Participation and Power – Editorial

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Among and in contrast to other global trends, there seems to be a worldwide movement towards involvement and participation within multiple social and geographical areas. Participatory Rural Appraisal or Participatory Reflection and Action (PRA) have been used in such different areas as "natural resource management, social protection, poverty appraisals, agriculture, health, women's empowerment, HIV/AIDS …" (Chambers, 2012, p. 73). A central idea of Participatory Action Research (PAR) is that it is the local communities themselves who inquire into and develop their praxis in order to produce their own understanding and sustainable solutions of their day-to-day problems (Fals-Borda, 2001; Cendales, 2005). Participatory Research involves relevant stakeholders, too. It might take on many different forms as e.g. participatory budgeting in Brazil (Streck, 2006). In Action Research, participation is a defining characteristic of involving employees, users, citizens, and many other stakeholders. The concept of participation has been defined by different political, theoretical and philosophical approaches as, e.g. critical theory (Kemmis, 2008), feminist theory (Reid & Frisby, 2008), systems theory (Ison, 2008), participatory philosophy (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) etc. Within the last years, *International Journal of Action Research* has published articles on employee participation (Alasoini, 2012; Becker, 2012; Fricke, 2011; Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011), participatory health research (Unger, 2012; Thiollent & Ferraz de Toledo, 2012), participation in environmental recycling (Pinheiro, 2012); challenges of youth participation (Wattar, Fanous, & Berliner, 2012), research participation (Streck, Eggert, Sobottka, Adams, & Moretti, 2011; Weller & Malheiros da Silva, 2011), participatory evaluation (Ozanira de Silva e Silva, 2011) etc.

Across differences, a shared intention seems to be participatory learning processes in shared research projects, involving different knowledge forms heading at more empowerment, sustainability, human dignity or simply higher efficiency when participants ask for this.

Borrowing a political science distinction between minimal and maximal participation (Carpentier, 2011), in Action Research, minimal participation might refer to situations where partners participate in the Action Researchers' project (Chambers, 1995). Maximal participation might be projects where partners are co-researchers or co-determining the purpose and design of the project as well as the evaluation and communication of the results in collaboration with the researchers or where partners alone are defining the problems they choose to work with.

There are also several interpretations of participation when conceptualising the researcher as a participant. Some understand the researcher as a participant observer (Wright & Nelson, 2001). Others think researchers are working on an equal footing with their partners in projects where researchers and partners co-produce or co-generate different knowledge forms. A third version understands the researcher as participating in the practitioners' project (Chambers, 1995) or as being in the service of practitioners (Brandão, 1981).

If power is understood as whatever contributes to constraint or empowerment, then participation is a power mechanism (Foucault, 2000). In this case, different definitions of participation will point at different power mechanisms, because they will endow researchers and partners with different scopes of action. This is true at least in principle. As Action Researchers, we are often faced with a discrepancy between espoused theories and theories-in-use among partners (Argyris & Schön, 1996) as well as among Action Researchers. We might have maximal participation as our espoused theory, but a more restricted understanding as our theory-in-use (Thorkildsen, 2013; Pedersen & Olesen, 2008). Within Weick's (1995) theory of sense-making, one might even say that it is not before the following reflection-on-action process that researchers understand how participation was enacted – if we get a clear picture of it at all?

If participation means a minimal version in which partners 'only' participate in a project designed as an intervention process by the researchers, then the researchers have the power to define the true or valid results of the project. If participation means a maximal version then, usually, all parties co-determine purpose, design, evaluation, and communication. In this case, you may speak of mutual participation implying that partners as well as researchers are internal members of the process, because they cannot step outside as mainstream social science claims (Stacey, 2001). Within this perspective, Action Research becomes an emergent process, because no one can predict the participants' different interests or the tensions between them when trying to collaborate (Burns, Harvey, & Aragón, 2012; Phillips et al, 2012). Partners and researchers may have some identical goals of the process, and some different ones, as long as these are made transparent and not incommensurable. The corollary is that the ways we as action researchers understand participation in practice heavily influences the learning generated and the results produced.

Arieli, Friedman, & Agbaria (2009) argue that participation ought to be an object of dialogue between partners and researchers: How would the partners like to participate in the process? The point is to avoid the so-called participatory paradox, where the researcher imposes his/her understanding of participation upon the practitioner.

Burns, Harvey, & Aragón (2012) address a similar power challenge in their editorial of *IDS Bulletin, 42(3)*:

> "Is the aim [of Action Research] to increase efficiency or to stimulate social change? Is it to solve specific problems, challenge broader norms and assumptions, or both? One of the dilemmas that underpins many of the articles is that different stakeholders may have different answers to these questions. While facilitators may frame the action research as being about social change, it may mean different things to funders and participants (p. 2).

What does co-production of objectives mean in situations like these? Is it at all meaningful to talk about co-? Similarly, what is the raison d'etre of endeavours towards co-designing of processes and co-evaluation of results when partners and researchers often have very different forms of knowledge

and competencies? What does co-communicating results mean? Does it mean that partners draw maps of power relations, co-author articles and books, or? And what do they expect, themselves?

It is our hope that this special issue of *International Journal of Action Research* will contribute to a continued dialogue on the problem of handling the relation between power and participation so critical in Action Research. This problem is also important because there is a tendency to turn the bottom-up processes of Action Research upside down when using Action Research methods in international top-down projects financed by the UN, the World Bank etc. Are we able to avoid "participatory conformity"? Do we in this case subscribe to the demands of the systems world of efficiency, predictability, and control (Wicks & Reason, 2009), thus reducing Action Research methodology to a participatory method? Or, as Gaventa & Cornwall ask: "What happens when participatory methods are employed by powerful institutions?" (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008, p. 182).

Usually, Action Research has addressed the participation-power nexus in the following three aspects: In social transformation studies, participation has been seen as a vehicle for changing societal power relations; in organisational studies, participation has been seen as a way of problematising existing power structures; and in first and second person action research, power relations between partners and the researcher have been understood as a research question, too (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008).

The articles in this volume discuss the second and the third of the above mentioned aspects of the relation between participation and power. Are Thorkildsen's contribution *Participation, power and democracy: Exploring the tensional field between empowerment and constraint in action research* questions a pragmatic-constructivist action research assumption that broad participation and the inclusion of multiple voices facilitates a democratic innovation process? The analysed case is a pilot of the national value creation project "Creating new assets in the cultural heritage sphere" in Norway (2007-2010). The challenge is here to redefine outdated industrial areas trying to balance cultural heritage and business perspectives. In handling this challenge, Thorkildsen shows discrepancies between the official project report and some of the involved and affected voices. In this way, he problem-

atises that a participatory action research process in itself is a vehicle for democracy. He argues in favour of renewed reflections on the empowerment-constraint tensions by contrasting a pragmatic-constructivist approach with a power-knowledge perspective on action research at the same time trying to transcend this dichotomy. Thus, the article is an important contribution to this critical issue on reflective practice: do we walk the talk as Action Researchers?

Claudia Nick and Paul Fuchs-Frohnhofen's article *The power of communication - Experiences on giving up the distance of researcher and researched in a project concerning the value and appreciation of nursing* discusses what happens when you try to give up the distanced position of a traditional social researcher and involve the other in a participatory project. The project described was not designed as an Action Research project; but the authors reflect on it from an Action Research perspective. In the empirical case, the partners work in geriatric care in Germany as so-called Altenpfleger, i.e. a special function involving nursing as well as caring for elderly people. The purpose of the research was to increase appreciation of Altenpfleger work, because often, it seems to be accompanied by low self-esteem and low societal prestige. As such, this is an important field of research also due to demographic changes in Europe. The article describes two conflicts between researchers and partners, because questions of power and participation became most evident in conflicts. The first deals with project design: Who decides which methods, among others a questionnaire, they are going to use? The second deals with communication of results: Are they going to publish a traditional scientific report or a practical hands-on-report immediately useful for Altenpflegers? The article gives an honest description of the personal challenges of researchers and partners in their new and more participatory positions.

Helle Merete Nordentoft and Birgitte Ravn Olesen's article *Walking the talk? A micro-sociological approach to the co-production of knowledge and power in Action Research* highlights the complexity of co-producing knowledge in Action Research. What does "co-"mean in Action Research epistemology and methodology? Their case is an Action Research process in two psychiatric wards. The purpose is to organise psycho-educational situations

which meet the patients' needs. Theoretically, the authors use a micro-sociological (ethnomethodology and conversation analysis) and a Foucauldian perspective to inquire into how knowledge and power relations are intertwined and negotiated. In their experience, they are often faced with a tension between the inclusion of different voices in the research process and the exclusion of certain voices in interaction with practice. They show that the ways Action Researchers as facilitators orchestra the learning process heavily influence the context and knowledge produced. As such, orchestration is an enactment of power by means of which particular voices are in- and others are excluded. In particular, they focus on how different forms of researcher and practitioner knowledge are negotiated and on how local power relations influence knowledge production in the workshops of the Action Research process. Thus, they argue most convincingly in favour of renewed scientific and ethical reflections on basic paradoxes in the so-called co-production of knowledge in Action Research.

Marianne Kristiansen's article *The dynamics between organizational change processes and facilitating dissensus in context inquiring dialogues* takes its point of departure in a dialogic, organisational Action Research collaboration with the Joint Team in the Citizen Service of the Municipality of Silkeborg in Denmark, 2008-2010. The purpose of the article is twofold. It is to show how team experiences with earlier organisational change processes are present as tensions between different voices and interests in the actual action research process working on new organisational changes. Thus even at team level, the process shows a highly complex structure of power relations. The second purpose is to inquire if and eventually how it is possible to facilitate a change process with a dissensus approach in which tensions are seen as a possible driver of change. In context-inquiring dialogues, the Action Researcher enacts power as a facilitator. The article shows that temporarily it was possible to create consensus across different interests and voices in the Joint Team by questioning and changing a communicative team pattern that produced new action. However, it was not possible to bridge permanently across different interests rooted in big differences in work tasks, in lack of managerial support, in the organisational culture, and in down sizing in the public sector.

Emil Sobottka's article *Participation and recognition in social research* is a theoretically inspiring comparison between the critical theory of the Frankfurter School and the participatory research in Latin America. Particularly, it focuses on how the attitude of the researcher and the languages used in the research process might facilitate the articulating of injustice. The text deals with three aspects of this question. Firstly, how some of the founding fathers of the participatory research like e.g. Carlos Rodrigues Brandão dealt with the tension between neutrality and political commitment underlining the intimate connection between co-generating knowledge and strengthening the power of the oppressed. Similarly, how Paulo Freire understood education and research as identical and as co-generated by researchers, educators and the partners of the community or social group, as well as how Orlando Fals-Borda's Participatory Action Research was a continuous struggle to combine scholarship and popular wisdom living together in the liberation movement. Secondly, how the Frankfurter School, as well as the participatory research, underscore dialogue between researcher and partners in order to avoid the romanticising of the knowledge of the oppressed partners on one hand and the traditional knowledge transfer from the more knowledgeable researchers to the less knowledgeable, oppressed partners on the other hand. In this context, the concepts of alienation and distorted knowledge are addressed comparing Horkheimer and Fals-Borda. Thirdly, how central concepts like recognition and citizenship are understood within participatory research and the Frankfurter School focusing on newer tendencies as formulated by Honneth.

Although there is no specific empirical case in Emil Sobottka's contribution, all the articles in this special issue contribute to clarifying the question of how facilitating action research processes can be recognised as enactment of power in complex power relations.

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