Participatory hierarchies:
A challenge in organisational
Action Research

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This article focuses on employee participation in organisational action research (OAR), presenting three examples of OAR in one private and two public organisations in Denmark, respectively. Each of these examples shows how participatory hierarchies between employees and between them and action researchers are constructed in OAR projects, leading in these cases to the exclusion of silent pedagogues, elderly foremen, and a critical employee.

Based on these examples, the article has three mutually connected purposes, an empirical, theoretical, and methodological purpose. First, the empirical purpose is to show that a participatory approach can unintentionally create new hierarchies or reinforce existing ones, thus leading to the exclusion of certain employees (or action researchers) in terms of voice and/or choice.

Second, the theoretical purpose is to show how participation in OAR projects can be understood as a contextualising mechanism. That is, partners and action researchers produce new project contexts by their ways of speaking, acting, and organisng. These new contexts are always already embedded in several simultaneous, organisational and societal contexts. This means that participation in OAR projects works in the interface between communication and organisation.

Third, the methodological purpose is to show that handling of these participatory hierarchies ought to become a goal in OAR projects to be included along with producing practical and theoretical results. The article argues that this might contribute to handling participatory hierarchies and power relations in more transparent ways in OAR projects if partners and action researchers decide to do so.

Key words: organisational action research, participation, hierarchy, power, context, communication

Jerarquías participativas:
Un desafío en la investigación acción organizacional

Este artículo se centra en la participación de los empleados en la Investigación Acción Organizacional (OAR – Organisational Action Research), presentando tres ejemplos de OAR en una organización privada y dos organizaciones públicas en Dinamarca, respectivamente. Cada uno de estos ejemplos muestra como las jerarquías participativas entre empleados y entre éstos y los investigadores de acción están construidas en proyectos OAR, llevando en estos casos a la exclusión de pedagogos silenciosos, un capataz de edad avanzada y un empleado crítico.

Con base en estos ejemplos, el artículo tiene tres propósitos mutuamente conectados, un propósito empírico, teórico y metodológico. Primero, el propósito empírico es mostrar que un enfoque participativo puede crear involuntariamente nuevas jerarquías o reforzar las ya existentes, lo que conduce a la exclusión de ciertos empleados (o investigadores de acción) en términos de voz y/o de elección.

Segundo, el propósito teórico es mostrar como la participación en los proyectos OAR puede ser entendida como un mecanismo de contextualización. Es decir, socios e investigadores de acción producen nuevos contextos de proyectos por su forma de hablar, actuar y organizar. Estos nuevos contextos siempre están incorporados en varios contextos simultáneos, organizacionales y sociales. Esto significa que la participación en los proyectos OAR trabaja en la interfaz entre la comunicación y organización.

Tercero, el propósito metodológico es mostrar que el manejo de estas jerarquías de participación debe convertirse en un objetivo en los proyectos OAR, que se incluirán junto con la producción de resultados prácticos y teóricos. El artículo sostiene que esto podría contribuir al manejo de las jerarquías de participación y las relaciones de poder en formas más transparentes en proyectos OAR, si los socios y los investigadores de acción deciden hacerlo.

Palabras clave: investigación acción organizacional, participación, jerarquía, poder, contexto, comunicación

Purpose

Initially, we describe some positive, practical results in different, Danish OAR projects that might indicate that all was well:

In 1995 at Bang & Olufsen (known for its audio-visual products), an OAR project with management and development engineers initiated a new way of organising and training management as mentors. These mentors would supervise the long-term, personal, and professional development needs of their employees to reduce labour turnover among software engineers. The project contributed to increase employee satisfaction and reduce personnel turnover (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005).

In 2001, at Lego (known for its production of toy blocks), an OAR project with management and employees paid by the hour resulted in the company halving its number of unplanned machine breakdowns and reducing employee stress levels (Bisgaard & Bloch-Poulsen, 2002).

In 2008, at Danfoss (known for the production of thermostats), an OAR project with management and engineers produced a model of co-creating knowledge at transition points between projects so that employees would not waste time repeating the same errors in new projects (Clemmensen, Kristiansen, & Bloch-Poulsen, 2009).

In 2009, within a public, citizen service municipality, an OAR project with management and employees resulted in a new model of organising work that gave employees more time to focus in-depth on urgent tasks (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2010).

These as well as other projects have produced theoretical and methodological results beyond the above mentioned practical ones (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014).

All of these OAR projects were based on a participatory endeavour where we tried to practice action research as a combination of action, research, and participation (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). This meant that everybody should have a voice, i.e. the opportunity to express their points of view, thoughts, and feelings, as well as a choice, i.e. the opportunity of taking part when it comes to decision-making (Cornwall, 2011; Saxena, 2011).

In this article, we argue that action research processes in practice are seldom as participatory as the above-mentioned practical results might indicate. The article shows how participatory hierarchies between employees and between employees and action researchers are constructed in one private and two public OAR projects, respectively.

Based on these examples, the article has three purposes:

The first, empirical purpose of the article is to show that unintentionally, participatory OAR approaches may create hierarchies that can maintain or reinforce existing ones or create new hierarchies among partners and researchers, leading to new inclusions and exclusions. We define a hierarchy as a frozen and unequal distribution of voices and choices among parties (Diefenbach & Sillience, 2011) and understand the three cases in this article as examples of 'participatory hierarchies'. This concept can be understood as an apparent contradiction, because etymologically, hierarchy means that somebody or something else decides. Paradoxically, participation seems to create its opposite, i.e. a hierarchy.

The second, theoretical purpose of the article is to show how participatory processes can be understood as contextualising mechanisms whereby all parties position themselves and each other by means of their ways of talking, acting, and organizing in changing and emergent processes (Davies & Harré, 1990, 1999). Simultaneously, participation in OAR projects is embedded in larger organiational, political, and societal systems (Burns, 2007*)*. This means that participation in OAR projects works in the interface between communication and organisation and between 'power to' and 'power over' (Göhler, 2009).

The third, methodological purpose of the article is to show how handling of participatory hierarchies ought to become a goal in OAR projects on par with producing practical and theoretical results. The article argues that this might contribute to handling participatory hierarchies and power in more transparent ways in OAR projects if partners and action researchers want to do so.

Outlines of a theoretical understanding of participation in OAR

Participation in OAR began in about 1940, when some of Kurt Lewin's former Ph.D. students carried out a number of organisational experiments on a social-psychological basis at the Harwood factory in Virginia (Lewin & Bavelas, 1942; French, 1945; Lewin, 1947a, b; Coch & French, 1948; Marrow, 1969, 1972; Burnes, 2004, 2007). In co-operation with Lewin, his former students tested if and how participation could contribute to increasing productivity while reducing absenteeism and personnel turnover.

Since then, participation understood as a kind of involvement or co-determination has been on the agenda in OAR. This was the case in the early work in the English coalmines of the late 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s where the socio-technical approach was being developed (Trist & Bamforth, 1951; Emery, 1959; Trist, Higgin, Murray, & Pollock, 1963; Trist, 1981; Trist & Murray, 1990a, b, 1997; Pasmore, 1995). This approach was further developed in the Norwegian studies of industrial democracy in the 1960s and the 1970s (Thorsrud & Emery, 1964, 1970; Roggema & Thorsrud, 1974; Herbst, 1975a, b; Thorsrud, 1978; van Beinum, 1997), as well as in the later development of democratic dialogues in the Norwegian projects in the context of the Work Research Institute (WRI) in Oslo and in the Swedish LOM-project (Management, Organisation, Participation/Ledning, Organisation, Medbestämmende) at Högskolan in Karlstad (Räftegård & Johansson-Hidén, 1990; Gustavsen, 1992, 2011; Johansson-Hidén, 1994; Shotter & Gustavsen, 1999).

In these projects we have not been able to find systematic inquiries into and documentation of how participation is performed in praxis between partners and between them and action researchers in development and research processes. We have been looking in vain for longer transcripts of meetings, detailed descriptions of what partners and researchers say and do during projects, and of how partners have experienced participation and cooperation. We have noticed, too, that the others' (partners) voices are often absent in descriptions of OAR projects. It has been difficult to find concrete examples where they speak for themselves. This differs from extensive

theoretical descriptions of how action researchers have understood participation, as shown, for example, in the above-mentioned literature.

Differing from the above-mentioned OAR approaches, this article examines what is at stake in the interaction between partners and between them and action researchers. Thus, it focuses on how participation is performed in praxis with which consequences. We hope to contribute to developing a theoretical understanding of how participation works, based on empirical analyses of actually recorded interaction in OAR projects.

The theoretical point of view of this article is that participation in OAR is always already contextualised, and simultaneously, that it operates in a contextualising way. In what follows, we elaborate on the concept of context, as well as the relation between communication and organisation:

There are many simultaneous contexts in OAR projects: the immediate project context, the organisational context like, e.g. a particular organisational culture, and extra-organisational contexts like, e.g. political and economic conditions. This poses a theoretical question of how to understand the relation between communication and organisation:

Within a modernist perspective, using models such as, for example, the "container-model" (Axley, 1984; Putnam, 1999), organisational and extra-organisational contexts are understood as frames situated outside a project without clarifying how the organisation influences communication. Thus, communication is understood to occur within a kind of context-free space. This understanding has been criticised, among others, from an ANT perspective (Asdal & Moser, 2012). Unlike, the Communication Constitutes Organisation (CCO) perspective focuses on language, communication, and relations among various partners (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011). Here, organisation and communication are understood as two sides of the same coin. This might mean that an organisational context is given lower priority in favour of assuming that everything can be understood as communication (Putnam & Nicotera, 2010). It might also mean that OAR is understood as contributing to changing discourses within projects (Pålshaugen, 1999).

This article is inspired by a dialectic understanding of the relation between communication and organisation (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Tretheway, 2010).

The various, simultaneous contexts influence communication in, e.g. a project context, while they can be changed through communication at the same time. According to this understanding, there are no context-free arenas or spaces in OAR projects, because the organisational context is always already present in any new project in ways that influence the project.

This article argues that participation works as a contextualising mechanism within these frames of many, simultaneous contexts. By means of what they say, do, and organise, partners and action researchers create new OAR contexts in which new participatory hierarchies are being produced, because in projects, everybody positions themselves and each other in and through changing communicative-organisational processes (Davies & Harré, 1990, 1999). Therefore, we do not think that participation can be guaranteed by means of particular dialogic ground rules of communication (Gustavsen, 1992) or by special ways of organising participatory processes. The article argues that participation works as a contextualising mechanism, and that local OAR projects should include a special goal dealing with participatory learning. This might contribute to handling participatory hierarchies by making them more transparent in the communicative-organisational field.

Inspired by Foucault (2000) and Giddens (1984), this article presupposes that there are no power-free spaces in organisational action research processes. Power is always already present and being enacted by all parties. It operates in constraining and/or empowering ways that is as "power over" or "power to" in continuous processes of in- and exclusion. Power is not only present in relations and discourses, but in societal, political and economic structures as well (Clegg & Haugaard, 2009). This seems to apply to participation as well. Therefore, we understand participation as a power mechanism (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011).

We define participation in OAR as co-determination in the organisation and in the action research process (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2016). Ideally, we understand participation as an endeavor towards more empowerment or 'power to', i.e. as an endeavor to work on an equal footing (Fricke, 2013; Streck, 2014).

Do certain partners get more of a voice than others?

In 2011, a Danish region funded an OAR project involving a public kindergarten, named the Oasis, where children are taken care of while their parents are at work. Besides a manager, the institution included three teams: a kindergarten team, a nursery team, and a specialist team. In what follows, we focus on the specialist team, whose job it was to take care of children with special needs (e.g., ADHD, autism). These employees were educated as pedagogues and trained as specialists in handling the particular needs and problems of these children.

Dialogic parent conversations and participatory hierarchies in the specialist team

The manager and the five employees of the specialist team decided, among others, to focus on improving their co-operation with parents in the OAR project. Over the span of a year, they succeeded in creating a model of dialogic parent conversations (Bloch-Poulsen, Eskesen, Fogh Jensen, Gamborg, Tolstrup, Væver, & Ørnskov 2013). It was created through the co-operation of the five pedagogues and two action researchers. One of the action researchers worked as a consultant at a local professional school training students to become pedagogical assistants (e.g., in kindergartens). The project was administered by this school, and Jørgen, one of the authors of this article, was the other action researcher.

Only occasionally did the manager take part in the action research process. The amount of speech was unequally divided among the pedagogues during the meetings. Two of them were very active, while three of them did not raise their voices to the same extent. The two "fiery souls," Ann and Mary, were not more experienced than their three colleagues. Their different ways of positioning themselves and being positioned did not seem to be due to differences in experience and knowledge. At a conference, Ann and Mary had been inspired by an institution that had conducted co-operative experiments between parents and pedagogues. Usually, parents received development plans for their children that were made by the pedagogues. In the new

project, parents would co-decide development plans for their children based on their knowledge of them in home contexts, and pedagogues would contribute their professional knowledge based on activities with children in the institution. This combined effort was intended to allow children to experience improved alignment between home and institution, which is particularly important for children with diagnoses like ADHD, autism, among others.

As an action researcher, parent, and grandfather, Jørgen was enthusiastic about this new way of organising co-operation between parents and pedagogues. Jørgen did not only work as a process facilitator, but was active in producing the new model of dialogic parent conversations. During a pause within a team meeting, he felt he saw the bigger picture, and so presented the basic principles of a new model of dialogic parent conversations to the pedagogues. While the latter agreed to the model, Jørgen began to doubt if he dominated the process too much. When asking if this was so, however, the pedagogues denied. Therefore, everyone was focused on the product of co-creating a model for enhanced co-operation with parents, and not on issues concerning the group's co-operation during the process. As a consequence, potentially shifting power balances in participating and co-operating were not included as part of the action research goals and processes.

Two reasons

In retrospect, Jørgen hesitated to address the development of a participatory hierarchy due to differences in speaking time, time spent on tasks, and the relations between the pedagogues and the action researchers when Jørgen began to work more closely with Ann and Mary. There were two reasons for such hesitation, the first of which has to do with changes in the institutional context. Early in the project's process, the kindergarten and nursery teams were told that they would soon merge with a different institution in the local area, and should not expect to continue working with their respective groups of children in the new institution. Thus, the action research project became contextualised in a larger organisational context. This piece of information had a demotivating effect on the action research process which we decided to finish before it was planned to. Due to this, no practical results were pro-

duced in the kindergarten and nursery teams. Unlike the situation of these two teams, however, the specialist team was told that they would continue as a team in the new institution with no changes. For this reason, Jørgen became fond of co-operating with them, as they remained productive concerning a project he was enthusiastic about. Parents were no longer to be told by pedagogues what was going to happen with their children, but would themselves be part of voicing and deciding what was best for their children.

The second reason for Jorgen's hesitation has to do with action researcher blindness. By focusing on practical results for a long period, Jørgen became blind to the hierarchy and power imbalances both within the team and between the team and himself. He did not reflect on the ways in which he himself exercised power until later in the process.

Ideally, OAR has three kinds of purposes. These are practical change, participatory learning in and about change processes, and improved theoretical understandings. The second of these purposes was partially excluded from the project, as both the pedagogues and action researchers did not decide to make reflections of their internal co-operation a goal to be treated on par with dialogic parent conversations.

New learning in interviews with silent pedagogues

After the project ended, Jørgen undertook individual interviews with each of the pedagogues with a focus on the project's processes. He asked, among other questions, if the pedagogues experienced the project as their own. All said they did. A pedagogue, Christal, who had contributed less suggestions and ideas throughout the process, added the following:

> You [action researchers] have worked as a kind of buffer. At regular team meetings, we would not have been able to talk with each other as we have done when you have been present … At our meetings in the basement [where the project meetings took place], which were organised in completely new ways, we have worked harmoniously together and been dynamic in ways that were different from how – I was about to say – it really is … Earlier, we had two informal leaders [Ann and Mary], and this structure was changed when you were present.

Cristal's perspective was new to Jørgen. She stated to him that before the project, their manager was rarely present during their daily work. The manager was preoccupied elsewhere and rarely joined team meetings or the action research processes. She said that she trusted her team and practiced co-determination as a manager. The absence of their manager meant that Ann and Mary had become informal leaders on a day-to-day basis. As an action researcher, Jørgen had observed this, but did not pay attention to the differences between Ann and Mary and the other three pedagogues, including Christal. At the same time, he did not recognize that the action research process itself had created a different context in which, apparently, the pedagogues could speak to each other in new ways.

Thus, it is not only participation that is contextualised (i.e., embedded in organizational structures and power balances). From Cristal's perspective, structural power balances were due to an absent manager and Ann and Mary's informal leadership. Participation in this situation can also be seen as a contextualising mechanism that created new contexts. Again from Cristal's perspective, the process appears to have softened informal leadership, as the action research meetings facilitated new ways of interacting. When seen from our own, current perspective, apparently, a new team context had been produced at the OAR meetings.

As a consequence, we do not believe that participation should be considered as a method that can be transferred from one context to another. Participation itself works as a means of contextualisation by positioning partners in different ways during the action research process. In this regard, one of the pedagogues suggested the following:

> … in the future, we ought to meta-communicate about such changes. If the division of labour is as asymmetrical as it was in our team, you [the action researchers] should ask if this is what we want. I say this, because people have prepared and solved tasks very differently during the process.

Some conclusions

Generally speaking, the project's intention was to operate via the equal co-operation between pedagogues, parents, and action researchers. However, in practice, this was not entirely the case. First, the pedagogues and action

researchers did not include the parents in the project until very late in the process, when the parents were invited to test and comment on the model rather than contributing to its development. Despite this, several of the parents felt that they had been included and were happy to share the responsibility of developing action plans for their children. The parents expressed this view both in interviews made for an e-book (Bloch-Poulsen et al., 2013) and in a video in Danish that accompanied the book (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhHxhozB8GI&feature=youtu.be).

Second, as Cristal stated, the earlier hierarchy of the two informal leaders might have been softened in the action research meetings, but it seemed to continue afterwards. At a reception for the book at the mentioned regional school, the project was presented by Ann and Mary and the action researchers, while the rest of the team sat among the audience. Today, it is only Ann and Mary who present the idea of dialogic parent conversations at different institutions in Denmark.

We do not think it is possible to eliminate changing participatory hierarchies. As mentioned earlier, power is always present in in action research projects, not only in the larger structural, organisational and societal contexts, but also in the interaction between partners who position themselves and each other throughout the project. Thus, we think that consideration of power and participatory hierarchies should be part of the overall purposes of OAR projects.

On a more practical level, we have learned that metacommunication about the action research process has the potential to induce learning (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2010). We define metacommunication as talking during a process about the process from a bird's-eye-view perspective. Metacommunication never operates merely as a neutral communicative tool, as it will inevitably contribute to defining the agendas of specific bystanders with special interests and knowledge. Thus, it is important that metacommunication is not exercised as part of an action researcher monopoly, because this would position researchers as uppers constructing new hierarchies. We have prior examined how metacommunication works in action research projects (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2010, 2011). Our results show that it must be

exercised and shared by all participants in projects where participative learning has been decided as a common process goal.

We have learned, too, that if partners and researchers feel sufficiently secure to address hot potatoes and important issues in their participative learning processes, this might open the way for new learning, not only in terms of practical results, but also in terms of the learning process itself. Improved learning can mean speeding up processes by staying on track, or including formerly silent or marginal voices, drawing on their competencies and knowledge, in a project.

Can dialogue result in the dethroning of employees?

The following case deals with Bang & Olufsen (B&O), a fairly large Danish industrial company that produces audio-visual goods (TV, radio, loudspeakers, etc.). In 1993, an OAR project with shop foremen was begun at B&O. The company initiated this project to increase productivity because it was threatened by closure due to growing international competition.

Organisational changes

The societal context was characterised by a generally higher educational level among hourly paid employees, who referred to foremen as their superiors. The inclination of the company was that if these employees had not already demanded more responsibility and influence at B&O, they would do so soon. Not only at B&O, but in a number of industrial companies, we have noticed foremen with a technical education be challenged by hourly paid employees due to their statuses as high school graduates.

Broadly speaking, the organisational context was marked by a good-bye to mass production. Long series fabricating the same products in large amounts was about to be replaced by smaller customer tailored series. Production for stock was being substituted by production on demand. Self- managing groups with so-called self-motivated employees were being placed on the agenda, because they could more easily match new production demands of flexibility, i.e. quick changeover of machinery (Hohn, 2000; Mueller, Procter, & Buchanan, 2000).

As a consequence, the foremen could no longer remain merely technical managers, trouble-shooters, and firemen, but had to also become process and production managers. At B&O, there was a fairly extensive system of hierarchy, with a chain of authority passing from employee, to foreman, to supervisor, to plant manager, to production director, to CEO. In this organisational context, the foremen were going to be upgraded as part of a cost-reduction programme, as the company's board of directors had decided to remove the supervisors.

An OAR project with 25 foremen

In this multiply contextualised situation, management in co-operation with union representatives decided to initiate a year-long organisational action research process with the company's foremen. This project was drafted as a process to include five two-day modules, with follow-up meetings in between with plant managers, who had become the direct managers of the foremen. In an initial meeting with the production director, the plant managers, and the 25 foremen, the following goals of the project were decided: productivity should be increased by 10-15%; the foremen should reduce their stress-level; the foremen were to assume the duties of the former supervisors (i.e., practice a higher degree of co-determination and responsibility); and finally, the foremen were to improve their abilities to match the expected demands of the hourly-paid employees dealing with more influence and co-determination. At this time in 1993, we had not developed ways of organising decision processes that facilitated and included dissensus. Thus, we cannot know for sure whether the above-stated goals were co-decided. However, all parties involved seemed to be aware of the risk of the company's closure.

When the managers and foremen had decided on the above goals, we discussed with them our prior experiences in similar projects at different Danish industrial companies (e.g., Rockwool, known for building insulation products). Many foremen had faced challenges in these projects. Many were inclined to offer advice or instruction whenever an hourly-paid employee presented a problem, when it might have been better to ask certain employees about their own ideas. Such observations taught us that it was important to distinguish between situations where it would be more efficient to act as advisors and those

in which it would be more adequate to act as midwifes (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005). Within this context, "efficient" means improved job performance, commitment, and learning. Several months later, some of the elderly foremen told us that they had been highly provoked when we suggested that some of their employees might come up with better ideas, more efficient solutions, or useful production set-ups despite the fact that the foremen had many more years of experience.

Clashes between two ways of thinking

These challenges were demonstrated in a conversation halfway through the project between one of the elderly foremen, Hans, 59 years old, his plant manager, Jan, and Jørgen, as an action researcher. Before the project, Hans reported he was used to employees calling him at 6:30 a.m. at the latest if they were ill. Then Hans organised a substitute to show up at 7:00 a.m. When they started, they gathered around Hans, who told them what to do. When they had finished their tasks, they were supposed to come back to him to get new assignments. Hans understood this procedure as delegating.

In the initial phase of the project, Hans became very angry at Jørgen when the latter said that he did not think Hans was delegating but performing managerial steering. Likewise, Hans thought it was odd when Jørgen began modules with the foremen by underscoring that the programme they had received in advance was meant as nothing but a draft. One of the goals of the project was to enhance co-determination, and therefore Jørgen thought it was important that the foremen were co-designing a programme that would be useful for them. However, Hans expected this to be Jørgen's job. In this way, opposite ways of thinking were present in the organisational as well as in the action research context. On the one hand, there was traditional authority, linked to one's formal position in an organisational or educational hierarchy, while on the other, authority connected to dialogue and leadership.

Halfway through the project, Hans explained how things had changed, with the hourly paid employees in charge of allocating resources and manpower. If Hans wanted to know who was present, he could find this information on a whiteboard placed on the wall. When before the project, Jan, his

boss, would ask him how production was running, he could, at the spur of the moment, tell him how much production had deviated from the plan. Jan mentions that today, he just has to look at the written information on a PC-screen, and does not need to disturb Hans. Hans states that it is difficult for him to understand what has happened, but he observes that productivity has gone up by roughly 10%, that his work hours have decreased, and that his wife thinks he is less irritable.

Changes in positioning of an elderly foreman and new participatory hierarchies

Prior to the action research project, Hans was positioned highly as a foreman, a man his colleagues listened carefully to. In initial feedback, his plant manager considered him to be "robust with lots of experience" and "a diligent and hard-working person," yet noted that "he doesn't delegate much" and he is "a bit too traditional." During the OAR project, Hans decided to become better at "listening to his employees and act accordingly." In their initial feedback, the employees wanted him to become better at "seeing things from other peoples' perspectives, listening to his employees, not getting angry in emergency situations, allowing for co-determination, forgetting their mistakes, and trusting them." Before the project, Hans had practiced management, i.e., he had planned, steered, and controlled. He had advised and instructed when any one of his employees presented a problem to him. Now, he was supposed to practice leadership in relation to some of his employees, too, trying to motivate them by asking questions as to their ideas on different issues.

The training modules were planned as sessions of practicing dialogic competences working with the foremen's own practical problems in various exercises, such as role playing. This was a challenge to Hans compared to some of his younger colleagues, who could more easily ask employees to offer their own ideas and suggestions. In the training sessions, Hans continued to offer pieces of advice and suggestions when he wanted to pose questions in relation to colleagues acting as experienced employees in role playing. Slowly, there was a change among Hans' colleagues during the modules. His colleagues tended to

listen to him less and directed their attention to younger colleagues, who explained how their employees had come up with good ideas when asked.

In hindsight, a power struggle and participatory hierarchy between the different partners of this situation gradually emerged. On the one hand, an action researcher, Jørgen, in his mid-forties, experienced himself closer to some younger foremen who showed trust in their employees by listening to their suggestions. This alignment seemed to be based on a shared, unproblematised discourse of dialogue regarded as being superior to a discourse based on orders and instructions given to the employees. Simultaneously in this situation, there was also a group of elderly experienced foremen in their late fifties of a more authoritarian background, who would accept a message from a colleague, but "not from an hourly-paid employee", as one stated at the beginning of the project.

Aiming at more co-determination for the foremen as well as for the hourly paid employees, the OAR project seemed to create a new participatory hierarchy where foremen positioned their colleagues in accordance with how they exercised dialogic competencies. Competencies related to technical expertise and instruction were no longer the only criterion. Instead, foremen, acting as midwives, were positioned as uppers in an informal hierarchy.

Reflections, learning, and conclusions in 2016

It is not until now, more than 20 years later, when writing about the project, that it becomes clear to us that we did not address the dislocations in the informal hierarchy among the foremen, nor did we address the hidden alliances between some of the foremen and one of us as an action researcher. The process of handling changing participatory hierarchies was not decided as a project goal.

Together, we focused on the practical goals of increasing productivity by decreasing the foremen's stress levels. Here, the problem was transformed into a general discussion as to the relation between a traditional expert manager, promoted because of his technical skills and primarily acting as an advisor, and a modern generalist leader acting as a midwife. As such, it was transformed into a general discussion concerning the relationship between

management and leadership (Mabey & Finch-Lees, 2008). Sometimes this discussion deteriorated into an either-or nature, where it seemed more important to be able to motivate and engage employees than to instruct them. It made Jørgen ask provocatively why they did not hire him, a generalist from the humanities with no relevant B&O technical expertise, as a foreman. However, this attempt to soften up battle lines did not change the fact that, unintentionally, a new participatory hierarchy had been created among the foremen, one which we as action researchers had taken part in by forming an unspoken alliance with the younger foremen founded on differences in dialogic competencies. In this process, the elderly technical managers were positioned differently. Today, looking back, we believe that they were dethroned in this situation.

The above example shows that metacommunication and the training of dialogic competencies cannot be considered parts of a neutral process. The training modules contributed to producing a new organisational context, i.e. they worked as a contextualising mechanism by positioning younger and elderly foremen into a new participatory hierarchy where the two groups changed positions. The action researcher, Jørgen, contributed to this process not only because of the above-mentioned unspoken alliance, but also because it was based on his knowledge of dialogic competencies. We therefore believe that the choice of participatory methods, such as semi-autonomous groups or dialogues, contribute to producing new contexts in projects that influence the ways everybody position themselves and each other.

As action researchers, we believe that we are ethically obliged to reflect on the ways everybody enacts participation as power in projects, as well as the consequences of this for our partners. Thus, we argue that it is not only a good but necessary idea to include participative learning as a goal in action research projects. If we chose not to do this, we might unintentionally exclude or dethrone partners whom we actually wanted to co-operate with and position as equals.

Dialogic communication – an unpredictable process is made an object of dialogue

The last example is an OAR project at the Faculty Office of Engineering, Science/Medicine at Aalborg University in 2013, a public knowledge organisation with approximately 140 employees, 10 managers, and a managing director. Previously, we had co-operated with this institution on projects concerning the development of self-managing teams (Dalgaard, Johannsen, Kristiansen, & Bloch-Poulsen, 2014)

Organizing an OAR project in a growing organisation

An informal steering committee was organised before the project began, though its mandate was never clearly expressed. This committee consisted of managers and employees who were willing to spend time on development projects. The steering committee applied to the Agency for Competence Development in the Danish State Sector concerning a two-year project titled "Framework for learning in self-managing teams in a growing organisation," for which it received funding. The practical challenge and aim of the project was motivated by the following question: "Can the organisation become better at creating learning and dealing with different forms of self-management in different teams?" It was important to the organisation that it not only became better at creating learning when facing unforeseen incidents, but also on a regular basis.

The steering committee decided that each of the 11 teams in the organisation should define its own goals, which meant that the teams could determine what they wanted to improve on within the broad framework stated by the steering committee in the application. The framework was the result of a long process in which all of the teams had the opportunity to come up with desires, comments, and suggestions for change in the various versions of the application. In earlier projects, we experienced the anchoring of organisational improvements to be a challenge, with results appearing to fade away after a project's closure. Earlier, we had worked, among others, as facilitators in each team to support their development processes. We believed that the time had come for internal facilitators to assume this job where an employee from team x should act as a facilitator for team y. As action researchers, it was our task to create a learning process for employees who were going to be trained

as facilitators, and to continuously balance this process with the steering committee. The use of internal facilitators should help anchor results, processes, and methods, because they had knowledge as to the organisation that we did not have.

Outlines of a participatory hierarchy?

Already in the beginning of the project, a critical question became: How are the facilitators to be selected? We discussed a series of ethical questions with the steering committee: How can we avoid an employee who has volunteered to be a facilitator feeling excluded if none of the teams want him/her as a facilitator? Were all teams, including the small ones, supposed to appoint a facilitator? This could mean a far greater work load for his/her team colleagues. Could the self-managing teams decide themselves if they wanted and whom to select for acceptance as a facilitator? Do they have this responsibility and choice?

We expected it to be the responsibility and competence of the steering committee to decide a process for selecting and appointing facilitators in cooperation with the teams. However, shortly after one of the meetings with the steering committee, it seemed as if the management group was making this decision. One of the employees in the steering committee reacted by writing the following email to the steering committee, the management group, and the action researchers:

> I actually think that this proposal from the … managers hits the nail on the head with respect to the main point of the project. How do we ensure active, self-managing employees in autonomous teams, but with … managers ... Aren't we shooting ourselves in the foot AND contradicting our point in the application [of the importance of self-management] if we negate employee ownership by going directly to the … managers and letting them be responsible for designating facilitators?

When seen from the perspective of the employee, there was a discrepancy between working in so-called autonomous teams and management selecting facilitators. When seen from our perspective, a participatory hierarchy was emerging in which the steering committee, whom we expected to have the final say in the process of selecting facilitators, and the action researchers

were about to be excluded. This participatory hierarchy looked as if it was identical to the formal hierarchy already in place within the organisation. We understood this as a paradox within a project about self-managing teams and learning. In co-operation with the steering committee, we decided to convene a joint meeting with the management group to try to balance expectations.

A dialogue about organising future unpredictability

When the secretary of the steering committee sent out the agenda for the joint meeting, the email from the critical employee was not included. During the meeting, no one mentioned the email, and then Marianne enacted power by metacommunicating and questioning if there was a tendency to meet disagreement with silence in the organisation. This question triggered a dialogue between the management group, the steering committee, and the action researchers about how they coped with disagreement in the organisation, and how as action researchers we saw the distribution of power in the organisation. Several participants at the meeting underscored that unpredictability was a condition in a modern knowledge organisation such as theirs. Misunderstandings were unavoidable, such as if someone makes a decision that others thought they could make themselves, which happened in the case of selecting facilitators.

After several group dialogues with colleagues among and across organisational levels, everyone decided to create a mailing list for the managers, the steering committee, and the action researchers so that anyone could respond within a short time if or when an unforeseen event occurred. Finally, at the end of the meeting, as action researchers, we proposed that there should be a fixed item on the agenda at future joint meetings where managers and the steering committee could address misunderstandings or internal disagreements in order to facilitate learning. In this way, we tried to make the unpredictable a focus of continuous dialogue. Simultaneously, the managers agreed to authorise the steering committee as a project management group to avoid the committee being reduced to project handyman or a forum for deliberations only. Several of the managers argued for the latter. We are inclined to understand these changes as alterations in power balances between managers

and the steering committee. The fact that a couple of managers were chosen as new members of the committee supports this interpretation. The committee seemed to have become a place where important decisions were going to be made in the future.

Thus, in co-operation with the steering committee, we found new ways of handling the participatory hierarchy in this specific situation. We did this by convening a joint meeting with management, organising dialogues among and across the formal organisational hierarchy, enlarging the committee to include an additional number of managers as new members of the group, and deciding how to deal with similar situations in the future. Before leaving the meeting, managers and employees said that this was the best and most efficient meeting they had had in a long time. These outcomes, however, did not imply that hierarchies disappeared from the project. They emerged in different forms within other teams. For example, one team positioned the project and the action researchers as "lowers", by mocking it and us in public until they found a way to define their own agenda that was meaningful to themselves.

Some conclusions about handling participation as a goal in OAR projects

It is our interpretation that participatory hierarchies are unavoidable. They cannot be solved but handled at best.

In this article, we have understood participation and participatory hierarchy from a communication-organisation perspective focusing on how everybody positions themselves and each other during the process. This approach cannot stand alone when trying to understand the complexities of participation in a project. In the future, we suggest that different professional groups work together in developing a theory of understanding participation in OAR projects like, e.g. sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, organisational communication researchers etc. depending on the subject of the OAR project.

We have learned that it is not possible to address participatory hierarchies without partners and action researchers developing a certain degree of confi-

dence in each other. Confidence seems to be a necessary condition for coping with them.

Some participatory hierarchies appear identical to current organisational ones, some positioning employees in new positions, and others constructing new positions in larger groups. Across such differences, participation seems to work as a contextualising mechanism. The praxis of employees, managers, and action researchers construct new contexts at and in between meetings. Sometimes, this implies that apparently decisive discrepancies and differences of interest are only due to misunderstandings or lack of dialogue and balancing expectations (Dalgaard, Johannsen, Kristiansen, & Bloch-Poulsen, 2014). However, at other times, it means that you have to terminate due to diverging interests that will be impossible to reconcile (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011). Dialogue and communication cannot solve all challenges.

The cases discussed in this article, as well as other projects, have taught us that OAR projects should not only have practical and theoretical goals, but also a parallel, methodological goal dealing with learning about participatory hierarchies. Thus, we suggest that the discussion of shifting participatory hierarchies and handling of emerging power balances between employees, managers, and action researchers become a goal to be treated on par with practical and theoretical goals. This implies that employees, managers, and action researchers agree to inquire into how their co-operation and participation works in practice.

Handling of participatory hierarchies does not mean solving them, but making them as transparent as possible. This might have happened in the B&O case if, for example, new positions were offered to the elderly management-oriented foremen as a means of avoiding their dethronement. Concerning the specialist team at "the Oasis," perhaps we could have prevented the exclusion of silent pedagogues. In the AAU-case, we think that our partners and we made power balances more transparent and the distribution of power more equal. However, we are still in doubt as to whether or not a critical employee's voice will be included in the long-term. Furthermore, we are not convinced that the new ways of organising disagreements by making them an object of dialogues will work in the future at joint meetings between the management group and the steering committee, when we are not present.

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