

Editorial: Action Research perspectives in German social science 2015

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This issue contains a series of excellent articles written by authors, most of them female, who belong to a younger generation of social science researchers, representing a new kind of labour research in Germany. The main characteristic of this new labour research approach is the authors' understanding of the political dimensions of their research. This is most clearly expressed in *Kristin Carls'* research with editorial and social workers in Italy, reported in her paper on "Precariousness meets passion". There we read:

"... co-research seeks to create a collective space in which individual work experiences can be socialised. The aim is to produce a collective knowledge that allows workers to increase their capacity for conflict, shape their working conditions, and fight for their rights and interests. That is, co-research starts from an explicit political standpoint and is itself a tool for political action. In a word, it is about enhancing positions of collective power within social struggles against oppression. The strategy proposed to achieve this is to begin from the subject level and ask 'how resistance is constituted on a subjective level' and how it can be recomposed on a collective level, that is, how class recomposition¹ can take place as a

¹ "Class (re-)composition is a term from workerist (*operaista*) theory, which developed in close relation to the Italian labour struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, and which has also been central to the development of the concept of co-research. Technical class composition refers to the positioning of workers within the production process as it results from changing forms of work organisation and labour control. By contrast, political class composition refers to the way workers constitute themselves as subjects and collective actors. Both processes are perceived as closely interrelated and historically contingent. Social change is seen as a result of class struggles, with workers' col-

continuous and contingent process. Co-research tries to create a space of collective reflection in order to analyse those daily practices by which subjects position themselves within society and its various relations of domination” (Carls, 2015, p. 44).

Behind this subject-oriented approach to research lies an attempt to radically reconsider the relationship between theory and practice, questioning the very idea of scientific objectivity. The aim is to abolish every hierarchical distinction between the researcher and the researched, as well as between theoretical and practical knowledge. Critical collective reflection on everyday practices and common sense is seen as the core of co-research and the keystone of its political strategy.”

Although Kristin Carls does not explicitly refer to action research, we are here at its very heart, at least according to our understanding of action research as a political endeavour.

There are more contributions in this issue which are dealing with political dimensions of social science research, if not action research. There is, e.g., the paper of *Daniela Wühr, Sabine Pfeiffer, and Petra Schütt* on “Participatory research on innovation”. In their chapter 4 they reflect on the conflicts which participation and democratic dialogue are confronted with by hierarchical power structures in organisational settings (Wühr, Pfeiffer, & Schütt, 2015, p. 111-114), and they are aware of the need to create dialogue spaces, which are leading to public spheres in enterprises (Pålshaugen, 2002) as preconditions for democratic participation and dialogue. To create public spaces in enterprises as a condition for democratic participation and dialogue is certainly and clearly a form of political action and it is at the same time an essential element of action research strategies.

Perhaps less obviously for many a reader, but political in a very fundamental way, *Ines Langemeyer* argues in her paper “that high-tech work requires not only skills but also experience of thinking and reflecting these work processes through scientific concepts. This quality of *work process*

lective action and the restructuring of work processes and exploitation strategies by capital constantly boosting and influencing each other. On this approach, co-research is not simply an analytic tool but above all a strategy of political intervention and collective empowerment ...”.

knowledge ... is termed 'scientification' ..." (Langemeyer, 2015, p. 14). Ines understands scientification not "in a positivist manner as an overall societal tendency (like the assumed 'knowledge society') that automatically occurs..." but "as a matter of collectively developing work process knowledge" (ibid., p. 15). This is indeed revolutionary, and it is political in its understanding of (skilled) workers' experience and work process knowledge no longer separated from or subordinated to scientific concepts. As in Kristin Carls' research there is no hierarchical distance between theory and practice, between work process knowledge and science.

"Professional ways of thinking", Kristin Carls says, "are based on the incorporation not only of scientific knowledge in terms of facts, but more precisely in terms of conceptual or theoretical ways of knowing to which the subjects also relate in a self-reflexive way. It is not thinking *of* certain bodies of knowledge but the thinking *within* certain ways of knowing that are crucial. It implies the capacity to critically evaluate one's knowing or knowledge-in-practice in the light of the problems at hand and to develop mental and/or practical strategies to solve them."

This perception is very near to many of John Shotter's contributions on "knowing from within" in former IJAR and CAT issues.

In a previous paper (Langemeyer & Ohm, 2009, p. 288) Ines Langemeyer analyses and describes a special new form of scientification of work, which offers employees the chance and even the need to develop plans and to become creative themselves by using scientific knowledge within the working process and designing production technology" (our translation). This reminds us of Claude Faucheux, a French action researcher, who said as early as in 1994: "The idea that one fine day the reflexive component may become a part of action, and to such an extent that actors will treat the research underway as a process for verifying their actions to be appropriate, is by no means illusory. Indeed, co-operation with professional researchers will become [...] a universal practice. This will lead to a situation in which actors will better recognise their opportunities for availing themselves of scientific research with the aim of resolving their own local challenges. What will also fundamentally change is the very concept of research work and science. The distinction between subject and object will vanish, as it will between "pure"

science and applied science [...]. The core of science will become that of our potential relationship with reality, the reshaping of which we are responsible for, as we ourselves are included in that process as actors. The entirety of scientific work, the aim of which is cognition, will no longer be limited to universities, but will extend across a broad spectrum of human endeavours, and will not be confined to the specialist fields of individual disciplines that pay each other no heed [...] Continuous dialogue between scientific knowledge and common knowledge will make actors capable of ‘thinking globally and acting locally’. Co-operation between science and action in joint research processes will yield the knowledge we need, in order to solve problems we ourselves have created” (Faucheux, 1994, p. 160).

In yet another way also the paper by *Peter Birke, Florian Hohenstatt, and Moritz Rinn* (2015, pp. 195-227) has a political dimension. The authors contribute a thorough description of their intervention against gentrification processes in a quarter within the city of Hamburg. A group of social scientists experimented with a wide range of actions: participation in protests against rising rents, street theatre and performances, initiatives against the instrumentalisation of artists and district culture; in addition the gentrification process was evaluated by means of critical sociological research. Beyond the multiplicity of these forms of action the group was searching for alternatives against the intense process of gentrification in the community; they even managed to enter a critical, controversial dialogue with Saskia Sassen about the gentrification process and her role in it.

In these examples as, well as in other contributions within the present issue not mentioned here, we encounter many an action research element: Co-research (Carls, 2015), democratic dialogue and dialogue space (Wühr et al., 2015), self-reflexion (Carls, 2015), intervention (Birke et al., 2015); astonishing enough however none of the authors is referring to action research explicitly or in its full sense, e.g. action research as collective self-reflection *and* intervention² or action research as practical *and* theoretical dialogue, etc.

² In a very interesting paper Olav Eikeland claims action research to be „collective self-reflection, not intervention“ (Eikeland 2007:). It is only in this point that we disagree with Eikeland’s notion of action research: To our experience action research consists of both: collective self-reflection *and* intervention.

When we planned to edit the present issue we wanted to demonstrate the present state of action research in Germany. Looking at the collected papers, however, we have to admit that our intention failed. What we found are very interesting and high standard social science research texts, which are related to action research without really being action research; so we were unable to present a collection of project and research reports representative of the state of action research in Germany. Why so?

In Germany action research was always in a difficult position, not accepted as scientific research by German mainstream social science, be it influenced by the critical theory (Frankfurt School) or by positivism (nearly all the rest). There was only one period in the 1960s and early 1970s in which a bunch of action research literature was published in Germany, for the first time after World War II. This AR literature was however characterised by a lack of empirical research; it was in its vast majority conceptual rather than theoretical and not empirically grounded (see Fricke, 2014).

Only in the early 1980s, i.e. during the first five years of the German Action and Research Programme “Humanisation of Work Life” there was a chance for social scientists to develop and perform action research projects. The socio-political context was in those days favourable for action research, because a coalition of employers, trade unions and politics influenced by social democrats and liberals jointly supported the Humanisation programme with its opportunities for research about improvement of working life. Enterprises and their management more or less willingly opened their doors for often interdisciplinary research teams (social scientists, engineers, ergonomics), which were not only expected to produce new knowledge how to improve working conditions but also to organise change and implementation processes. A special sector of the programme was reserved for participative research, for improvement and enlargement of co-determination processes. Management’s criterion for accepting and supporting change processes during those days was not exclusively their contribution to efficiency as is the case nowadays, 40 years of neoliberalism later.

Some research groups used these favourable research conditions to perform action research projects including joint reflection with employees, intervention in organisations, introduction of democratic participation pro-

cesses and democratic dialogue, sometimes even based on special institutional arrangements. It was however only a minority of social scientists who used the programme opportunities of those days to engage in collective self-reflection, participative intervention, democratic dialogue, as well as in conflictual situations connected to this kind of social science research: action research. Moreover this programme period did not last more than five years. It ended when the reform coalition between employers, trade unions and politics was cancelled by the employers' associations. From now on participation, enlargement of co-determination rights, engagement of social scientists in shop floor conflicts were no longer tolerated, the programme changed its character.

Nevertheless the action research tradition, especially the idea of democratic participation, survived, and it is still influential in social science research as demonstrated by this IJAR issue. Especially the idea of democratic participation, not that of action research as a whole, is still alive and meets growing attention and commitment: not only among researchers, but also within trade unions (IG Metall, 2013). Even management has shown growing interest in participation for 20 years, but they are implementing reduced concepts of participation only as a device to raise employees' engagement at work, without granting influence on conditions of work. Management's focus is on growing efficiency, not on participative elements like autonomy, self-determination, and dialogue.

The present socio-political context, as well as research conditions in enterprises, are less favourable for action research than they were 40 years ago at the time of the humanisation programme. This is the reason, we think, why the idea of action research, both in state financed research programmes and in the great majority of research projects, is more or less reduced to intervention. Often enough, the conditions for collective self-reflection such as dialogue space, time and finance for reflective praxis in enterprises are missing.

This is more than problematic as we anticipate seeing more change in the future. In Germany we currently observe a vital discourse on changing working conditions centered on the assumed dramatically evolving digitalisation, especially addressing technical developments coined in terms like "Industry 4.0" or the "Internet of Things". In September 2014 the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, together with the main industrial employer associa-

tion (BDI) and the trade union for the service sectors (ver.di) announced a new research programme: Up to the year 2020 more than 1 billion Euros will go into research on creating good working conditions in the digital era. On first sight and as for decades now, the funding seems to be oriented on principles of action research: joint projects between science and practitioners working together inside companies. Funded projects are obliged to combine research with organisational change as well as to involve work councils and employees. Thus, on one hand the structural conditions for action research in German companies will be better than they have been for years. On the other, there are at least three reasons to have not too much hope for an upsurge of action research in Germany:

- Results of a variety of employee surveys in Germany prove again and again that German employees experienced previously unknown intensified work, leading to ever increasing rates of depression and burnout. Current working conditions are not suitable for providing the time and space action research requires. Shaping good work in the future, companies have to mitigate the pressure on their employees now.
- The new research programme relies on funding conditions, which although being the dominant form in recent decades, did not lead to a thriving action research community in Germany. Social research in Germany in its mainstream does not acknowledge the scientific *and* the societal potential of action research. The contributions we present here hopefully will initiate a discourse on action research that we have not seen for decades.
- Many researchers active in this research context have no roots or understanding of action research, and even of the role of works councils and industrial relations. Thus, often enough the interests of companies and management are predominant during all steps and required decisions of the research process. The funding institution requires the involvement of employees and work councils, but lacks any regulations or reporting mechanism that ensure this happening.

In this volume we gathered some representatives of a generation of social scientists that is innovative and inventive! In her paper “Research for whom? Labour Sociology Between Observation, Co-Management and Social Cri-

tique” Nicole Mayer-Ahuja reports about difficulties in interviewing or having dialogues with workers in Indian IT enterprises: there was no time, no space, no agreement by management, high personal fluctuation as many workers had only short term work contracts etc. Nicole and her research team decided “to broaden the range of methodological instruments ... available to labour sociology. First, it is precisely the most tension-riddled (and the most exciting) workplace constellations that cannot be accessed by means of company case studies. Second, the shop-floor is increasingly failing to function as a stable microcosm, given that many employment relationships are becoming more short-term. ... Labour sociology will not be able to fully relinquish its focus on the company, but there is much to suggest that *it should start from the employees even more than it has hitherto done* (our italics). One way of doing this might involve contacting workers outside the workplace, and using their social networks as a starting point from which to obtain insight into workplace constellations. In the case of the above-mentioned project on Indo-German IT work, for example, the first experiences yielded by such an approach were consistently positive. Thus, in India, where the IT sector is much more concentrated in geographical terms than in Germany, the research team lived for several months in the IT metropolis of Bangalore, within a neighbourhood inhabited by large numbers of IT specialists. Like them, we found ourselves stuck in the notorious traffic jams between these residential areas and IT business parks twice a day. It was only against the background of this experience, for instance, that we were able to understand why the scope of work intensification depends significantly on the physical structure of social space, and hence on infrastructure policies”.

The message from this paper is a new challenge for organisational action research. Its focus will not be any longer the company or the shop floor exclusively. “It should start from the employees” as Nicole Mayer-Ahuja says. This methodological turn will perhaps make collective self-reflection easier than it is nowadays in hierarchical organisations, but the other side of action research: intervention, organisational change, improving work conditions, will become more difficult to achieve, we are afraid.

Anyhow: The collection of excellent papers in this issue supports our view that action research will survive and grow in German social science.

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