keep improving their capacity to do so.  
(p. 6)

In organizational action research, then, participation means that local managers and employees should to a greater extent be able to ‘control their own destinies more effectively and keep improving their capacity to do so’. According to Greenwood et al. (1992, pp. 30–31), this means that they will strengthen their capacity for organizational learning, i.e. their capacity to study the organization, and continually carry out the desired improvements, together.

Participation thus means not just the employees gaining more influence in the organization, but also a democratization of knowledge production in organizational learning. In this process, the employees act as ‘co-researchers’. Greenwood & Levin (1998) stress that action research is based on two crucial aspects: democratic inclusion and the production of valid social knowledge: ‘... democratic social change and the simultaneous creation of valid social knowledge ... democratic inclusion and social research quality. AR [action research] democratizes research processes through the inclusion of the local stakeholders as co-researchers’ (p. 3).

Greenwood and Levin (1998) understand action research, as do democratic dialogues, as a generative process (Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986,

p. 104). In contrast to democratic dialogue thinking, they emphasize that this is co-generation of knowledge in which local partners contribute as ‘co-researchers’. The term ‘co-researcher’ also occurs in action science, e.g. in Argyris & Schön (1996, p. 50). This approach seems to have inspired Greenwood et al. (1992, p. 34). As we have mentioned, there is from the 1980s onwards a tendency to focus on action research as a participatory endeavour.

On the basis of this understanding, in which both parties contribute their different knowledge during the research process, Greenwood & Levin (1998) also present their work as pragmatic action research:

We consider ourselves participants in change processes where democratic rules guide decision making. We bring certain skills and knowledge, and other actors do the same, bringing their own capacities and experiences to bear on the problems. This is why we call our particular variety of AR practice pragmatic action research. (p. 11)

Pragmatic action research is inspired by Dewey’s pragmatism (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, pp. 72–73; Greenwood, 2007). It emphasizes democracy, the combination of thought/theory and action/practice, learning as a development process—i.e. as continuous cycles of thought and action—and the significance of diversity and conflict for a democracy.

At the same time, it means that action research is understood as an emergent process: ‘PAR [Participatory action research] is an emergent process, with the participants changing their hypotheses, aims, and interpretations as the process develops’ (Greenwood et al., 1992, p. 3). In practice, it means that action researchers must live with unpredictability: ‘One of the fundamental prerequisites for anyone considering the option of becoming an action researcher is a willingness to live with uncertainty’ (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 149). The chapter thus points to the second perspective of the book: that participation is an emergent process, not a once-and-for-all template.

## 2. Aims and perspectives

Pragmatic action research extends the understanding of action research to include participation on an equal footing with research and action (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). We regard this as an innovation. As already mentioned, Greenwood et al. (1992) understand participation as a dual endeavour en-

compassing both the employees' opportunities to control their own destinies and practise organizational learning, and a democratization of knowledge production. Participation is therefore about both democratic inclusion and the production of valid social knowledge, with locals' knowledge contributing on an equal footing with that of the researchers, because the locals act as co-researchers. There seems, then, to be participation in both the practical and the theoretical dimension of the action research process.

The overall aim of this chapter is to inquire into the meaning of the prefix 'co-' in the fundamental concepts of pragmatic action research, 'co-generative research' and 'co-researcher'. Using accounts and analyses of the Mondragón example, we will argue that co-generative research is based on a differentially distributed power of definition. The chapter therefore discusses the book's fourth perspective: that participation is the exercising of power in tensions between parties with different interests and knowledge. This is apparent in the following three points, dealing with objectives and organization, research method and presentation:

1. Co-generative research denotes a management-driven process. The original purpose of the process is determined by local management and the researcher. Local members are involved primarily as interviewers or respondents.
2. Co-generative research denotes a particular research process. The research team (RT) is made up of a group of personnel managers and the professional action researcher. The team exercises the power of interpretation and decides the validity of statements made by respondents, i.e. rank-and-file members, without the RT problematizing its own interpretations.
3. Co-generative research is described by Greenwood et al. (1992) in a particular way. By analysing the use of language, the chapter will show that an apparently conflict-free and united research team, described as a collective 'we', studies power, conflict and difference in the cooperatives. The rank-and-file members of the cooperatives are described using valorizing adjectives and nouns. We can find no documentation of these interpretations and do not know whether they were put to the members for dialogue.

It therefore seems to us that this is more a case of research that moves between research on the cooperative members and co-generative research.

## ***Sources and chapter structure***

The chapter describes and analyses one particular action research project involving a group of cooperatives in northern Spain. The project takes place around the industrial town of Mondragón in the Basque Country. We have chosen to study accounts of practice in this project for two reasons: it is described very comprehensively in Greenwood et al. (1992), and both Levin and Greenwood frequently refer to it, e.g. in Greenwood & Levin (1998) and Greenwood (2007). We therefore see Mondragón as an exemplar of both participatory and pragmatic organizational action research. Our account is based especially on these texts: Greenwood et al. (1992), Santos (1991) and Greenwood (2007).

The chapter also includes texts that define and discuss key concepts such as: co-generative research and learning (Elden & Levin, 1991; Greenwood & Levin, 1998); participatory action research (Greenwood, Whyte & Harkavy, 1993; Schafft & Greenwood, 2003; Whyte, 1991; Whyte, Greenwood & Lazes, 1991); and pragmatic action research and democracy (Greenwood, 2002, 2007; Greenwood & Levin, 1998).

The chapter first positions pragmatic action research in relation to earlier chapters of the book (Section 1). Then come the aims of the chapter (Section 2). Section 3 provides a characterization of pragmatic action research. The remaining sections move from a description of the Mondragón project (Section 4) to a critical reflection on and analysis of this approach (Section 5). Sections 4 and 5 are especially concerned with examining the understanding of co-generative learning and co-research, and the status of the local co-researchers and respondents. Section 6 moves onto a philosophy of science level and discusses whether pragmatic action research can be characterized as a participatory, conventional, applied and/or phronetic science. Finally, we present the conclusions of the chapter as a whole, together with a number of reflections (section 7).

## **3. A characterization of pragmatic action research**

### ***Pragmatic action research as a democratization project***

Pragmatic action research understands action research as a democratization project based on pragmatic philosophy. It is more than a method: ‘... AR [action research] is not a method or a recipe but a complex strategy for orchestrating processes of democratizing social reform’ (Greenwood, 2007, p. 146).

Pragmatic action research aims to strengthen the democratization of knowledge production and strives for the ability to continue doing so in local change processes: ‘... the creation of more democratic, just, fair, and/or sustainable human situations ... [and endeavors] to increase local capacity for participative, self-managing, and sustainable change processes’ (Greenwood, 2007, p. 133).

The strengthening of democracy proceeds through co-generative research, which creates the possibility of mutual learning (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 152). In this way, pragmatic action research becomes democratic knowledge production in which members of an organization study themselves:

Within action research, PAR is a variant in which members of the organization under study themselves form part of the research team. They collaborate from problem definition, to the research, discussion, and implementation of the results. This kind of research both relies on and develops the internal capacity of the organization to analyze itself. (Greenwood et al., 1992, p. 33)

### ***Pragmatic action research as co-generative research***

Pragmatic action research has a broad concept of expertise encompassing academic/professional knowledge systems and local knowledge:

However, in AR practice, expertise is very broadly defined, including a wide array of academic/professional systems of knowledge, methods, and technologies and the kinds of local expertise that summed up in the term ‘local knowledge’. Local expertise is an essential ingredient in AR because we start from the premise that human beings are intelligent, experts in their own lives and life situations, and that the mobilization of their expertise is a fundamental ingredient in any successful and lasting social change process. (Greenwood, 2007, p. 134)

The locals are experts on their own lives, and durable solutions cannot be achieved unless they contribute their knowledge. The professional researchers therefore do not have a knowledge monopoly. Expertise is understood as multidisciplinary and as borne by many interests (‘multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder teams’, p. 135). This broad expert knowledge is necessary

because pragmatic action research is concerned with big challenges to which there are no simple solutions:

I assume that all significant problems create challenges that reach well beyond the boundaries of any conventional discipline and that cannot be mastered by academic deans, provosts, or presidents. Effectively addressing such issues requires the mobilization of many kinds of expertise including many forms of academic expertise and non-academic local knowledge garnered through years of stakeholder experience with particular problems. (p. 136)

Democratic knowledge production does not simply mean that local partners have their influence in the organization strengthened. It also means a democratization of the research process itself, with locals acting as co-researchers. This helps to generate results that enhance their control and autonomy. It is this democratic duality that underlies the designation 'co-generative research' (Greenwood & Levin, 1998):

This democracy is involved in both the research process and the outcomes of the research. In AR, the research process must be democratic in the sense that it is open, participatory, and fair to the participants. In addition, the outcome of AR should support the participants' interest so that the knowledge produced increases their ability to control their own situation. We summarize this double meaning of democratization by referring to AR as co-generative research (p. 113).

Action research thus becomes a collaboration between professional experts and local stakeholders in organizations that co-generate knowledge, design actions and evaluate results:

AR is a strategy for conducting research that engages professional social researchers and other professional experts with the local stakeholders from an organization, a community, or a coalition in a co-generative process of knowledge creation, action design, and evaluation of outcomes. (Greenwood, 2007, p. 133)

The co-generated knowledge encompasses the entire process from aims, design and methods to actions and interpretations of the change process:

AR promotes broad participation in the research process and supports action leading to a more just or satisfying situation for the stakeholders. Together, the professional researcher and the stakeholders define the problems to be examined, cogenerate relevant knowledge about them, learn and execute social techniques, take actions, and interpret the results of actions based on what they have learned (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p.4).

In this way, pragmatic action research becomes a co-generative learning process.

### *The action researcher as ‘friendly outsider’*

Pragmatic action research is critical of the supposed objectivity of positivist social science (Greenwood, 2002, p. 118), as shown by the judgements in this quotation:

Anyone who has paid attention to the critiques of positivism over the past forty years knows that the underlying assumptions of positivism are indefensible: objectivity, controls, rational choice, etc.—all of these pillars of positivism have been taken down...

The persistence of positivist social science is mainly a product of its institutional posture as a self-referential, socially passive activity in universities and its conception of the professional social researcher as an ‘advisor’ to power. To the extent positivist social scientists study anything of interest to anyone other than themselves, they study those issues that power holders are interested in ... (Greenwood, 2002, p. 118)

Unlike the positivists, Greenwood & Levin (1998) understand the various forms of knowledge contributed by the parties to be coordinate. Theoretical knowledge is not superordinate to experiential knowledge, or vice versa: ‘AR centers on an encounter between the worlds of practical reasoning and the worlds of scientifically constructed knowledge. We do not assert the superiority of either type of knowledge’ (p. 109).

Greenwood & Levin (1998) conceive of the professional action researcher as a ‘friendly outsider’ (p. 95) who takes part in a research team on an equal footing with local co-researchers. He or she acts as: ‘a kind of consultant, teacher, researcher, and team member who accepts the team’s goals’ (p. 9).

The action researcher seeks to play a part in enabling the local co-researchers themselves to take over functions such as process facilitation, so that they can organize their own learning processes from then on (p. 119). Hence, it is the locals who ultimately own the objectives and the process. This conception breaks with the understanding of the action researcher as an external specialist analysing and designing workflows, as was the case, for example, in the NIDP (see Chapter 5).

***Pragmatic action research as an emergent and collaborative process***

Pragmatic action research understands participation as an emergent and collaborative process co-generated by external researchers and local organizational members. This understanding is already present in the title of Greenwood et al. (1992), which describes industrial democracy as a process. Greenwood & Levin (1998, p. 149) stress that action researchers must be willing to live with uncertainty. Greenwood, Whyte & Harkavy (1993) write that participation is not determined once and for all, e.g. in advance of a project. It is an emergent collaborative process that is generated along the way:

No one may mandate in advance that a particular research process will become a fully developed participatory action research project. Participation is a process that must be generated. It begins with participatory intent and continues by building participatory processes into the activity within the limits set by the participants and the conditions. To view participation as something that can be imposed is both naive and morally suspect. Thus, we treat participatory action research as an emergent process in all cases, placing it on a continuum ranging from 'expert research' to participatory action research. In the 'expert research' model, all authority and execution of research is controlled by the expert researcher. In participatory action research, authority over and execution of the research is a highly collaborative process between expert researchers and members of the organization under study. (p. 1)

Pragmatic action research paves the way for a broad understanding of participation and therefore argues against participation as a planned process that can be imposed on the local organizational members.



### ***Pragmatic action research, diversity and dissensus***

Pragmatic action research supports diversity in the participatory process and seeks to co-generate arenas in which it can unfold. For example, Greenwood & Levin (1998) advocate ‘the creation of arenas for lively debate and decision making that respects and enhances the diversity of groups’ (p. 11). They also argue against democracy understood as consensus—‘distributive justice and consensus models ... [or] majority rule’ (p. 11)—and in favour of a dissensus-based conception of democracy: ‘We have a passion for diversity ... We view democracy as an open system that should be able to welcome and make humane use of these differences’ (p. 12). Thus, there is no expectation of achieving a firm consensus that everyone can sign up to; rather, the idea is to keep the conversation going, with the project being continually co-redesigned in an emergent process:

... in pragmatic AR, the ongoing and purposive redesigning of the projects while they are in process is a key principle of practice ... that never results in a single, hard-line consensus to which everyone is subordinated. Following Rorty’s (1980) view of neopragmatism, we aim to ‘keep the conversation going’ ... The whole AR process, viewed our way, is an emergent one ... (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 152)

With its focus on diversity and dissensus, this understanding of participation departs from the manner collaborative research sometimes has of describing collaboration as a predominantly positive and harmonious process (Gershon, 2009; Pushor, 2008).

### ***Pragmatic action research and power***

Greenwood and Levin (1998, p. 88) understand democratic knowledge production as the democratization of power relations in the direction of increased democracy, both generally within the organization and between local and external partners in the research process: ‘AR democratizes the relationship between the professional researcher and the local interested parties’ (p. 4).

Schafft & Greenwood (2003) write that participatory processes are associated with a number of dilemmas. This is the first time we have come across the concept of the dilemma in the context of the history of early organizational action research. Participatory dilemmas have since been explored by Arieli,

Friedman & Agbaria (2009), among others, as part of the participatory paradox concept. Schafft & Greenwood (2003) describe a number of dilemmas in connection with studies of participatory processes in two local communities in the United States. One of them concerns power:

... we argue [...] while participatory methods may foster democratic process, they do not erase power differentials. Participation may help to 'level the playing field,' but the power relations that have historically structured community interaction will partially structure the processes and outcomes of participation ... (p. 21)

Schafft & Greenwood (2003) deny that differences in power relations disappear in participatory and democratic projects ('they do not erase power differentials'). They expand on this as follows:

An implicit assumption in much of the ideological invocations of participation for community development is the notion that participation itself makes economic inequality, educational differences, and ideological divergences disappear. This assumption presumes that the differences among people are superficial and that they can be mediated by group process, resulting in eventual consensus-based agreement. Contrary to these ideas of participation, the AR processes we describe involve learning to *map and understand* differences, rather than *eradicate* them. (Schafft & Greenwood, 2003, p. 27)

According to Schafft & Greenwood, action researchers can help to map and understand power relations, but participation does not make economic, educational and other differences disappear.

A participatory project may be able to help make power relations more equal ('level the playing field'), but power structures and differentials will still be embedded in that field.

Greenwood & Levin (1998) point out that co-generation of knowledge also includes issues of the power of definition and interpretation. They emphasize that they are not acting as psychoanalysts, but as social researchers, and that they have neither the knowledge nor the right to correct or define what is good for others in a research project:

We are reformers, not revolutionaries, however, and we are social scientists, not psychoanalysts. We do not believe that we have the wisdom or the right to 'lead' others to the 'correct' social arrangements 'for their own good', as some of the more liberationist practitioners do or as some of the more 'therapeutic' approaches to AR advocate. (p. 11)

It is not clear from the passage quoted which schools are being referred to and critiqued. The passage could, for example, be read as a critique of STS (Chapter 4), in which researchers use the psychoanalytic concepts of regression or resistance when employees do not want to go along with self-management initiated from above.

Greenwood & Levin (1998, p. 197) also point out that facilitation confers power on the outside action researcher. If the action researcher is not competent to facilitate the process, this can go towards inhibiting the democratic process: 'If the AR facilitator is not observant or skilled enough, a pragmatic AR process can be turned into a playground for the powerful and can further inhibit democratization' (p. 172).

In sum, pragmatic action research understands co-generative research as a process that is embedded in economic, social, cultural and other power relations that also include the action researcher's exercising of power (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, pp. 172, 197). The research process is seen as borne by diverse interests and experiences that are to be welcomed so that they can contribute to the understanding and possible solution of problems (pp. 12, 113) and to the transformation of power relations between the parties (p. 88). In this process, the ideal is to generate a lively debate between different forms of knowledge and experience (pp. 11–12). Through participation, 'democratizing political effects' can be generated (p. 134).

Pragmatic action research, then, is characterized by a close linkage between participation, go-generative learning, co-research and democracy; between research, participation and action. The next section looks at how co-generative research plays out in an example from Mondragón.

## 4. Organization of participatory action research in Fagor

### *Historical background to the study*

As mentioned, the project we have chosen to examine in detail takes place around the industrial town of Mondragón in the Basque Country, where a priest and some young engineers began establishing cooperatives back in 1956 (Greenwood et al., 1992, p. 16). In a cooperative, the employees are at one and the same time both workers and members, i.e. co-owners. To become a member, one pays a fee equivalent to one year's pay. After this, employees receive a wage as a share of the profits. Work and pay are differentiated on a scale from 1 to 4.5 according to skills and other factors. At the same time, members receive an annual premium on their capital invested (p. 16). This is set by the General Assembly, the supreme decision-making body, in which each member has one vote (p. 22) and where overall directions are approved, the annual budget set, managers appointed and dismissed etc. Moreover, the cooperatives are organized as a number of elected councils:

The *Consejo Rector* (Governing Council) is the oversight group, elected from among the membership. The *Director General* (General Manager) serves a four-year term. The *Consejo Rector* is overseen by a *Consejo de Dirección* (Management Council) which advises it on business matters. (p. 17)

A Social Council deals with issues of participation, information etc., and can refer them to the Governing Council and General Manager (p. 17).

Health insurance, a bank, schools, a technical university etc. are all established. In 1987, the Mondragón cooperatives became a comprehensive social organization with 19,000 'worker-owners' (p. 16) and no fewer than 173 cooperatives.

The action research project concentrates on the biggest group of cooperatives in the area, known as the Fagor Group, which has 6,000 members and is organized, from a production point of view, in three divisions. One deals with Consumer Goods; another with Industrial Components (car parts etc.), and the third with Engineering and Factory Equipment; among other things, this supplies turnkey factories to countries such as China and India (p. 21).

### ***Challenges and results of the Fagor study***

The background to the action research project is a study of the cooperatives undertaken in the late 1970s by William Foote Whyte and Katherine Whyte (Greenwood, 2007, p. 137; Greenwood, Whyte & Harkavy, 1993, p. 7). Their results indicate that the cooperatives are good at investigating and managing technical problems, but that they do not seem to be similarly skilled at handling the social challenges that continually arise. They allegedly lack the capacity for ‘internal social research’ (Greenwood et al., 1992, p. 24). Santos, the director of the central personnel department, therefore requests a proposal as to how they can deal with this challenge (Santos, 1991, p. 2). This leads to Greenwood becoming involved in a project that comes to be about how internal social research capacity in the cooperatives can be strengthened. In practice, it entails the creation of a research group consisting of Greenwood and a number of cooperative members, the majority of them section heads in the central personnel department and managers of the devolved personnel departments: ‘... the core of the Fagor research team itself is composed of Section Heads of the Central Personnel Department and by Directors of Personnel from the member cooperatives’ (Greenwood et al., 1992, p. 126).

The main conclusion arrived at by the research group is that the members have a high degree of participation as co-owners of the cooperatives, but not as workers in them: ‘Participation in the workplace and in working relationships is much less well developed than in the social institutional structure of the cooperatives’ (p. 131). In their study of the cooperatives, the research team also find that problems of hierarchy, alienation and change characteristic of ordinary capitalist companies apply to cooperatives as well (p. 1). They therefore point out that there seems to be an important difference between the opportunity for influence on the overall management of the cooperatives such as via the above-mentioned councils—i.e. governance—and the feeling of being excluded from influence in day-to-day work:

The most important and unique finding of our study centers on the sources of apathy and alienation. Fagor is undoubtedly one of the most successful experiments in industrial democracy in the world. It shows every sign of continuing to grow and develop successfully. Yet many worker-owners in the system feel that they do not control it, that it controls them. They vote in the annual business plan and they can censure and fire managers ... The owners of the means of production govern the

system. Yet at work, they often feel as if the system owns them ... In the workplace ... Hierarchical systems of command and control operate, albeit in a muted form (p. 8).

On the one hand, then, there is a paradox here that places a question mark over the very principle of participation or self-management: 'Feelings of apathy and distance in a strongly participatory system are matters of great concern because they strike at the foundation of self-management' (p. 12). Many members also have problems with the cooperative discourse. They must not use the term 'subordinates' that is used in capitalist companies; in the cooperatives, they have to say 'collaborators'—even though they feel that they are treated as subordinates by their managers (p. 117).

On the other hand, there is marked satisfaction with the job security that is built into the cooperative approach. If there is a crisis in one sector, the workers/members can be moved from there to other sectors where they are needed. During a recent recession, for example, it was decided to move around 500 members from one cooperative to some others (p. 74, p. 78). In 1987, as a result of such a transfer of members between Fagor cooperatives, job losses were avoided at a time when unemployment in the rest of the Basque Country was as high as 27% (p. 126).

The study shows that, while it seems to be understood that transferral is a way of creating job security, there is also criticism of the specific way it is handled, with some people feeling treated as objects (p. 114). So, there are challenges with participation both in day-to-day work and in critical situations involving recessions in certain sectors. One of the research team's recommendations therefore reads: 'Our study led us to conclude that Fagor needed to reintroduce more problem-solving into the workplace and to democratize production processes as they have democratized governance' (p. 8).

### ***The research process***

The study itself begins with Greenwood creating a process in which the other members of the research team will gain an understanding of what it means in practice to carry out an internal social science study. It is decided first of all to study what others have written about the Mondragón cooperatives, and to use these studies as 'springboards for critical discussions' (p. 51). Apart from Whyte (1991), the outside studies understand culture statically. Greenwood stresses that culture is a process—as also indicated by the book's title, *Industri-*

*al Democracy as Process*. In the course of the discussions, it therefore becomes clear that the culture cannot be seen as something created once and for all by the founder of the cooperatives, the priest Don José María. Culture is understood as a process that changes continually through everybody's day-to-day interactions. Fagor is a 'constantly-changing organization (p. 26). The research group succeeds in creating a provisional culture map themed according to these dichotomies:

'*Hierarchy and equality*' (p. 62). José María did not want to create equality; he wanted the individual member to be able to realize his or her full potential. Hence, hierarchy and pay differentials still exist in the cooperatives. The research team do not see this as a contradiction, however, because they understand the cooperatives as solidary, not egalitarian (p. 63).

'*Cooperation and conflict*' (p. 63). This theme is portrayed as a contradiction in many of the outside descriptions of the cooperatives. The team's perception, though, is that the two concepts are not contradictory, i.e. not irreconcilable opposites, because collaboration entails conflict: 'Conflict is a prominent element in the life of cooperative members. Debate, disagreements, persuasion, and the regular enforcement of the will of the majority over minority views are everyday occurrences' (p. 63).

'*Ethnicity and social class*' (p. 64). Here, too, the outside descriptions of the cooperatives seek to point to a contradiction, but the team's assessment is that 'The same persons or groups simultaneously pursue social class and ethnic group interests' (p. 64).

'*Charismatic leadership and member activism*' (p. 64). There seems to be a tendency in the accounts to overplay the significance of the founder and to reduce later members' contribution to 'small adjustments to an initial, nearly perfect plan' (p. 65). The team, in contrast, want to maintain a balance between tradition and innovation.

'*Unity of values and internal diversity*' (p. 65). As the team sees it, these aspects are also connected. Having democracy as a value means continually debating what is to be understood by democracy and whether a particular action can be characterized as democratic: 'The Fagor Group is an arena in which certain practices and values are simultaneously used and debated' (p. 65).

In this way, an understanding is built in the group that participation and democracy are not a template that is set once and for all and can be used to criticize deficiencies in specific historical formations. On the contrary, participation and democracy are a process that must be developed continually and

participatorily (Greenwood, Whyte & Harkavy, 1993, p. 1). The participatory or solidary element is thus slowly reinforced throughout the development of the cooperatives—something that was not a given from the beginning. Something similar happens to the research process. Greenwood does not characterize this as participatory in the beginning, either, because he only plans to train selected members of the research team to carry out internal social science studies.

### ***Pilot survey and individual interviews***

After the anthropological cultural surveys, the research group decides that Santos, the director of the central personnel department, should take charge of a small initial pilot survey (Greenwood et al., 1992, p. 96). On the one hand, the survey indicates some positive aspects of the cooperatives around ‘internal democracy, freedom of information, participation and social supervision by the membership, employment security ...’ (p. 97). On the other hand, it also shows up some weaknesses, such as that the democratic structure leads to lengthy decision-making processes, or that some feel the social side is overshadowing the economic dimension, while others feel the opposite—and so on.

It surprises the research group that respondents do not talk about the political dimensions of life in the cooperatives or their importance to society as a whole. Nor do they mention conflicts and passivity in the cooperatives (p. 98). The overall verdict on the responses therefore reads:

Their generally positive tone did not match well with the sense of disillusionment and lack of collective commitment that appeared in some of the responses and that worried Fagor from the beginning of the project. (p. 98)

From the research group’s point of view, the results of the pilot survey are too positive: ‘As we examined the results together, our persistent feeling was that the general tone seemed too positive to be real in an organization containing 6,000 persons (p. 99).

The group therefore decides to expand the survey so that it will focus particularly on those who have been directly affected by redeployment during recessions (p. 99). Together with the dichotomy-based culture map, the responses to the pilot questionnaire remain the point of departure for a subsequent larger interview survey (p. 99).



Some members of the group are used to interviewing as part of their job; they use role-play to train their colleagues as interviewers (p. 27). The idea is that the culture map will prove itself in the collection of data, in the form of members' own perceptions and values, in the interviews.

The research group consciously chooses to study some very contentious situations in the history of the cooperatives, namely a strike in 1974 and the handling of the recession in 1979 (p. 66). The group are aware of their explicitly critical focus, seeking out 'problems and weaknesses in the system' (p. 106) on the assumption that, if they can find a way of handling the worst problems, they will subsequently be able to handle the less significant ones as well.

First, the map is submitted to 'the management team of the Fagor Group' (p. 66), who give the green light for a further survey.

Then, for each theme of the culture map, six individual interviews are carried out with members of cooperatives that have been affected by redeployment during recessions. A similar number from cooperatives not affected act as the control group (p. 104). These interviews, which are conducted by the research team members, are crucial because they indicate the conflicts, differences of perspective and problems that have not been understood hitherto (p. 28). At Greenwood's urging (Greenwood, Whyte & Harkavy, 1993, p. 6), the team starts thinking of writing a book, which would therefore also contain 'intervention recommendations for Fagor' (p. 28).

Once the interview survey results are available, the research group finds the responses too negative overall. The group's interpretation is that members have each used the interviews to vent their frustrations. This is especially true where the 'participation and power' theme is concerned:

In exploring this subject [participation and power], we began to understand some of the limitations of the interview as a technique. Many respondents used the interview as a catharsis, a need that points to problems within the system, since the need for expression on these issues is apparently not sufficiently fulfilled elsewhere. (p. 112)

### ***Roundtables***

Greenwood therefore proposes to conduct roundtables, i.e. a form of focus group interview. This method is intended to generate knowledge in groups in a more dialogical way, going beyond the individual knowledge production that characterized the interview situation (p. 28):

If the result of the pilot survey seemed too positive to be real and made it necessary to seek out more negative dimensions, the results of the interviews seemed too negative ... The one-on-one interview about difficult issues with an emphasis on criticism invited cathartic and extreme responses ... We wanted to find ways of developing a more differentiated and complex picture and this led us to the next phase of the study: the roundtables. (p. 120)

Another reason for proposing roundtables or group discussions is that they are in line with the customary practice at Fagor: meeting around the table and debating (p. 122). They are also motivated by an external pressure, in that a lot of resources have been spent on the research. There seems to be a need to bring the results in to the organization (Greenwood, 2007, p. 138). Roundtables are therefore seen as a transition from a more research-oriented style to a more action-based part of an action research process (Greenwood et al., 1992, p. 123).

It is the research group, i.e. Greenwood and the personnel managers, who decide the themes of the roundtables: *'The value-added of being a member of a cooperative ... Equality and hierarchy ... The economic crisis'* (p. 123). For each theme, there will be two roundtables. The participants are nominated by a moderator and an observer for each roundtable using criteria designed to achieve a good spread. The moderator and observer are nominated by the research group and are, we assume, members of it (Santos, 1991, p. 5). Greenwood is co-observer at all roundtables (Greenwood et al., 1992, p. 124). It is agreed that the sessions will be tape-recorded, that the tapes will be deleted when they have been analysed, and that nobody will be quoted by name (p. 124).

The focus group interviews show that members are more satisfied with the cooperatives than the individual interviews suggested. At the same time, they show dissatisfaction with the administration and with the personnel department (Greenwood, 2007, p. 138).

At this point, Fagor decides to hire Greenwood as a consultant so that the research group can continue its work and so integrate internal social science research—in this case, the roundtables—with the ordinary work of Fagor. It is no longer to be just about studying and improving technical/economic problems, but also about the social problems associated with participation in practice, such as hierarchy and power. This means that participatory action research can become organizational learning:

Structured internal social research is not a luxury under these conditions. Fagor members must understand the social and cultural consequences of economic decisions in advance, insofar as possible. They must attempt to anticipate social and cultural adjustments to external economic pressures well enough to maintain member commitments to cooperative processes and ideals. That is, there must exist an internal capacity for organizational learning. (Greenwood et al., 1992, p. 30–31)

### ***Evaluation and questions***

In its final evaluation of the project, the research group presents some results that point to a number of nuances. On the one hand, the original aim was to build an internal social science research capacity that could match the capacity for investigating and reacting to economic and technical problems. This form of organizational learning has grown stronger. It is used in some cooperatives, e.g. in the form of roundtables, but it remains a challenge (p. 168). Some of the problems raised in the surveys have also been taken in hand. Some have been taken up in the five-year plan (p. 159); personnel procedures have been changed so that there is a conversation with the person(s) involved, not just a written reply, in cases in the personnel department (p. 159); various pilot projects have been set in motion, and so forth.

On the other hand, the transition from roundtables to action seems to be difficult (p. 160). The research team indicate that they have not drawn up a diffusion or dissemination strategy. There has been no diffusion of results and methods (p. 169). Participation on the factory floor is still weak: 'Officially, participation is the management philosophy. Work groups operate, although they are not widely distributed at present ...' (p. 135). The personnel departments have had no requests from the cooperatives for PAR initiatives after the project ends. This may be because the cooperatives have difficulty telling the different change processes apart, as Santos (1991) writes:

The department has received no express requests from the cooperatives, the social bodies, or management for specific PAR interventions. Nor am I optimistic that such explicit requests for applications of PAR will be formulated. Our organization tends to blend things ... (p. 8)

This brief account of the project leaves a number of questions unanswered. The first are concerned with background and aims: who defines the aims of

the project? Is it Whyte's assessment of deficiencies in the ability to handle social tensions that sets alarm bells ringing for Santos, the central personnel director? Is it the Fagor managers' worry over whether their culture has been weakened by their handling of the recession and whether it can cope with the growing complexity of the technical system (p. 50)? Or is it the research group's choice of contentious themes? Other questions are how rank-and-file members were involved—and whether they can be involved at all when there are so many members. We will examine these and other questions in Section 5, to the extent that the sources used make it possible to answer them.

## **5. Pragmatic action research as co-generative research**

Section 5 focuses on participation in research. On the basis of the Mondragón example, it discusses what pragmatic action research understands by co-generative research. The section thus returns to the three aims outlined in Section 2. It examines these two questions in particular:

- 1: Who is included and excluded as members of the research team (RT)?
- 2: How do the local co-researchers take part in the study, and what is the role of the RT's interpretations vis-à-vis the respondents?

The overall aim of these questions is to inquire what pragmatic action research understands by the prefix 'co-'. For example, does 'co-' mean 'different, but equal', 'all', 'together', 'joint'—or something else?

### ***The research team (RT) as a group dominated by personnel managers?***

A total of 50 members are involved in the research team (RT) over the 4–6 years of the project. As stated, the team consists of the professional action researcher plus section heads/leaders from the central personnel department and managers from the devolved personnel departments.

The team also includes members from personnel departments and from the central Social Council: 'It had the participation of representatives from Personnel from all the cooperatives and the personnel viewpoint was complemented by the presence of the members of the Central Social Council from different cooperatives and different professional areas' (p. 100).

It therefore appears that workers or cooperative leaders are directly included as RT members to only a limited extent. We are surprised that the authors do not mention that the action research process at Fagor is mainly management-driven, with heads and managers from the personnel departments appearing to play a central role. It is clear that not all members/employees can take part directly when there are approximately 6,000 of them, as there are here. In large organizations, representation has to come into it one way or another (Elden & Levin, 1991, p. 7). We can find no reflections as to whether the RT, consisting as it does primarily of heads and managers from the personnel departments, can be said to represent the members of the cooperative.

### ***The research team as a united, collective ‘we’***

This is how Santos (1991) describes the division of labour in the research team between those who write the big book about the project (Greenwood et al., 1992) and those who carry out the interviews:

The various parts of this process were carried forward by differing groups, dedicating varying amounts of time and attention to it. The key groups were as follows:

A team of seven persons, including the external collaborator, who acted as the principal leader in the research, dedicating special effort to the final phases of writing and synthesis: Although these were members of the Department of Personnel, their educational backgrounds differed: law, psychology, economics, education, and so forth.

A broader group of around 20 people who worked on the interviewing process, defining the questions, doing the interviews, and discussing the results: This included members of the personnel department and representatives from many different levels in the cooperatives. (p. 5)

Greenwood et al. (1992)<sup>17</sup> also emphasize that the RT is not a homogeneous group: ‘While we came to share a vision of Fagor, the team was not a homo-

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17 We are aware that there is a difference between the research team (RT) and the authors of Greenwood et al. (1992). We have had no access to tapes documenting the work of the RT. We have therefore chosen not to distinguish between the book’s authors and the RT in this section.

geneous group' (p. 100). This statement stands in contrast to the way the RT is described. There are many examples where the team is described using the subject pronoun 'we':

'We felt that research on the cooperatives ...' (p. 95)

'... we agreed that a very modest pilot should be conducted ...' (p. 96)

'We were surprised by the small importance ...' (p. 98)

'Thus we decided that we needed ...' (p. 99)

'We began by structuring ...' (p. 100)

'We selected the persons to be interviewed ...' (p. 104)

'We selected ... we chose ... (p. 106)

In this way, the team is described as a homogeneous group that makes decisions on which all apparently agree. Through the use of 'we' as the subject, the prefix 'co-' here comes to denote a united group. This contrasts with the overall focus of the study, which emphasizes difference, diversity and conflict. There are few examples indicating how any differences manifest themselves internally in the RT. One such is from the end of the project, when the action researcher problematizes an activity in the RT:

A key member of the management team in charge of the Mondragón Cooperative Corporation, who had been a participant in our PAR work before, is now developing materials and processes to assist in explaining the new forms and their socio-cultural implications to the members. In reviewing this initiative, Greenwood noticed that elements in the plan were likely to produce the opposite effects from those intended, because it did not take into account the heterogeneity and dynamism of the cultures of the cooperatives. This criticism was taken seriously and the plan was revised. (Greenwood et al, 1992, p. 169)

The action researcher's problematization could pave the way for discussion of difference in the RT. How the criticism is turned into action is not documented empirically. The criticism appears as interpretations that seem to be agreed on ('was taken seriously', 'was revised').

Theoretically, the use of 'we' to denote the RT as a whole may conceal the existence of differing interests and agendas internally in the RT, e.g. regarding

differential positioning in the organizational hierarchy. On p. 96, for example, we read that 'José Luis Gonzales [the personnel director] took charge of this process'. We cannot know, because the use of 'we' is not problematized. As readers, we are puzzled that conflict, dissensus and differential positioning in the organizational hierarchy are apparently investigated 'only' in respect of the cooperatives, not in respect of the RT. In connection with the choice of interviewees, for example, we are told that: '... there was also an attempt to include people at different professional levels because we expected different reactions from these different groups' (p. 104). Here, differences are included in the survey. There is no explicit examination of an equivalent issue in respect of the RT.

There is thus a discrepancy between what is examined in the cooperatives and the way things are apparently done in the RT. Diversity, conflict and dissensus seem to be about others, not the RT.

### ***How do the local co-researchers take part in the study, and what is the role of their interpretations vis-à-vis the respondents?***

Right from the definition of the aim of the Fagor project, there seems to be a hierarchy. The aim from the start is to grow internal social science research, i.e. to increase organizational learning. This objective is defined by external researchers, i.e. by William Foote Whyte and Kathryn Whyte, and accepted by the personnel department managers, many of whom have an academic background (Santos, 1991, p. 5). Rank-and-file members of the cooperatives thus appear to have neither voice nor choice in the determination of the project aims. We have carried out many projects with different professional groups in various private and public-sector Danish organizations. From this, it is our experience that their goals always include some concrete elements such as reducing staff turnover in a particular department, building clearer interfaces between certain departments and so forth. It has subsequently been possible to use those concrete goals for reflection on the possibilities of boosting organizational learning. Our experience thus indicates that rank-and-file employees and managers are too result-focused and too concrete in their thinking to accept an abstract metagoal such as increased organizational learning.

The remainder of this section is structured around three of the surveys: the pilot survey, the interview survey and the roundtables. Here, as above, we will analyse the use of language in the three surveys on the basis of the way they are described in Greenwood et al. (1992) and Santos (1991). The analysis will examine how the authors talk about the RT and the respondents. It cannot

comment on what happened in practice. We have no evidence for that in this chapter, partly because all the tape recordings have been deleted.

### ***The pilot study and participation as the exercising of power***

The RT develop their methods processually, or emergently. They do this on the basis of their ongoing interpretation of the responses they obtain along the way. As mentioned, the RT are surprised at the pilot survey results (Greenwood et al., 1992, p. 98), which they conclude are too positive and which they reject with this interpretation, which we feel bears repeating:

Their generally positive tone did not match well with the sense of disillusionment and lack of collective commitment that appeared in some of the responses and that worried Fagor from the beginning of the project. (p. 98)

... As we examined the results together, our persistent feeling was that the general tone seemed too positive to be real in an organization containing 6,000 persons. (p. 99)

Here, too, the RT is described as a united, collective ‘we’ (‘As we examined ... together’, ‘our persistent feeling ...’). We cannot tell whether the RT test their interpretation that the pilot survey is too positive in comparison with the respondents’ experience. That interpretation is apparently based on the RT’s own shared impressions, on some of the responses and presumably on the concerns of the Fagor management. It thus appears that, internally in the team, the RT co-generates a shared interpretation based on the RT’s knowledge of Fagor’s concerns. This lays the foundation for the next stage of the study.

We understand these interpretations as a way of exercising participation as power. The RT position their own interpretations above some of the respondents’ answers without presenting reflections as to what this choice means for their understanding of the respondents’ status in the study. This surprises us in a study that has co-generation of knowledge as a declared goal and in which locals participate as co-researchers vis-à-vis their colleagues. Does it mean, for example, that the RT in practice comes to downgrade some of the respondents’ answers in favour of their own interpretations, so that the respondents acquire the status of objects in a local study in which the ‘co-’ apparently does not include them? Or does it mean that it is hard to avoid such dilemmas when, for example, there is a difference between some local co-researchers’ and perhaps



the action researcher's understanding in the RT, and that of some of the rank-and-file workers?

We have encountered similar problems in our own projects and have concluded that participatory action research is always the exercising of power (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011, 2013, 2014a), and that therefore what matters is, among other things, to make it transparent, e.g. by putting one's own arguments and interpretations, and their limitations, up for dialogue. It also entails, for example, consideration of how we write up our projects.

### ***Interview survey and participatory hierarchy***

The next phase, consisting of individual interviews, is based on a series of themes (Greenwood et al., 1992):

*'Participation and Power'* (p. 100)

*'Relations between management and the membership'* (p. 101)

*'Employment Security and Transfers'* (p. 101)

*'Concentration and Autonomy in the Cooperatives'* (p. 102)

*'Compensation'* (p. 102)

Based on the pilot study and their own experiences, the RT have chosen the areas that have attracted the most debate and the most conflict (p. 103). As mentioned, the RT draw attention to their explicitly critical focus, seeking out 'problems and weaknesses in the system' (p. 106). As we have said, the RT rejects the results of the interview survey, interpreting the survey results as too negative and arguing that the method itself has its limitations (p. 120). They question the use of individual interviews as a method in a critical study such as theirs. They argue that the method invites respondents to use the interview as a way of venting their frustration within a system that does not provide for this need, i.e. to use it as a form of catharsis. This applies especially to the inquiry into the theme of participation and power, of which, as already mentioned, we are told:

In exploring this subject [participation and power], we began to understand some of the limitations of the interview as a technique. Many respondents used the interview as a catharsis, a need that points to

problems within the system, since the need for expression on these issues is apparently not sufficiently fulfilled elsewhere. (p. 112)

The one-on-one interview about difficult issues with an emphasis on criticism invited cathartic and extreme responses. (p. 120)

Greenwood et al. (1992) reflect, as a collective 'we', on their use of the interview as a method in combination with a critical focus in a study such as theirs. They do not question their interpretation that the respondents are using the interview as a form of catharsis, which they understand in relation to the interview as a method and the organization as a system. Our interpretation is that, here, the RT are generating a participatory hierarchy (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2016) in which the RT indirectly position themselves as 'uppers' and the respondents as 'lowers'. As readers, we would like to know whether this interpretation was put to the respondents. If so, how did they react to it? We are particularly puzzled as to how the authors, who explicitly reject turning action research into psychology (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, pp. 196–197), here go ahead and comment on other people's, i.e. the respondents', psychological reactions. Here, then, 'co-' may come to mean positioning local researchers and respondents in superordinate/subordinate relationships.

### ***Roundtables and interpretations using the passive voice and valorizing language***

As already mentioned, after the interview survey, Greenwood proposes the use of roundtables, because they can provide a more complex, differentiated picture: 'We wanted to find ways of developing a more differentiated and complex picture and this led us to the next phase of the study: the roundtables' (p. 120). Roundtables are portrayed as an improvement on individual interviews. Santos (1991) puts it as follows:

Some of the limitations of the interviewing technique were overcome through holding roundtables involving persons from different parts of the organization with different views, educational backgrounds, and experiences. These roundtables centered on the most significant issues that came up in the interviews, permitting us to capture the subtlety of different views but assuring that these views were tested in a social context, with each person obliged to support his or her statements. This gave clear evidence of the existence of a variety of different discourses

regarding the same facts in FAGOR and also showed the existence of schematized worldviews, replete with prejudices and stereotypes. (p. 4)

There are several things that strike us about the use of language in this passage. Santos uses verbs in the passive voice ('were overcome', 'were tested'), which can help camouflage who was testing and how problems were overcome. He also uses valorizing adjectives and nouns. Here, 'valorization' means ascribing value to a statement by using value-laden adjectives and nouns suggesting how a statement is to be read. Valorization thus acts as a form of interpretation, enabling the reader's perception to be indirectly influenced by the way an author ascribes value to his empirical data through his interpretive use of language.

The adjectives and nouns in the quotation that describe the RT are predominantly positive in content, as in the adjectives 'most significant' and 'clear [evidence]' or the nouns 'subtlety', 'variety' and 'facts'. The same is not true of the adjectives and nouns describing the roundtable interviewees. Here, the text contains a series of negative judgements or interpretations such as the adjective 'schematized' and the nouns 'prejudices' and 'stereotypes', which carry a psychological content. As readers, we are therefore left with a polarized understanding of the RT as the good analysts, and the interviewees as the prejudiced respondents.

### *Use of the passive*

In the remainder of this section, we will analyse the use of the passive voice and valorizing language. It is difficult for the reader to determine who in the RT is making these decisions:

The group of interviewers was also chosen at this time ... Some were chosen because ... (Greenwood et al., 1992, p. 104)

A work plan bringing the results together was developed (p. 105)  
..., it was felt ... (p. 99)

The decision was made to pursue an extensive set of interviews ...  
(p. 99)

The repeated use of verbs in the passive ('was/were chosen', 'was developed', 'was felt', 'was made') contributes to a lack of clarity as to who is the agent or the acting subject. This makes it less transparent who chose the interviewers,

who made which decisions, who drew up the work schedule for the interviews etc.

### *Use of valorizing adjectives and nouns*

As we have said, the RT agrees that the sessions will be tape-recorded, that the tapes will be erased when they have been analysed and that nobody will be quoted by name (p. 124). This may be why Greenwood et al. (1992) give only a few examples, such as those on pp. 108, 111, 114, 116, of what participants actually said in the conversations. Most of the roundtable conversations are presented through the RT's interpretations of them, as for example in this quotation:

In all six roundtables, participation was excellent. All participants selected and who received a personal explanation of the motives behind them, attended. The atmosphere, except for a few moments at one of the roundtables, was characterized by cordiality, progressive opening up of dialogue, and the free expression of personal opinions. At the end of each, the participants expressed satisfaction for the opportunity to state their opinions and discuss these issues. (p. 125)

Interpretation is also apparent here in the form of valorizing adjectives ('excellent', 'progressive', 'free') and nouns ('cordiality', 'satisfaction'). Something similar comes through in the following quotation from Santos (1991), where he uses positively laden adjectives ('open', 'continuous') and nouns ('wish', 'the reality') to describe the roundtables: 'All of this phase took place in an atmosphere of open discussion, continuous questioning, and the wish to get to the bottom of things, to touch the reality as it is lived in the workplace by different people' (p. 5).

There are many similar examples of the use of value-laden adjectives and nouns throughout the book on the Mondragón project (Greenwood et al., 1992). They are used to describe both the respondents and the RT. The following examples relate to interpretations of the respondents:

But it was also clear that the process has been uncomfortable and difficult at the personal level. (p. 99)

Member ignorance about how such businesses [private firms] really operate can induce both facile 'mythification' and debunking of the cooperatives, neither particularly helpful. (p. 99)

... the respondents highly valued businesses with a secure future (p. 97)

The adjectives 'uncomfortable' and 'difficult' characterize the respondents' inner psychological states, but we are not told whether they have commented on them themselves. We read the noun phrase 'member ignorance', the adjective 'facile' and the phrase 'neither particularly helpful' as negative judgements on, or interpretations of, the respondents.

Another use of valorizing adjectives and nouns is to describe the RT's working procedure, as in these examples:

The agreed-upon core characteristics of the cooperatives .... Emerged clearly as ... (p. 99)

An active and productive debate emerged over ... (p. 95)

With the active participation of all the members, we produced an enormous number of ideas (p. 103)

Greenwood et al. (1992) interpret the RT's internal working procedure positively. They do this by the use of value-laden adverbs and adjectives: 'emerged clearly', 'active and productive', 'active', 'enormous'. As readers, we get the impression of a committed process. The book does not document through examples how or why it is that the RT's collaboration apparently worked well. The use of the adjectives and nouns mentioned feeds in to our interpretation of a participatory hierarchy in which the team of local and professional researchers position themselves as uppers and practise the power of definition and interpretation vis-à-vis the others, the respondents, who are generally positioned as lowers and regarded negatively. In none of these examples do we hear the respondents' own voices, find documentation of interpretations or see reflection on how such interpretations endow a research team with the power of definition. We feel these absences especially because we share the authors' (1992) view that co-generative research and co-generation are embedded in power.

### *The interpretation of members' reactions as resistance*

Pragmatic action research emphasizes that it is inspired by the socio-technical systems thinking that evolved at the Tavistock Institute (Chapter 4) and in the early phase of the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project (Chapter 5) (Elden & Levin, 1991, pp. 2–3; Whyte, Greenwood & Lazes, 1991, p. 515). As mentioned earlier, in the later projects run by the Tavistock Institute and in the first phase of the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project, if participants problematized the idea of self-managing groups and the breakdown of traditional demarcations between production, maintenance and quality control, this was interpreted as resistance. The researchers in the Mondragón project also use the concept of resistance in their interpretation:

The structured rotation of positions within specific product areas has contributed to improvements in product quality, social relations, a sense of belonging to a group, and the ability to respond flexibly to cases of absenteeism. Unfortunately, the inclusion of qualitative functions, originally the responsibility of other areas—e.g. quality control, maintenance, etc.—has frequently remained conceptual rather than a genuine change. This has occurred generally because of resistance to these programs from the production support services whose responsibility these matters used to be, coupled with lack of an appropriate, continued educational effort to alter their attitudes. (Greenwood et al., 1992, p. 90)

The researchers explain that members in the production support services show resistance to the breakdown of demarcations ('resistance to these programs'). They attribute this to the lack of an appropriate, continued educational effort that might alter members' attitudes. The valorization of members is apparent here in that the researchers use a psychological concept of resistance to interpret the members' reactions, apparently without questioning this interpretation.

We are therefore left thinking that there is a discrepancy in that the RT inquire into and reflect on power in the cooperatives, but apparently not in connection with their own exercising of power, as a research team, over the respondents.

### ***Some conclusions on co-generative research***

On the basis of the analysis in the preceding sections, we will advance some conclusions regarding the three points mentioned in Section 2. The conclusions all relate to the meaning of ‘co-’ as it is described in the Mondragón example.

#### ***Who participated?***

The analysis has shown that the RT consisted predominantly of heads and managers from the central and local personnel departments. There were also some members from the central Social Council, and the action researcher Greenwood. ‘Co-’ thus becomes a designation covering personnel department managers primarily. The inclusive ‘co-’ seems largely to exclude rank-and-file employees/members.

#### ***How did the local co-researchers participate?***

The local co-researchers in the RT contributed to the co-generation of knowledge throughout the research process, from the formulation of the aims and problem to the writing of the book about the results of the project (Greenwood et al., 1992). ‘Co-’ thus corresponded to the way in which the authors defined co-generative research as the co-generation of knowledge. On the evidence available, we cannot say how it took place in practice.

#### ***How was the RT described?***

Greenwood et al. (1992) emphasized that the RT was not a homogeneous group. However, the RT was predominantly described in the text as a united group, a ‘we’ that took decisions collectively. Here, ‘co-’ contained a discrepancy between the theoretical understanding of dissensus in the cooperatives and the consensus in the RT. There is no way of knowing from our analysis whether ‘co-’ meant in practice the exclusion of diversity in the RT, because there were few examples describing internal similarities and differences within the RT or showing who made which decisions.

#### ***What was the role of the RT vis-à-vis survey respondents?***

The authors state that co-generation of knowledge is not a neutral process. It is embedded in power relations that are assessed according to a pragmatic and democratic criterion. In all their surveys, the authors and the RT make use of

interpretations in the form of valorizing adjectives and nouns. The analysis has shown that, here, they were using their power of definition to interpret the respondents' contributions as either too positive or too negative—or perhaps as more consistent with the desired results.

The analysis has also shown that it was not apparent whether respondents had had the opportunity to evaluate these interpretations pragmatically, nor could we find documentation of them. We therefore conclude that 'co-' comes to mean the practice of participation as the power of definition and the establishment of a participatory hierarchy vis-à-vis the respondents.

Methodologically, we would like to see reflections on possible sources of error such as power relations between participants in the context of an evaluation of the validity of results from the roundtables. A harmonization might occur, for example, i.e. some participants might be inclined to adapt to others. It might also depend on selection procedure, e.g. the fact that it is RT members who nominate focus group interview participants (Greenwood et al, 1992, p. 124).

Except for the local co-researchers' contributions to the co-generation process, these conclusions indicate that there is a discrepancy between the study's overall focus on power, voice, dissensus and conflict on the one hand, and the way pragmatic action research is described in the Mondragón example, on the other. We are therefore unable to assess whether, or how, the research process contributed to a democratization of the organization and of the relationship between the professional action researcher and the local partners.

## **6. Is pragmatic action research a participatory, conventional, applied and/or phronetic science?**

Section 6 will attempt, at a philosophy of science level, to pinpoint how pragmatic action research can be characterized. Can it be understood as a participatory, conventional, applied and/or phronetic science? To this end, we will use a number of concepts from Schafft & Greenwood (2003).

### ***Participatory or conventional science?***

Schafft & Greenwood (2003) use a number of parameters to distinguish between a conventional scientific approach and a participatory action research approach, as also discussed by Greenwood & Levin (1998). Schafft & Green-



wood (2003) regard this distinction as an ideal type distinction that can have a heuristic function. They also underline that, if used concretely to evaluate the projects of others, it 'likely obscures more than it reveals' (Schafft & Greenwood, 2003, p. 20). We have nevertheless chosen to use the distinction in order to come closer to a characterization of pragmatic action research in philosophy of science terms.

Schafft & Greenwood (2003) write that the planning process in the conventional approach is marked by 'Less emphasis on the specifics of local context, often driven by concerns for economic efficiency', while the participatory approach 'is multi-dimensional and context specific, driven by local knowledge and concerns for economic equity' (p. 20).

Our interpretation is that this opposition between economic efficiency and local knowledge and interests represents a general dilemma in organizational action research. It relates to how, as an action researcher, one strikes a balance between different forms of knowledge. As far as we can see, the Mondragón project is driven not only by local knowledge but also by the professional researcher's preferences such as those for self-managing groups, for the understanding of culture as process, for roundtables rather than individual interviews and so on.

Schafft & Greenwood (2003) elaborate on the difference between a conventional and a participatory approach. The management strategy of the conventional approach is characterized as 'Top-down in management and implementation; hierarchical power structure'. The participatory approach is described as 'Bottom-up, or synergy between top and bottom; collaborative; egalitarian power structure' (p. 20).

The analysis of the Mondragón project indicates that the project encompasses both approaches. It appears to be the management-dominated research team who decide that the project is to be initiated, what its aims are to be, how it is to be designed and how it is to be interpreted and validated. The project thus appears to have some of the 'top-down' characteristics of the conventional approach. At the same time, it can also be said to have 'bottom-up' characteristics, such as emergent learning processes, that contribute to the development of new methods. We do not, therefore, understand the project as a merely management-driven implementation project; in line with the authors' own understanding (Greenwood et al. 1992), we also see it as a learning process.

We see the opposition between the top-down and bottom-up approaches as a general dilemma in organizational action research, i.e. as a problemat-

ics that, as an action researcher, one cannot solve but must try to deal with. We have come across similar dilemmas in our own projects. In one previous project, our espoused value was the participatory approach, whereas our theory-in-use proved to be the conventional one (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2004).

Schafft & Greenwood (2003) use a third parameter, relating to who determines the goals of a project. Here, the conventional approach is characterized as being ‘Pre-determined, concrete’, while the participatory approach practises ‘Evolving outcome objectives; Process and outcome in constant dialogue’ (p. 20).

The analysis of the project in Mondragón points up a duality. On the one hand, it shows that the methods of the project were developed emergently, that its themes were drawn up in relation to the context, and that it was based on co-generation of knowledge between local partners and an action researcher. These aspects indicate a participatory approach. On the other hand, the project aims were determined in advance. This indicates a conventional approach. The Mondragón project therefore appears to contain both participatory and conventional approaches. We also understand the opposition between predetermined, concrete objectives on the one hand, and emergent objectives on the other, as a general dilemma in organizational action research.

### *Is pragmatic action research applied science?*

In the early 1990s, Greenwood regarded participatory science as applied science. In the words of Whyte, Greenwood & Lazes (1991):

PAR is *applied* research, but it also contrasts sharply with the most common type of traditional forms of applied research, in which researchers serve as professional experts, designing the project, gathering the data, interpreting the findings, and recommending action to the client organization. (p. 514)

In the passage quoted, the authors distinguish between a conventional/traditional understanding and a participatory understanding of applied science. In the first, the researchers act as professional experts responsible for the entire research process. In the second understanding, the research process is conceived differently: as co-generation of knowledge, for example, or through the idea of researchers as ‘friendly outsiders’.

The analysis of the Mondragón project again points up a duality. On the one hand, it involved a learning process rather than an implementation process. On the other, the depiction of the research team as a united ‘we’ makes it difficult to judge whether, and to what extent, the professional action researcher acted as a more traditional expert. It was he, for example, who designed the various survey methods used in the project.

In the late 1990s, the view of pragmatic action research is sharpened. It is no longer perceived as applied science, because that approach relies on a separation of thought and action (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 6). If pragmatic action research can be understood neither as conventional, nor as applied science, how, then, can it be characterized? Greenwood (2002) points to Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis*, as too did action researchers in the democratic dialogue tradition (Chapter 6).

### ***Is pragmatic action research a form of phronesis?***

Aristotle distinguishes five intellectual virtues: *sofia*, *nous*, *episteme*, *techne* and *phronesis* (Aristotle, 1968, pp. 331–373). *Phronesis* is practical reasoning (prudence), while *episteme* is theoretical reasoning. In the democratic dialogue approach, Toulmin & Gustavsen (1996) understand action research as *phronesis*, not as *episteme*. Citing a different, secondary reference to Aristotle, Greenwood (2002) writes:

... action research depends on a major revision in the epistemological and methodological standards that the social sciences use. Returning to Aristotle through the good offices of Stephen Toulmin and Björn Gustavsen (1996) and Bent Flyvbjerg (2001), action research is based on revitalizing the Aristotelian distinctions between *theoria*, *techne*, and *phronesis* as forms of knowledge. Aristotelian *phronesis* strikes action researchers as the pre-eminent form of knowledge that the social sciences must employ, because of their social mission and their complex inter-subjective data sources. (p. 126)

The quotation could suggest that Greenwood understands the concept of *phronesis* in the same way as Toulmin and Gustavsen do, because he asserts that *phronesis* is the most important form of knowledge in social science action research. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Greenwood (2014, p. 646) regards Gustavsen and Pålshaugen as part of pragmatic action research.

On the other hand, *phronesis* also seems to be portrayed by Greenwood & Levin (1998) as local knowledge. Action research—understood as *phronesis*—therefore aims to bridge the gap between local knowledge—understood as *phronesis*—and theoretical knowledge:

Our own understanding of local knowledge centers on viewing it as practical reasoning in action and local reflections by participants on their actions. This conception of knowledge can be traced back to Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* ... AR becomes the process of bridging local knowledge and scientific knowledge, a process that will create both new local knowledge and new scientific understandings. (p. 111)

### **Summary**

At the start of this section, we asked whether pragmatic action research was a participatory, conventional, applied and/or *phronetic* science. This question cannot be answered unequivocally.

As mentioned, Greenwood & Levin (1998) revise their view that pragmatic action research can be understood as applied science. We share this understanding, because action research is not just about applying or implementing knowledge already available, but about further developing it in dialogue with practice.

Greenwood (2002) introduces the term *phronesis*, which is used both to denote action research generally and to denote local knowledge. This dual definition of the term does not, in our view, help to bring clarity.

Ultimately, it seems to us that the opposition in terms of ideal types between a participatory and a conventional approach represents a more fundamental dilemma in action research. In our experience, it is not possible to carry out organizational action research projects that are not also conventional. The projects we ourselves have contributed to have had characteristics that Schafft and Greenwood would class as conventional rather than participatory. For example, the objectives have also, but not solely, been marked by 'concerns for economic efficiency' (Schafft & Greenwood, 2003, p. 20). The projects have been marked by a 'hierarchical power structure' (p. 20) that included our own power of definition as researchers, and so on.

If we bring in the analysis of Mondragón, our view is that pragmatic action research can be characterized as both participatory and conventional. We are

therefore not surprised that both participatory and conventional aspects are present in the Mondragón project.

It cannot be characterized as an example of applied science, because methods were changed partway through the Mondragón project. We cannot say whether it can be characterized as phronetic in Greenwood's sense, partly because he uses the term in multiple ways.

## 7. Conclusions

In this chapter, we have focused on the tensions inherent in the prefix 'co-' in co-generative research.

On the one hand, we have seen that, on a theoretical level, pragmatic action researchers develop a series of concepts and dilemmas that seek to understand participation in pragmatic action research projects. These relate to democratic knowledge production, emergent and collaborative processes, diversity, consensus/dissensus and power.

On the other hand, the analysis of Mondragón points to a number of tensions in the research process. Local co-researchers contribute to the co-generation of knowledge throughout the research process. At the same time, the process is predominantly controlled by managers and action researchers, and is embedded in power relations. Here, the research team and the authors (Greenwood et al. 1992) make use of their power of definition to interpret the respondents' statements. This points up a discrepancy in the Mondragón example between the study's overall focus on dissensus, power and conflict and the way it is described.

The prefix 'co-' thus comes to contain a duality. In respect of the others, the respondents, 'co-' signifies dissensus, diversity and power. In respect of the researchers, 'co-' apparently signifies consensus, unity and absence of power.

We have found no extended, practical reflections on how the researchers addressed the overriding theoretical dilemmas in the Mondragón project. Particularly lacking have been reflections on discrepancies between inquiry into conflict, power and diversity in the cooperatives in Mondragón and the description of the research team as a united 'we'. We would like to have seen reflections on the researchers' use of their leadership and knowledge monopoly and on the participatory paradox between co-generation and the exercising of RT power.

The development of the theoretical understanding of pragmatic action research took place mainly from the late 1990s onwards, i.e. after the Mondragón project. As early as (1991), however, Elden and Levin describe the action researcher's knowledge monopoly as one of the big challenges facing participatory action researchers. They also stress that co-generation of knowledge between local and outside partners is not sufficient to overcome this challenge:

Oddly enough, for a communication process aimed at empowerment, power equality, and democracy, inequality is a hallmark of the dialogical relationship. Insiders and outsiders have different power and knowledge bases. The outside expert has much more powerful and explicit 'sense-making' models. Indeed, a researcher could be said to be in the business of being a professional sense-maker. The Norwegian sociologist Bråthen (1973, 1986, 1988) calls this dominance situation 'model monopoly.' Researchers have the most relevant training and specialized education and the most influential position, so they have a model monopoly in the sense that their way of thinking may dominate the dialogue.

How can the researcher's 'model monopoly'—which is part of being a researcher—be overcome? It is not enough to bring insiders and outsiders together and hope for a happy and spontaneously created co-generative dialogue. Overcoming the researchers' model monopoly is one of the real challenges for a PAR practitioner ... (p. 8)

Elden & Levin (1991) point out that the rules of play of democratic dialogues can be one way among several of solving the problem of professional action researchers' knowledge monopoly:

Gustavsen's idea of 'democratic dialogue' in Scandinavian PAR is quite similar to ours (Gustavsen, 1985). He builds partly on the philosophical thinking of Habermas, postulating nine criteria for evaluating the degree of democracy in a dialogue aimed at democratizing work (Gustavsen, 1985: 474–475) ... This is one solution to the problem of researcher model monopoly. (Elden & Levin, 1991, p. 9)

We do not share the view that issues of knowledge monopoly and power can be solved structurally by setting rules of play for democratic dialogues. In Chapter

6, we problematized the ability of researchers to put their power of definition or model monopoly in brackets by means of dialogic rules of play. The chapter showed that the researchers had a processual model monopoly on defining democratic dialogues. In the analysis of the Mondragón example, we have shown that the research team had a knowledge monopoly.

We see co-generation of knowledge as the Achilles' heel of organizational action research. Is it possible to develop a practical/theoretical understanding of knowledge co-generation based both on the practical management of diverse interests and agendas, dilemmas, conflicts and power in organizations, and on a theoretical understanding? We will examine this in more detail in the concluding chapter (Chapter 8).

## Reflections

We have spoken in several places in the book in favour of an empathetic-critical depiction of our predecessors as organizational action researchers. One weakness of this chapter may be that the empathy has given way to the criticism. The chapter pays a lot of attention to the unspoken hierarchical aspects of the fundamental concept of co-generative research. On the other hand, it is to Greenwood and Levin's credit to have been very quick off the mark with a conception of action research as consisting of three equiordinate dimensions: action, research and participation. The same can be said of their understanding of participatory action research as co-generative research, i.e. as a co-generation of different forms of knowledge, both practical and theoretical. They also portray this research as an emergent and hence unpredictable process, presenting reflections on the successive phases of the research process. They also stress that power and dissensus between different forms of knowledge and different interests are a part of co-generative research.

We criticize the co-generative research at Mondragón as being a management-driven and researcher-driven process in which, as respondents, rank-and-file employees are allotted the status of objects of the research team's interpretations, the arguments and documentation for which we are unable to see. On the other hand, one might ask whether we are not neglecting a key circumstance. We are dealing here with cooperatives whose management is chosen in one way or another by the rank-and-file workers through their co-ownership. The project includes about 6,000 employees. How should they

be represented on the research team? What is wrong with most of the internal members of the team being personnel department managers?

On the basis presented by the researchers, we lack sufficient knowledge to propose an alternative organization. We do not know whether assemblies were held. We do not know whether rank-and-file employees were interested in participatory action research processes. There are two things we do know, however. One is that a significant criticism of the personnel departments emerged during the project. The other is that we lack descriptions by the researchers of any discussions they may have had as to whether it was appropriate for most of the internal members of the research team to be personnel department managers.

This brings us to the second weakness we are aware of in the chapter. As in the other chapters, we have felt the absence of documentation such as audio or video recordings or meeting transcripts. This being so, we have resorted to the researchers' narratives of practice. We are therefore unable to comment on what actually went on. We can only comment in the chapter on what the researchers write and what we find wanting.

Our chapter is therefore marked by the unavailability of reflections on the relationship between theory, practice and use of language. How was co-generation practised? Is co-generation possible at all? Perhaps only in part of the process? How does one document the way co-generation is done in practice? And finally: whose truth is it, if any, that co-generation 'ends with'? In retrospect, perhaps it was historically impossible to ask such questions within participatory action research in 1992. It is different today, when collaborative action research has begun to problematize the content and consequences of that little prefix 'co-'.



# Chapter 8

## Participation, past and future

### 1. Introduction

We are nearing journey's end in this book. Chapter 8 presents the book's conclusions, which fall into two sections. The first section summarizes some fundamental differences and similarities between the five approaches to organizational action research described in Part II: change-oriented social science (Lewin and Harwood), socio-technical systems thinking (STS), industrial democracy (NIDP), democratic dialogues and pragmatic action research. The summary discusses some similarities in the reasoning behind the projects, different understandings of participation and the researchers' ways of self-positioning, and different conceptions of action research.

The second section points forward. It is about what we, as organizational action researchers, can learn from history. It examines four aspects of participation that are mentioned only sparsely in the projects described and that we have learnt about the hard way in our own projects. We therefore hope that they can act as points for consideration in others' future action research projects. The four aspects are: who/what is involved, to what extent, with what approach and on what theoretical basis.

The two sections are bound together by an overall understanding of participation as the exercising of power.

### 2. Differences and similarities between change-oriented social science, STS, NIDP, democratic dialogues and pragmatic action research

The first section of the conclusion summarizes some fundamental differences and similarities between the five approaches to action research described in Part II. The summary discusses only organizational action research in which the action researchers act as outside collaborative partners.

## ***Increased productivity through better use of human resources***

### ***Organizational action research as organizational development***

Our analysis of the examples from Harwood in the USA, the coal mines in Britain and several industries in Norway indicates that, across different nationalities, project types and historical periods, organizational action research focuses on increasing productivity in organizations through better use of human resources.

At Harwood, experiments with participatory and democratic management and partially self-managing groups act as means of improving efficiency at a textile mill in the southern United States that is having problems with low efficiency and high workforce turnover as compared with its parent factory in New England.

Researchers from the Tavistock Institute investigate the correlation between participation in self-managing groups and increased productivity in the mining industry, where mechanization of the mines has not brought the expected productivity increase. Their results indicate that the optimal match is a combination of the socio-psychological and technical systems, i.e. of the miners' organization in autonomous, functionally flexible groups and the longwall organization. This provides higher productivity and improved working conditions at the same time.

In Norway, the Industrial Democracy Project (NIDP) focuses on increased participation in the form of the introduction of self-managing groups. Industrial democracy is an issue not only in Norway, but in a large number of western European countries where increased employee participation has come onto the agenda as a possible alternative to a Taylorist organization. The NIDP is both about creating better alignment between a person's influence as an employee and their influence as a citizen in a democracy, and about creating the conditions for the individual fulfilment that can contribute to higher productivity and efficiency.

In all three projects, then, increased democracy in self-managing groups is linked to organizational productivity development. In Norway, Thorsrud (1976, p. 78) writes explicitly of the linkage between 'organizational change' and 'democratization at work'.

The same applies to the continuation of the Industrial Democracy Project in Norway and Sweden, although participation no longer means self-managing groups, but participation in democratic dialogues. Organizational action

research with outside action researchers is thus understood from the outset as part of an organizational development project in which democracy and participation are also means to increased productivity and efficiency in organizations. The pragmatic action research project in Mondragón is perhaps an exception. It is intended to boost organizational learning capacity and to strengthen self-management in the production department, thereby reducing alienation. It is not evident from the sources whether there are underlying economic objectives.

### ***Management- and researcher-initiated projects***

There is another common feature that transcends time and nationality. At Harwood, in the British coal mines (STS), in several Norwegian industries (NIDP), in several Norwegian and Swedish organizations (democratic dialogues) and in the Spanish cooperatives (pragmatic action research), employees participate in projects that the researchers have agreed with management, trade unions and/or employers' associations, without the employees contributing to determining the overall objectives or deciding whether they want to participate. All these projects are therefore the result of initiatives from above. We believe this to be the normal state of affairs in organizational action research projects, but it puzzles us that this circumstance is rarely discussed, given that researchers at the same time stress the importance of democracy.

### ***Different understandings of participation***

Participation in the practical and theoretical dimensions of the research process is developed in four different ways in the five approaches. All four ways raise certain dilemmas and paradoxes relating to organizational action research projects:

#### ***Participation as involvement***

At Harwood, the workers gain co-determination over the means they will use to improve efficiency. They are heard, i.e. they have voice, and they can also decide for themselves which means to choose, i.e. they have choice. The combination of voice and choice is radical when the historical period and the project's geographical location are taken into account. The aim of the project is set in advance by the management and the researchers. Participation thus comes to act as a management tool. We have previously described this as instrumen-

tal participation. The workers' voice and choice thus unfold within an overall agenda determined by the management and the action researchers.

### *Participation as self-managing groups*

Both STS and the NIDP understand participation to mean taking part in partially self-managing groups in the coal industry and various Norwegian industries, respectively:

The STS researchers discover the miners' use of self-managing groups by accident. This is where the development of STS theory begins. In their later research, they argue for a form of enforced use of self-managing groups, and interpret the miners' reactions against them in terms of the psychoanalytic concept of resistance. They do not reflect explicitly on the dilemma between voluntary and enforced use of self-managing groups or on their own interpretations.

The NIDP is inspired by STS and similarly understands participation to mean taking part in partially self-managing groups in organizations. On the one hand, this is a case of shop-floor democracy and increased participation. On the other, it is practised as democracy from above, with employers' associations, trade unions, local management and researchers determining for the workers what self-management is to be. For example, it was representatives of the Norwegian Employers' Confederation, the labour organization and the Work Research Institute (WRI) who approved the overall aims of the cooperation project, and it was the researchers who, with support from foreign colleagues, defined the theoretical basis and overall hypothesis and designed the research process. In this way, a discrepancy arises between the introduction of partially self-managing work groups, democracy and cooperation on the one hand, and the way the action research process proceeds as a democratic project enforced from above on the other. We understand this as a democratic paradox.

### *Participation as engagement in democratic dialogues*

Democratic dialogue proponents are critical of the NIDP's approach. They understand participation to mean employees and managers taking part in democratic dialogues. We see this, as mentioned, as a participatory step forward, because it creates opportunities for employees and local managers to have greater influence. Yet democratic dialogues run into a participatory paradox, albeit from a different position than the NIDP. It is the researchers who

apparently have the power of definition enabling them to define the limits of what is to be included in the dialogues. For example, they exclude backstage communication and personal, emotional reactions. It is also the researchers who formulate the discursive guidelines governing what is discussed in democratic dialogues, and how. The researchers want open dialogues based on everybody's work experience while yet apparently defining in advance how the dialogues are to take place and what is to be excluded from them.

As far as we can see, the participatory paradox moves from structure in the NIDP to process in democratic dialogues. Instead of a particular structure based on self-managing groups, a particular process based on democratic dialogues, defined by the researchers, is used. Both seem to be instances of participation as the exercising of power, without it being stated explicitly.

### ***Participation as co-generation of knowledge***

Pragmatic action researchers understand participation as the co-generation of practical and theoretical knowledge. Pragmatic action researchers emphasize conflict, differences and dissensus in their study at Mondragón. Our analysis showed that these themes apparently applied only to the respondents, i.e. the rank-and-file cooperative members, not to the research group, who, linguistically, were described as a united 'we'. This raises questions as to how we, as readers, are to understand the prefix 'co-' in co-generative pragmatic action research. Does 'co-' signify equality and consensus, or differences and dissensus, or both?

### ***Different conceptions of action researchers' ways of self-positioning***

Participation does not generally include workers and managers taking part in the theoretical dimension of the action research process. It is based on a division of labour between partners and researchers, on a distinction between the practical dimension, i.e. the actions of others, and the researchers' theoretical dimension. Within the individual approaches and between them, changes take place in the ways the researchers take part in the projects and the ways they position themselves. The exception is that the personnel managers at Mondragón do take part in the research team.

### ***Action researchers as professional experts***

Shortly before his death, Lewin speaks in favour of a greater degree of cooperation between professional practitioners and researchers in the research process.

The STS researchers understand the action researcher as a professional researcher who, in the beginning, engages in a close collaboration with the workers and carries out research into their organization. In their later research, the STS researchers not only analyse the miners' organization, but also begin to design work processes for self-managing groups. This tendency becomes pronounced in the NIDP projects.

### ***From professional experts to sparring partners***

In the first NIDP projects, the researchers act as professional experts who analyse and design the work process for the self-managing groups. The analysis of their field experiments shows that their understanding of action research as applied research often causes problems in the interaction between researchers and workers. The researchers are met with scepticism, partly because they comment on local conditions that the workers feel they have no experience of. They therefore have problems with the workers' support for the local experiments and with presenting themselves as expert authorities, because they position themselves as uppers in a hierarchical relationship to the workers for which the latter feel there is no basis.

During the process, the NIDP exponents change their methods and their conception of the researcher role. They move from acting as outside experts analysing and designing the work process to acting as consultants and sparring partners. We understand this shift as an attempt to change the relationships in a more equal direction that opens the door for the engagement of local knowledge.

### ***Action researchers as facilitators***

Democratic dialogue advocates are critical of the NIDP's conception of the action researcher as an outside specialist who designs work processes for self-managing groups. They understand the action researcher as a facilitator of democratic dialogues: he/she organizes the process but does not offer substantive views, e.g. on workplace self-management. They also explicitly decline to research into the process, despite their focus on communicative processes. At the same time, the participatory paradox indicates that it is the researchers

who define what work experience will be included in the democratic dialogues and which discursive guidelines these conversations are to follow. The democratic dialogue researchers thus appear not only to act as facilitators, but also to define the framework of the dialogues.

### ***Action researchers as ‘friendly outsiders’***

Pragmatic action research has an understanding of the action researcher that differs from that of Harwood, STS, the NIDP and democratic dialogues. It differs from Harwood in not testing predetermined theories and methods. It differs from STS and the NIDP in not understanding the action researcher as a professional expert who carries out research into, for or on others. As a consequence of its combination of action, research and participation, this approach understands the action researcher as a ‘friendly outsider’ who, together with local partners, co-generates knowledge in the action research process. It differs from democratic dialogues in not merely facilitating processes but also offering substantive views and knowledge. For this reason, we do not understand how Greenwood (2014) can maintain that democratic dialogue can be a part of pragmatic action research. Pragmatic action research is the only approach that articulates dilemmas, paradoxes and power in connection with participation.

### ***Different understandings of action research***

In this section, we summarize three different philosophy of science-based conceptions of action research: as applied research, accompanying research and co-generation of knowledge.

#### ***Action research as applied research***

Harwood, the NIDP and democratic dialogues can be seen as different variants of applied research:

At Harwood, the researchers carry out experiments in the organization to test predetermined hypotheses about participatory and democratic management and partially self-managing groups. The workers are involved in the practical dimension, where they have influence over means and methods that may raise production efficiency and improve their working conditions. Participation in the research process does not occur. This makes the Harwood experiments an example of applied research in which action research can be seen as a combination of action and research with a limited form of participation.

More generally, the researchers move the experiments from the laboratory to organizations and do applied social science on a natural science foundation.

In the NIDP, there is a particular division of labour between researchers and partners. It is the researchers who, in the beginning, introduce a British theory of partially self-managing groups; this is applied in experiments in several industries in Norway. It is also they who want to test some predetermined hypotheses about a correlation between influence, positivity and democracy, and about certain psychological job requirements. This makes the NIDP an example of action research as applied research. Management and workers are involved along the way in the organization of the practical dimension of the research process, but they have no influence on the choice or development of theory or method in the theoretical dimension of the research process. The NIDP thus comes to represent an organizational development project characterized by applied research with continual design development.

Democratic dialogues consist of arenas in which the employees themselves will contribute to defining problems, objectives and actions in the development of their organization. Democratic dialogues therefore adopt, not a structural perspective as the NIDP does, but a processual one. Democratic dialogues focus primarily on phronesis, i.e. on practical, organizational knowledge—and to a lesser degree on episteme, i.e. theoretical, scientific knowledge. In line with their focus on phronesis, democratic dialogue researchers understand action research as a form of clinical practice. From a philosophy of science point of view, as mentioned in Chapter 6, we are most inclined to interpret democratic dialogues as applied philosophy of language.

### ***Action research as accompanying research***

The STS researchers understand their work in the British coal mines as action research. Our analysis of the examples from the earlier and later studies shows that they are an instance of accompanying research. The researchers investigate the miners' use in industrialized mines of their experience of self-managing groups in non-industrialized mines. At the start, the research is based on a close collaboration with the miners. The two researchers, Bamforth and Trist, discover by accident that the miners and local management have, by themselves, gone ahead and combined their experience of self-managing groups in non-mechanized mines with their work in the mechanized mines. This indicates that the engagement of local everyday knowledge can act innovatively. In the later studies, there is a clearer division of labour between the miners and



the outside researchers, who, among other things, carry out more protracted observational studies. There is no question of participation in the research process. We therefore understand the STS studies in the British coal mines as a combination of the miners' organizations and research into them, i.e. as collaborative accompanying research carried on to varying extents in collaboration with the miners and their management. We have had difficulty finding arguments for characterizing the STS research as action research unless action is understood as investigation of others' actions.

### *Action research as co-generation of knowledge in processes*

Pragmatic action research in Mondragón differs from the other approaches. It differs from Harwood, NIDP and STS in understanding action research as a combination of action, research and participation, not merely as different versions of action and research. It differs from democratic dialogues in researching into the process and in co-generating, with a local research team, knowledge of that process.

## **3. Action researchers' exercising of power as silent discourse**

Several of the five approaches talk about power. They do this especially in relation to society, organization or partners with different agendas.

Lewin does so theoretically when he speaks of gatekeepers, but there is no mention of the researchers' exercising of power in the Harwood project.

The STS researchers describe how power plays a part in the establishment of the new Tavistock Institute, and how it manifests itself as conflicting agendas in the collaboration with the coal industry. The STS advocates do not describe as the exercising of power their use of psychoanalytic theory or their interpretation of the miners' reactions as resistance.

The NIDP provides examples of the socio-psychological understanding of asymmetric relationships between workers and researchers. The researchers also mention discrepancies between democratic self-managing groups and a bureaucratic administration, but they describe their projects throughout as democratic.

We have not found any examples of the concept of power entering into researchers' self-understanding in the practical or theoretical dimension of democratic dialogues. The researchers generally emphasize equality in respect

of everybody's work experience, and they do not present documentation showing whether, or how, power might play out in democratic dialogues.

Pragmatic action research explicitly brings power into its study of participation in the cooperatives. However, this does not include reflections on the way the research team exercises power in the form of interpretations that reject the respondents' self-understanding.

Along the way, we have provided many examples of the researchers choosing and defining theory, content, design, guidelines of conversation and methods. We have found no corresponding examples of them reflecting critically on their own participation as the exercising of power or as the power of definition. We have therefore come to the view that power is a silent, unarticulated discourse in the history of organizational action research in the twentieth century. It is as if the exercise of power by the researchers is an elephant in the room that we assume everybody can see but is apparently not mentioned. Several times, therefore, we have chosen to carry out communication analyses of the part played by powerful elephants in the written texts.

Our analyses of the examples also indicate that, when the researchers do not question their use of predetermined theories and methods, this can play a part in bringing about a particular positioning of researchers and employees in their mutual collaborative relationships. The researchers begin to act as interpreters of the others' reactions (STS), as socio-technical experts who analyse and design employees' work situations (NIDP), as process consultants who present predetermined guidelines for a particular development organization (democratic dialogues) or as pragmatic researchers who do not include the researchers' use of the power of definition in their analyses (pragmatic action research).

This can mean that unequal or asymmetric relations are formed between researchers, employees and their immediate managers, with the researchers positioning themselves as uppers with the power of interpretation or definition. We understand this as a participatory paradox, because, at the same time, the projects have democracy as an espoused value.

Across time and across different historical and organizational contexts, researchers' use of the power of definition seems to play a part in arousing scepticism and a lack of trust among the workers. At the Durham mines in Britain, the miners react with anger. At Hunsfos in Norway, the workers wonder how researchers with no local knowledge of their work can set themselves up as expert authorities. At the AST factory in Sweden, the employees feel that they

are heard by the management and by the researchers, but they are not asked whether they want co-determination.

It has struck us that documentation of processes between researchers and employees is as good as absent from the history of organizational action research in the twentieth century. We would like to have had access to transcripts, minutes and tape recordings of meetings, because these could presumably have nuanced our conclusions.

In comparison with modern times, the development of participatory action research in Scandinavia, in Britain and internationally was sparse. Not until the 1990s did participatory action research come onto the agenda. In that context, then, it is not surprising that twentieth-century organizational action research did not explicitly address issues around the practical and theoretical understanding of participation to a greater extent than it did. At the same time, it strikes us that the challenges, dilemmas and paradoxes that organizational action researchers must address today are not new. They are present, more or less implicitly, in all the approaches from the latter half of the twentieth century that we have described.

#### **4. Participation in the future?**

The next section of the conclusion is intended as a series of points for consideration for anyone wishing to practise participation in change processes.

On the one hand, the conclusion is not meant to be a how-to-do manual. Organizational action research processes are too complex for that, as the book has shown. This is the case, in our view, for most change processes that are more than simple implementations. Carrying out change or development processes means having to accept that something unforeseen may happen.

On the other hand, we have implemented processes with employees and managers where, in some cases, we have paid insufficient attention to the conditions. A company in crisis such as Danfoss Solar Inverters (Chapter 1) is perhaps not the smartest place in which to attempt to carry out development and change processes. Such a company is probably more preoccupied with day-to-day business and with survival.

The following points for consideration are therefore designed to—hopefully—reduce the likelihood of others making the mistakes that we have already made once. Unfortunately, it goes without saying that they are not sufficient to guarantee success.

## ***Change or development is the exercising of power***

The key point for consideration is that organizational action research and change processes are a question of power or the exercising of power. This also applies to the exercising of power by the action researcher.

Power can be identified as the enactment of a demarcation—that is, of a de-finition. It is a drawing of boundaries between the topics, persons, organizations and institutions that are included and those that are excluded from the change process. The exercise of power is in itself a process. The boundary is therefore mutable, not set once and for all.

‘Inclusion’ means the same as ‘participation’. The key point for consideration, therefore, is: ‘how do you practise participation?’. This question can be put to organizational action researchers, managers or change agents. The challenges vary according to whether one is contributing to a change process as a manager, an internal or external change agent or an organizational action researcher. The following four aspects of participation are all relevant to the action researcher, while a manager or change agent is likely to be mainly concerned with the first two.

### ***Four aspects of participation***

There are at least four aspects or dimensions to participation: who/what, to what extent, which approach and what theoretical basis.

#### 1. Who/what is included, and who/what is not?

The first aspect is whom it is relevant to include, and in what. Who are the stakeholders, i.e. how is the system demarcated? Who are the (non-)participants in the dialogue? What are (not) the topics of the dialogue? And who determines these boundaries?

Bateson (1972) sees the punctuation, and hence demarcation, of a system as contingent. We agree that it is at least not natural. We see it as a question of power. The management team at Danfoss Solar Inverters (Chapter 1), for example, did not want to include the employees in the project board. We saw this demarcation as too narrow. In the beginning, we believed that we, together with one particular team and the management, could change the meeting culture. This demarcation proved to be too narrow. It became necessary to include the whole organization. The management had wanted the Product Support team to change a number of conditions internal to the team. The team saw this

as too narrow. For them, improving their relationship with the development department was key. Setting the boundary between those/that to be included and those/that to be excluded is an ongoing question of power.

In another action research project at a health and social care college, we had thought that the system of relevant stakeholders could be demarcated to consist of the teaching teams and college management, plus the placement supervisors at the institutions. After a year, we realized that this demarcation was too narrow. The students were employees of the municipality who rejected the result of our collaboration. A year's work was as good as wasted (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2014b).

The system of relevant stakeholders can change. It can seldom be set once and for all, e.g. at process start-up. It is therefore a case of keeping one's eyes peeled.

## 2. To what extent does who participate in what?

The second aspect has to do with how deep the participation goes.

In the practical dimension of organizational action research, a typical question is whether employee participation means co-influence or co-determination. Are employees to be able to make proposals, or will they also contribute to decision making? Is dialogue about putting forward recommendations and/or taking decisions? And who determines that?

This drawing of boundaries is typically an underlying power agenda in works committees. Can management present its unfinished ideas and let the employee representatives comment on them, and perhaps participate outright in decision making? Or does management present only finished motions for consultation?

In the theoretical dimension, the question is typically how the action researchers use their power to position managers and employees on the spectrum between doing research *on* them and *with* them. Then there is the question of whether managers and employees have the time, inclination and competence to participate as respondents or co-researchers. A generally increasing focus on business operations seems to facilitate a division of labour in which the action researchers alone take care of the theoretical dimension. On the other hand, there seems to be a growing tendency for managers and employees to do action research in their own organization (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005).

3. On the basis of which approaches is who included in what?

The third aspect concerns the approach. Here, there are a number of points for consideration. We have chosen to concentrate on these three dilemmas: is the approach one of empowerment (i.e. involvement that is primarily about efficiency improvement) and/or participation? Emergent and/or strategic? Consensus and/or dissensus?

4. What is the theoretical basis of participation?

The fourth aspect concerns the understanding of action research. How is theory involved?

Is theory involved in the change process as something predetermined, something that is not up for dialogue? This could mean that action research will be understood as applied research, or that it will be practised as research-based consultancy. Is theory not involved, but used to observe change processes that have been set in motion, i.e. is this accompanying research? Or is theory involved in a dialogue with practice, so that it results in a development of both, where the theory becomes practice-based and the practice becomes theory-based?

We will expand on these four aspects of participation below.

***Aspect 1: Who/what is included, and who/what is not?***

Participation in change processes, whether pure change processes or change processes integrated into an action research process, poses five overriding questions:

1. Who has influence over whether a change process is to be initiated?
2. Who has influence over what its objective(s) will be?
3. Who has influence over how it is to be designed?
4. Who has influence over how it is to be evaluated?
5. Who has influence over how it is to be communicated, i.e. who says what about the process and any results it may have, to whom, when, and how?

Who has influence over whether a change process is to be initiated?

Many organizational change processes do not yield the expected results. Older studies indicate that this is true of as many as 75% of cases (Beer & Nohria, 2000). Perhaps this might be a reason to consider one more time whether it is necessary to initiate yet another change. We have met many employees and

their immediate managers who have talked about change overload. They seem to be tired of endless changes that are rarely fully implemented before new ones are launched.

In the cases we have described in this book, the employees had no influence over whether change processes should be initiated. Some will say that this circumstance results from the management team having strategic responsibility. Others will point out that it could be part of the explanation for the reactions of employees and their immediate managers, interpreted by many as resistance.

We have accepted that it was management who took the decision to initiate the projects we ourselves have been involved in. This means that we do not regard these projects and other action research projects as democratic. On the other hand, it has been important to us that employees and their immediate managers had as much influence as possible over the objectives. We have only wanted to take part in action research projects where employees and their managers both wanted and were able to gain more influence, and preferably co-determination.

A central dilemma in this connection concerns the relationship between economic objectives in the form of efficiency improvement, and humanization objectives in the form of better quality of working life, e.g. the desired level of influence—something we have discussed in several places in the book.

Who has influence over what the objective(s) of the change process will be?

Employees and their immediate managers generally did not contribute directly to determining the objectives of the action research processes in the projects we have described in the book. This applies to the practical objectives, i.e. the changes the organization wanted to implement. These objectives were defined by management and/or by the leadership of the employers' association and trade union. This was often done in collaboration with the researchers. One exception is Team Product Support at Danfoss Solar Inverters (Chapter 1), who contributed to deciding that improved collaboration with the development department should be an objective, besides those already set by management. In other action research projects, we have known the management to make a decision that a change process would be initiated, but that the objectives would be defined by the individual teams and team leaders alone (Dalgaard, Johannsen, Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2014).

In the projects described in Part II, the theoretical objectives seem to have been defined solely by the researchers. These are the objectives often described as the research questions. Only in the co-generative project at Mondragón (Chapter 7) do (mainly) personnel managers act as co-researchers.

Does it otherwise make sense to speak of employees and managers as co-researchers? In our view, the answer depends on the relationship between the practical and theoretical objectives. In one of our action research projects, the management's practical objective was to reduce staff turnover in the software department. Our research question was about discovering what could generate new recognitions in dialogues. Together, we, the management team and the employees arrived at some special dialogical competences that could contribute to the generation of new recognitions. When the managers in the software department began to practise them, at the same time introducing a mentoring scheme, this meant that they were involving the employees' knowledge to a greater extent. This contributed to a fall in staff turnover (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005). Here, it made sense to speak of employees and managers as co-researchers, but this has generally not been the case in the approaches described in Part II.

Who has influence over how the change process is designed?

In the approaches described in Part II, employees generally did not have influence over how the change process was to be designed or organized with a view to attaining the practical objectives. The initial changes in the British coal mines are an exception to this, as they were initiated by the local management and miners. We are unsure whether the research team at Mondragón might also be an exception. The team consisted primarily of personnel managers, and the relationship between the team and the rank-and-file employees is not clear from the sources available to us.

The design of change processes entails a dilemma. On the one hand, we as action researchers have a competence in this field that managers and employees seldom have. On the other hand, employees and their immediate managers often want better opportunities for participation. It may therefore appear to be a self-contradiction if action researchers or change agents foist their design on them, especially as local partners have knowledge of work processes that action researchers seldom have. This was the case in the NIDP, for example. The dilemma seems to consist in designing the process in an equal way, making use of both parties' knowledge. We ourselves have dealt with this by putting for-



ward our design as a draft based on our experience from other organizations. However, this has rarely led to our draft being amended.

We know of no organizational action research processes with outside researchers in Part II in which employees and managers had influence over the design of the theoretical dimension of the process. They were involved with a view to adapting the project's research methods to their local conditions. This was the case, for example, with the STS research in the coal mines.

Who has influence over how the change process is to be evaluated?

In the approaches described in Part II, employees and their immediate managers generally did not have influence over the criteria by which the change process would be evaluated. It is in our view crucial that there is continuous evaluation so that the parties can amend the process together and so that it proceeds as their joint effort. In one action research project, for example, we asked a manager to evaluate, on a scale from 1 to 10, his team's progress towards the objectives set. He thought they were around an 8, meaning very good. Shortly afterwards, we asked the team's facilitator, an employee from another team, the same question. She said that the team had only got started on one of the objectives. The same day, an employee said they had made no progress at all (Dalgaard, Johannsen, Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2014).

In the approaches described in Part II, we know of no organizational action research processes in which employees and their immediate managers were involved in the validation of the results of the theoretical dimension. Moreover, it would probably only be in special cases that the desire, time and competence would be in place. Then again, action research in the researchers' own organization could suggest the opposite.

Who has influence over how the results of the change process are to be communicated?

In the approaches described in Part II, employees and their immediate managers are generally not involved in telling the story of the change processes. An exception to this is the book about the Mondragón process (Chapter 7) written jointly by the research team—the outside action researcher and a number of personnel managers (Greenwood et al., 1992).

In other cases, we have written an article on the practical results of the action research process with an employee (Clemmensen, Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2009), produced a book and a video about the practical results to-

gether with the employees (Bloch-Poulsen et al., 2013) and written an article on the practical and theoretical results with an employee and a manager (Dalgaard, Johannsen, Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2014). We have also given a conference presentation, together with a manager and an employee, on the challenges and results of a process. This provided new perspectives on the process, which we thought we had understood. In a way, it was a confirmation of Weick's (1995) idea that sensemaking goes backwards. Not until afterwards did we understand what we were about. We also learnt that truth is multi-faceted, because it is dependent on, among other things, the organizational positioning in the action research project. As the credo of the Wellcome Library in London had it, the truth is 'a question with 7.5 billion answers and counting—including yours'.

***Aspect 2: To what extent does who participate in what?***

The second aspect of participation is about depth. In the practical dimension, one question is usually whether employees and their immediate managers contribute to setting objectives, or only means. The other is whether participation means voice or choice, co-influence or co-determination, also known as deliberative democracy in its weak or strong variant.

Under the first aspect, we wrote that employees and their managers were only seldom involved in defining the objectives of a process. In the approaches described, they normally had voice when it came to the means of implementing management's objectives. They could recommend and make proposals. It does not seem to have been common for them to be able to decide for themselves.

We believe that there is a crucial challenge here for organizational action researchers in future. It is our experience that the rising level of education is leading to demands for participation over and above the ability to make proposals on the most appropriate way of implementing objectives set by a senior management team. More and more employees and their immediate managers seem to be demanding to determine the means for themselves and also to have co-determination on the objectives.

In relation to the theoretical dimension, we will put forward an outline showing how employees and their managers could be involved in organizational action research projects.<sup>18</sup> They could contribute as:

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18 There is a fuller description in Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen (2017a).

- Informants or respondents. These are concepts normally used outside action research, e.g. in positivism, phenomenology and hermeneutics (Bryman, 2008), but also within action research (McKenna & Main, 2013). They refer to a relationship between employees and managers on the one hand and the researcher on the other, in which the employees and managers produce data and information while the researchers collect, analyse and interpret it. From a power perspective, the action researchers are thus positioned as the subject with the power to define and interpret.
- Resisters. This is a psychodynamic concept. It can mean, for example, that a team moves too little on the working group level and too much on an irrational basic assumption level, where they put up resistance, for example by fighting or taking flight instead of collaborating with management (Bion, 2006). From a power perspective, the researcher seems to have the power to define and interpret what is to have the status of valid knowledge according to pre-established psychodynamic theory.
- Involvees. This means that employees and managers are involved in a project whose aim has already been decided by others, e.g. senior management, the leaders of the trade union or the employers' association, possibly together with the researchers. In this way, organizational action research can become an offer the employees and managers cannot refuse. Here, participation becomes empowerment, i.e. a tool of senior management for improving efficiency (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). White (2011) describes it as follows on the basis of projects in developing countries: 'Participation in this case is instrumental, rather than valued in itself. It functions as a means to achieve cost effectiveness ...' (p. 60).
- Practitioners. This is a much-used term in action research (Bradbury Huang, 2010). Various researchers have problematized the concept (Gunnarsson, 2007) because the relationship between researcher and practitioner hints at a hierarchy in which the production of new knowledge means that action researchers not only know something different but know better than the employees and management. From a power point of view, the relationship can become asymmetric.
- Co-operative inquirers. This means that all parties—managers, employees, researchers and other stakeholders—contribute to a joint development process in which they co-generate objectives, means and results (Heron & Reason, 2001, 2008). Inherent in the concept is a point about different forms of knowledge: the parties contribute different forms of knowledge,

such as experiential, practical, theoretical or communicative knowledge, none being preconceived as superior to any other.

- Co-learners. This is a term used in action science, among other fields (Argyris, Putnam & Smith, 1985). It means that, for employees and managers, the point is not just to solve an urgent practical problem, but to learn to cope with similar problems in future. They are involved in both the practical and the methodological dimension.
- Co-researchers. This designation implies that employees and managers play a part not only in the practical and methodological dimensions, but also in the theoretical dimension (Argyris, Putnam & Smith, 1985).
- Professionals. This is a term chosen by us to describe employees, managers and ourselves in the type of dialogic organizational action research that we engage in. We see action research as an interdisciplinary project collaboration between professionals within and without the university who contribute different forms of knowledge.
- Practitioner-researchers. This relates to action research in one's own organization; to practitioners who research into their own practice. According to Eikeland (2012), this may become a widespread type of future action research, because the knowledge society implies a growing number of employees with an academic background.

We wish to stress that these positions are not set once and for all throughout a project. They can change, e.g. according to the most suitable relationship and approach in successive project phases. They can also unfold differently according to the relationships formed between partners and action researchers. For example, we have known a reciprocal trust and mutual knowledge to develop toward the conclusion of a project, enabling more complicated issues to be discussed. What is important, in our view, is to be clear as to which approach one has chosen and what one is about. In one project, we thought we had involved employees and managers as co-learners. Their feedback showed that we had involved them as respondents, and we alone had arrogated to ourselves an interpretation monopoly (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2004).

There is a tendency in Part II to involve employees and managers as respondents. On the basis of their responses, the action researchers then design various types of intervention. This points to a challenge for outside organizational action researchers today:

In Scandinavia, there is a trend towards action research in one's own organization becoming more widespread. Employees and managers are more frequently carrying out integrated change and research projects. Their practitioner research can be seen as a form of organizational learning in which they continually seek to generate practical improvements and a theoretical understanding of what can promote or inhibit change processes. This could suggest that action research involving employees and immediate managers only as respondents is becoming a thing of the past. That type of action research does not seem to meet a growing desire and demand for participation. However, the growing prevalence of management thinking in European and American organizations might also lead to the recrudescence of an experimental and laboratory-driven approach to action research similar to that practised at Harwood.

***Aspect 3: On the basis of which approaches is who included in what?***

The third aspect concerns the understanding of some key dilemmas in the action research process. Here, we have chosen three points for consideration. Is the process about generating empowerment and/or participation? Do we go about it emergently and/or strategically? Does the change process rely on a consensus and/or dissensus approach?

Empowerment and/or participation?

In much of the literature, the relationship between empowerment and participation is portrayed in either/or terms. Nielsen (2004) distinguishes between involvement and participation; Greenwood & Levin (1998), between empowerment and participation; Fricke (2013), between instrumental and democratic participation. Involvement, empowerment and instrumental participation become management tools aiming for an improved economic position. As such, organizational action research becomes a kind of organizational development, as was the case with Harwood, STS and the NIDP. Participation and democratic participation, in contrast, refer to a democratic endeavour, e.g. in the form of increased co-determination for the employees.

As we see it, this is not a matter of either/or, but of both/and. Our experience is that all organizational change projects, whether they are action research projects or not, serve an economic purpose. This is perhaps not so surprising when one considers that we live in capitalist societies. It is therefore more a matter of paying attention to whether one's action research projects become, in practice, merely involvement, empowerment or instrumental par-

ticipation. We also see increased co-determination as a means to an improved economic position. Increased co-determination is also a management tool. However, we think it is crucial to maintain that co-determination has an independent value having to do with human dignity, i.e. with having influence over one's own (working) life, in interaction with others, to the extent one wishes. It is therefore important constantly to question the existing exercising of power, i.e. the drawing of the boundary between what/who is in and what/who is out. Thus it was a problem when we did not insist that the employees had to be on the project board at Danfoss Solar Inverters (Chapter 1). It pointed in the direction of instrumental participation.

Emergence and/or strategic planning?

Organizations have traditionally been conceived of as machines (Morgan, 1998). This implies that change can be planned. A final objective and sub-objectives can be set for change processes. 'Milestones' have fully entered Danish organizational development jargon. Organizational development can be planned like other organizational strategies.

Over many years, a realization has spread that it is hardly quite so linear in practice (Freire & Horton, 1990; Stacey, 2001, 2007; Weick, 1979, 1993, 1995). Freire and Horton's book is entitled *We Make the Road by Walking*. The title expresses the emergence perspective according to which one cannot plan, but must shoot, then aim, then shoot again, as Weick has it.

Here too, we argue for a both/and perspective. Like Lewin, we think that one can plan the first phase together with the relevant parties. After that, it is a question of continuous learning in which action researchers must give up the notion of being 'in control'. Objectives and design can change. It is rarely the same managers and employees who are involved at the start of the project and at the end. Theory should ideally be refined during the process—and so on. In our experience, the thing is to be aware that we, as action researchers, are ourselves a part of the system. We cannot carry out interventions as if we are in an outside position where we can influence an organization and observe from a distance how it reacts to our interventions. Like Greenwood & Levin (1998), we think that action research means giving up your safety net: we cannot carry out interventions; we ourselves are in play and must put ourselves on the line. Ongoing first-person and second-person action research therefore becomes key (Torbert, 2001; Marshall & Mead, 2005). It is therefore a matter of being

constantly aware of the emergence/planning dilemma and of how we position ourselves and others on this spectrum.

#### Consensus and/or dissensus

The third dilemma is about whether, as an action researcher, one takes a consensus perspective or a dissensus perspective. If one adopts a consensus perspective, one essentially understands the production of new practical and theoretical knowledge as a joint development process in which the parties—employees, managers, action researchers and other stakeholders—have, if not identical, then at least coincident interests. If one adopts a dissensus perspective, one understands action research's knowledge production as a process marked by differing interests and competences, by discrepancies, dilemmas and paradoxes. Here, there is an idea that differing knowledge and competences can contribute to the solution of complex problems and generate more sustainable results. As an action researcher, does one look for similarities and/or differences? The two different conceptions can be practised variously in the course of a project, so that one might move from a dissensus to a consensus perspective, or vice versa. Often, it cannot be planned, but occurs emergently in the course of a learning process, which might show that what you thought was shared, wasn't. Or, conversely, that there was more opportunity to generate shared results than you were expecting.

The majority of the projects we have analysed in the book seem in practice to be marked by a consensus approach. In the researchers' self-understanding, there is no questioning of participatory management in Harwood, USA; of self-managing groups in the British coal mines or in the Norwegian industrial democracy experiments; of the Habermas-inspired approach in democratic dialogues in Norway and Sweden; of the joint team presented as a 'we' in the pragmatic action research in the cooperatives in northern Spain. We have a notion that such an approach may rest on the particular general, i.e. that somebody's special interests—here, typically those of senior management and the researchers—attain the status of general interests, i.e. common interests on which there must be consensus, including among managers and employees.

On the other hand, we do not see a dissensus approach, which we ourselves seek to practise, as an immediate solution to this problematics. This is a dilemma. For example, we still cannot know whether there really was agreement on the goals formulated by the Product Support team at Danfoss Solar Inverters, or whether they were more an expression of the informal leader's special in-

terests. A dissensus approach can make it legitimate for people to present their disagreements, as we saw in connection with the team's relationship with the development department. One can develop a form of dissensus organizing in which, say, one sub-group has to find advantages to a given proposal, and another has to find problems with it. This approach can make criticism legitimate. One can also train a dissensus sensibility, i.e. the ability to listen for differences and unspoken voices (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2013). But we can never be sure that employees and managers will find it possible to use that opportunity in the culture of the organization in question. This is a dilemma that we as action researchers can seek to manage by means of the greatest possible transparency, in which exclusions are continually put into words—if this is possible in the organization concerned. In one action research project, for example, we found that we were excluded because an executive had introduced an alternative meeting arrangement—meetings that we had not been invited to. We were phoned up by his director, who suggested we contact the executive. We did so, and invited him to a meeting of the project steering group. Here, the various interests and power plays between him and us were made transparent, but the collaboration with him and his team ceased.

***Aspect 4: What is the theoretical basis of participation?***

The fourth aspect of participation relates to the understanding of action research that comes out in the processes. Is the scientific basis included in and developed through the action research process? In the Introduction, we presented six different conceptions of participation:

1. That the researchers move their laboratories out into the field, i.e. into the organizations, and apply predetermined theories and methods in the experiments they conduct with their new partners.
2. That employees and managers bring about changes that the researchers follow and seek to understand.
3. That the researchers act as experts, advising employees and managers how to organize their work.
4. That the researchers act as facilitators for a number of organizational processes that managers and employees choose to initiate in their organizations.



5. That managers, employees and researchers co-produce/co-generate a number of practical and theoretical results on the basis of their different knowledge and interests.
6. Then there is our own conception, which is that managers, employees and researchers have coincident and divergent interests. They are professionals within different fields. From a dissensus approach, they investigate the possibilities of establishing consensus on practical, methodological and theoretical results.

These six understandings imply different conceptions of action research. The first and third cases seem to refer to applied research, in which theory and method are involved in the change process as something predetermined but not up for dialogue.

The second case seems to refer to accompanying research, in which theory is not brought into play but is used to observe the change processes that have been set in motion. This conception raises a key question, one that we have discussed: is action research about studying change and/or about generating it?

The fourth case might indicate an understanding of action research as consultancy or research-based facilitation. Here too, theory seems to be outside dialogue. It is not made the object of problematization and development.

The fifth and sixth cases apparently regard action research as a collaboration between people with different competences, potentially leading to the development, not only of practice, but also of theory and perhaps of the scientific foundation as well.

In the first section of the conclusion in this chapter, we related these understandings to the approaches described in Part II. We argued that Harwood, the NIDP and democratic dialogues could be seen as different versions of applied research; STS as accompanying research; and pragmatic action research as co-generation of knowledge.

## **5. A child of the Enlightenment?**

We now come to one of the sore points of organizational action research, namely action researchers' positioning and their exercising of power. We think there is in practice a tendency for action researchers to position themselves as uppers in relation to others on an uncontested scientific basis—as expert, helper or facilitator.

We would like to see action researchers putting themselves into play to a greater extent. It is as if participation and the dialogue in which it takes place exclude action researchers' positioning as superior. This topic is most often kept out of the dialogue. Action researchers rarely talk about it in Part II in relation to their own practice. Dialogues are used to generate another organizational practice. They attempt to attain the organization's practical objectives. They may also be used to develop the method applied. But they are too rarely used to question action researchers' own scientific foundation. There seems to be a tendency for dialogues to be about single-loop learning, i.e. about developing the best practical and methodological answers (Bateson, 1972). However, they rarely question the foundation the toolbox itself rests on. McNiff & Whitehead (2006) portray action research as a method on a par with questionnaire surveys, qualitative interviews, document analysis etc. We do not think any of the action researchers whose projects we have written about in this book would endorse that. Our interpretation is that they—like us—conceive of action research as something more, as an ethical-political-scientific endeavour to make the world a better place. Trist & Murray (1990b), for example, entitled their STS anthology *The Social Engagement of Social Research*. Nonetheless, we feel that double-loop learning is practised too seldom in the approaches described in Part II. The relationship between action researchers and others rarely seems to be problematized in practice.

We understand dialogue as a method that constantly makes itself the object of dialogue (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 1997). Dialogue is integrated single-loop and double-loop learning. It inquires into the possibilities for giving practical, methodological and theoretical answers, and it questions its own foundation. We welcomed the self-critical portrait given by Thorsrud & Emery (1970a) of their work in the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project (Chapter 5)—a critique that in practice questioned the action researcher as helper. Similarly, Levin (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, pp. 120–130) adopts a critical stance toward the so-called BUNT programme in the 1980s and 1990s, which we have not discussed in this book. We would like to have seen more of this kind of example, where double-loop learning is practised.

It is therefore our perception that organizational action research hitherto has to a great extent been a child of the Enlightenment, for better or worse. For better in the sense that it has wanted a better world based on reason. For worse in the sense that it does not ask questions about its own reason. It does not problematize whether reason actually does represent the best in relation

to Nature, society and the Other. If reason knows best, how then can it be that it has constantly manifested itself as a hierarchy in which theoretical knowledge has been superior to others—without in practice problematizing its own superiority? How can it be that action researchers' critique of their own scientific foundation—and their consequently uncontested helper role—is so thin on the ground? Organizational action research has hitherto been about assistance. A researcher has had to help an organization because the organization has apparently not been good enough to help itself, i.e. it has not been capable of practising organizational learning, or 'internal social research' as it was called in the Mondragón case (Chapter 7), for itself. Perhaps the time has come for this help to be extended to include action researchers? How can it be that action researchers apparently believe they can help themselves when the organization cannot? Why should their reason be able to see itself from outside? Perhaps an appropriate challenge in future would be to involve action researchers and their scientific foundation more directly in the action research process, so that the exercising of power by action researchers will be made the object of dialogue?

There are no doubt many possibilities here. Perhaps action researchers could get help from the organization if they ask its help as it asks for theirs? In that case, organizational action research could become a kind of help to self-help. Or perhaps one could reconsider the Tavistock Institute's requirement for its action researchers to attend psychoanalysis, i.e. get help elsewhere such as in supervision or therapy, acknowledging that it is impossible to see one's own blind spots? We ourselves would not have liked to practise action research without long-term training in therapy and supervision. As has become apparent, however, this has not eliminated all blind spots.

Or perhaps there are other ways? Here, it occurs to us that a key challenge for future organizational action researchers is to contribute to the creation of processes in which questions can be asked, on an equal footing, of the organization's practice and the action researcher's method, theory and scientific-ethical-political foundation. In which both parties can develop, learn from each other and help each other to become wiser about practice and theory. In which theory is not just to be used on practice so that practice is subordinate to theory. In which the foundation becomes the object of dialogue between the parties. This, we suggest, could improve both practice and theory.

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# Index

- Bamforth, Ken, 118, 119, 120  
Bavelas, Alex, 87, 89  
Bystander, 44-45  
Chambers, Robert, 18, 35  
Change-oriented social science, 28,  
chapter 3  
Coch, Lester, 88, 89  
Co-creation, 13, 17, 22, 213  
Co-determination, 23, 71, 81, 98, 195,  
210  
Co-generation, 17, 278, 284, 288  
- Co-generative research, 29,  
chapter 7  
Co-influence, 17, 81, 94, 98, 194-195,  
209, 231, 292, 297  
Collaborative study, 123-125, 126  
Communication theory, 171, 200,  
214, 215, 222, 233  
Communication patterns, 43, 46-47  
Comparative study, 130-132  
Consensus, 23, 30, 226, 302-303  
Co-production, 13, 17, 22, 27, 239  
Co-research/-er, 14, 20, 21, 241, 295,  
299  
Cornwall, Andrea, 17, 18, 24, 90  
Democracy  
- Deliberative democracy in the  
weak sense, 195, 209-212, 231,  
232  
- Deliberative democracy in the  
strong sense, 195, 209-212,  
231, 232  
- Democratic dialogues, 29, chap-  
ter 6, 287  
- Democratic paradox, 154, 156,  
174-182, 184, 186-187  
Dialogue, 212-213, 305  
- Dialogue conferences, 29,  
chapter 6  
- Theories of dialogue, 214, 232,  
236  
Different interests, 23, chapter 1, 61,  
111  
Dissensus, 23, 248, 276, 284, 303-304  
- Dissensus approach, 60-61,  
302-303, 304  
Documentation, 26-27, 168, 186, 189,  
200, 216, 233, 242, 268, 290  
Eikeland, Olav, 189, 214, 299  
Emery, Fred, 24, 69, 70, 127, 161, 305  
Engelstad, Per, H., 189-190, 192, 195,  
204-205  
Emergence, 23, 41, 58, 91, 239, 247,  
301-302  
Empathetic-critical approach, 25-26,  
234, 278  
Employee participation, 28, 65-66,  
68, 292  
- as individualized involvement,  
66, 70-79  
- as trade union-based involve-  
ment, 66, 69-70  
- as autonomy, 67, 80  
Fals-Borda, Orlando, 13  
Foucault, Michel, 24, 35  
Freire, Paulo, 24, 107, 143, 163  
French, John, R.P., 87, 89, 91, 92, 94-  
95  
Fricke, Werner, 24, 71, 85, 300  
Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 25, 26  
Greenwood, Davydd, 24, 29, 71, 74,  
149, chapter 7  
Gustavsen, Bjørn, 29, 189, 191, 192-  
193, chapter 6  
Habermas, Jürgen, 20, 188, 218-219,  
225-226  
Harwood experiments, 28, chapter 3  
Heron, John, 24, 184, 239



- Human Resource Management, 66, 67, 68, 70
- Industrial democracy, 28, 29, 68, 69-70, 155, 160-161
- Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project (NIDP), 28-29, chapter 5
- Involvement, 13-14, 18, 65, 68, 93-94
- Knowledge interest, 20
- Levin, Morten, 29, 149, 238
- Lewin, Kurt, 19, 23-24, chapter 3
- Murray, Hugh, 113, 130
- Organizational Action Research, 18-22, 303-304
- as accompanying research, 19, 112, 129, 146-150, 287-288
  - as applied research, 19, 104-105, 108, 127-129, 150-151, 182-184, 229-231, 273-276, 286-287
  - as co-generation, 19, chapter 7, 288
  - as Organizational Development, 84, 85, 88, 96, 107, 281-282
  - as pronesis, 227-229, 230, 274, 275, 287
- Organizational Action Researcher
- as expert, 155, 164, 167, 175, 285
  - as facilitator, 206, 228-229, 233-234, 250, 285-286
  - as friendly outsider, 246-247, 273, 286
  - as a professional among others, 299, 304
  - as social engineer, 104-105, 108
- Participation, 13-15, 18-20, 22, 23, 35, 61, 84, 93-94, 98, 241-242
- as voice and/or choice, 207-208, 210, 211, 231
  - as exercising of power, 35, 40-41, 42-43, 156
  - as involvement, 282
  - as self-managing groups, 283, chapter 4 and 5
  - as engagement in democratic dialogues, 283-284, chapter 6
  - as co-generation of knowledge, 284, chapter 7
- Participatory
- Action Research, 18, 238, 239-240
  - budgeting, 17
  - challenges, 290-304
  - dilemma, 20, 248-249
  - hierarchy, 264
  - management, 28, 85, 90-92, 107
  - paradox, 166, 231, 249
  - turn, 17-18
  - tyranny, 18
- Planned change, 86, 101-103
- Power, 23, 24, 35, 98-100, 248-250, 291
- Power-free spaces, 221-223, 226
  - as silent discourse, 288-290
- Pragmatic Action Research, 29, chapter 7
- Pålshaugen, Øyvind, 189, 192, 196, 228
- Reason, Peter, 18, 149, 184
- Resistance to change, 88, 89, 92-93, 133-135, 137, 153, 269
- Self-managing group, 28, 29, 65, 70, 81, 107, chapter 4 and 5
- Socio-technical systems thinking (STS), 28, chapter 4
- Tavistock Institute, 28, 111, 113, 114-118, 135
- Tensions in organizational action research, 23 30, chapter 1, 93, 111, 129, 163
- Thorsrud, Einar, 24, 29, 69, 155
- Trist, Eric, 24, 28, 112, 113, 114, 117, 119, 130
- Whyte, William Foote, 18, 247, 252
- Work Research Institute (WRI), 29, 155-156, 189-190

# Action Research in Organizations

Who decides to initiate change processes in organizations? Who sets the goals? What does it mean for employees to participate in change processes? The book examines organizational change processes based on collaboration between employers, employees and action researchers in Europe and the U.S. in the later part of the 20th century. The authors offer important insights into participation and change in organizations for researchers and practitioners by identifying dilemmas and paradoxes, conflicting interests and exercising of power.

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