

# Action research for democracy – a Scandinavian approach

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Many proponents of action research for democracy seem to presuppose that to anchor action research in democratic ideals is a sufficient base for action researchers to legitimate their democratic purposes and intentions. This article starts out from the presupposition that anchoring action research in democratic ideals is in fact idealism, and argues the case that action research for democracy has to be anchored in some democratic institution of society to have a real legitimacy base for engaging in co-operation with others on democratic development. From this point of departure, a Scandinavian approach for democracy that aims at impact on society as well as social science is presented. The article presents just selected aspects of this tradition. The presentation is based on the presumption that some of the aspects, that seem to be relevant only within a Scandinavian context, may in fact have general relevance for any other approach of action research for democracy.

**Key words:** democratic procedures, discourse democracy, democratic dialogue, dialogue conference, development organization, linguistic simulation, scientific publication, Scandinavia

## Introduction

From its very beginning, most action research in Scandinavia has in various ways been oriented towards democratisation of working life. However, at times the explicit focus on democratisation may seem to have been more or

less absent. There are a number of reasons for this, which has been subject to debates (e.g. Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006). An often underestimated factor in these debates regards the question of the legitimacy of action research programmes and projects that aim at democratisation. An important part of this question of legitimacy is about the societal role and status of social research.

Experience from Europe during the last fifty years, since the late 1960's, has shown that it is no obvious strategy for success to legitimate public funding of social research by the claim that it may serve common interests because of an inherent emancipatory interest. On the other hand, dependence on funding from private interests is neither a solid base for legitimacy of social research projects on democratisation. By rejecting these two alternatives, an often-preferred strategy in Scandinavia has been to anchor action research programmes in some institution that somehow is to be regarded as part of the democratic system of society. Such institutions may be of different kinds, like the parties of working life, governmental institutions and public institutions that have a role in the task of providing some common goods. These institutions generally consider knowledge from research as a public good, and may thereby also serve as a legitimacy base of social research.

The conditions for anchoring action research in some kind of democratic institution of society as a legitimacy base for having a role in some kind of democratic development of society, differs remarkably between countries in different parts of the world. Scandinavia is often, and perhaps rightly, considered a kind of society where these conditions are more favourable than many other places. However, these conditions are not just simply a result of the societal development that has taken place in post-war Scandinavia. It is a result also of the pretty profound changes that have taken place in one of the main action research strategies in Scandinavia since the late sixties.

As will be known, "action research for democracy" is not really a new slogan in Scandinavia. The so-called *Industrial Democracy* project was launched about half a century ago, as a result of collaboration between some of the most experienced action researchers at the Tavistock Institute in London and the emerging milieu of action researchers in Norway. This project explicitly aimed at contributing to the democratisation of working life, and formed the foundation for the development of some of the main action re-

search traditions in Scandinavia today. This history is well known and much is written about it (Emery & Thorsrud, 1976; Gustavsen, 1992; Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999; Fricke, 2011; Eikeland, 2012). However, there is by no means any one univocal or uncontested interpretation of this tradition, and its practical as well as theoretical merits. Thus, in order to learn from this history, we have to rethink it, and present reasons for the way we interpret it.

That the Industrial Democracy project and the following development during the 1960s and 70s in Scandinavia took place in a certain historical period, which was a favourable context for the kind of action research approach that was applied, is commonly acknowledged within the international action research community. To some extent, this is also part of the reason why there seems to be not so much more to learn from this specific historical period of relevance for today. However, the way and the extent to which the overall strategy of this action research was subject to revisions and changes throughout this period, in particular from the 1980s, contains certain elements that are not so much to be found in this specific context, but *quite as much in the way the action research strategy related to its context*. For this reason there may be more to be learned of relevance for action research that operates in other kinds of context, and thus the actuality of these experiences may be greater than what is commonly considered.

In Scandinavia, the revisions and the renewal of the action research strategy were based on both the *practical challenges* regarding deficiencies in dissemination of practical changes/social impact, and the *theoretical challenges* regarding deficiencies in theories of knowledge, democratisation and communication. This equal attention to practical and theoretical challenges is intertwined with the ambition of having an impact on *working life*, as well on *social science*. The renewal of the Scandinavian approach therefore may have some relevance for challenges that other action research approaches are confronted with today, as well as the problem of social impact. In the following, I will present an interpretation of some general aspects of this history, focussing on aspects that still represent challenges to action research strategies for democracy.

### **The quest for and the agents of democracy**

Firstly, I will pose a question that should be considered quite important to any kind of research that aims at contributing to democratisation: Who has asked for it? This question was not explicitly asked fifty years ago, and it is not always asked explicitly today. But if democracy is about some kind of self-governance, and democratisation is about increasing the opportunities for people to make use of their own will in guiding their own activities, would it not be a grandiose contradiction in terms to impose democratisation on people who have not asked for it?

This may seem a rhetorical question. However, when democratisation is about some form of participative democracy, and not about some kind of representative democracy, it becomes a real question. If nobody in a workplace asks for it, what are the legitimate reasons for research to take on the task and responsibility for engaging in enhancing democratisation of workplaces? The *Industrial Democracy* project did not pose this question explicitly, but the researchers behind it were quite aware of the problematics behind it. A short overview of how they dealt with it and the further development of the strategies to deal with it may be helpful to understand the ways research confronts this problematic today.

In Scandinavia the question of industrial democracy was on the political agenda in the fifties and sixties, at first in the form of a quest for “economic democracy”. The slogan of the labour movement was that political democracy had to be complemented by economic democracy, if society was to be considered a really democratic society. The conceptions and the debates of economic democracy took on different paths in Norway and Sweden. A bit simplified, the main difference was this: The Norwegian labour movement emphasised that capital and labour represent in principle two equally legitimate bases for influence in the enterprises. The Swedish labour movement, however, tended to consider capital and labour as two principally unequal bases for influence and therefore the workers’ union ought to collectively own a fair share of the capital, in order to get real influence in the enterprises (Sejersted, 2005).

The position of the Norwegian labour movement, viewing capital and labour as equally legitimate bases for power and influence at the workplace, for obvious reasons caused less resistance within the employers' organisation than the Swedish position. Also, this position made it possible for the researchers behind the *Industrial Democracy* project to argue their cause to the main parties of working life: namely that the workers' influence over their own workplace was quite as important as the influence the workers would obtain through representatives in the boards of the enterprises. The importance of democratisation at the workplace was exactly what should be demonstrated by the *Industrial Democracy* project. The parties of working life were sceptical regarding the belief that this idea could be realised in practice, but they did not reject the idea in principle, and decided to give it a try.

This decision was made in the form of an institutional agreement between the employer and the unions, at the workplaces that were to participate in the project, and this agreement was anchored in the basic agreement between the parties of working life at the national level. Thus, it may be said that this decision was made above the head of those who were to participate in the project at the workplace level, but it cannot be said that the decision was not made in accordance with the institutionalised democratic procedures. At the societal level, there are two different forms of institutionalised democratic principles that are the main sources of legitimacy for the form and content of this decision-making: The *freedom to organise*, which forms the basis for the employees and employers organisations, and the *freedom of expression* that among others forms the basis for the debates and deliberations in the public sphere.

Accordingly, both the quest for democratisation of working life, and the decision to experiment in practice with operationalising it as some kind of democratisation at the workplace, took place at the national level. Those who were to participate in the experiments at the local level did not really ask for it: rather, they accepted it. These were the conditions, and this was the point of the departure for carrying out the local action research project that aimed at realising some form of industrial democracy in Norwegian working life.

**Renewal of a Scandinavian approach:  
From practising science to practising dialogues**

Even though all of this was not explicitly stated, all was well acknowledged, and the action research strategy was developed on this basis: Firstly, it had to be demonstrated that it was possible to concretise the principles for design of new forms of work organisations in practice, by creating new organisational forms that were both more productive and more democratic than the traditional forms. When this was undertaken at the workplace level, the local management and workers were expected to be convinced about the superiority of the new forms of work organisation. Secondly, on this basis, research based knowledge of the theoretical principles and practical design of these new forms of work organisations would supply the parties of working life with the knowledge necessary to argue the cause to the management and union in other workplaces, and to install new forms of work organisations at the workplace level throughout the industries in general.

It was in particular the institutional anchoring of the project and the strategy for dissemination by the parties of working life at the national level, which made this project appear as a somewhat new kind of approach in action research. However, regarding the theoretical framework of the *Industrial Democracy* project, it was the classical Enlightenment model of scientific knowledge that guided both the carrying out of the local experiments, and the strategy for dissemination of the results from the initial projects. This theoretical model of knowledge came to be experienced as highly problematic in practice.

The problematic aspects of the Enlightenment notion of scientific knowledge may be many. What appeared to cause a main difficulty in the *Industrial Democracy* project was the inherent tendency of this notion to assume that general knowledge contains in some embryonic form the more concrete knowledge required for its practical application. Thus, in the co-operation between researchers and practitioners, the task of the researchers appears to be to provide the general knowledge, and the task of the practitioners is to complete the general picture with concrete details and put this concretised knowledge into practice. More specifically, in the *Industrial Democracy* project the researchers were to provide the general principles and

models of democratic forms of work organisation, and the local people at the workplace were to take care of the practical details and put these democratic forms of work organisation into practice.

In practice it turned out that the local people at the workplace agreed to collaborate on democratising their work organisation, but they did not agree to collaborate in accordance with the above-mentioned model of the relation between scientific knowledge and their own knowledge. The forms of collaboration took on other forms. Through trial and error, co-operation and conflicts, progress and setbacks, new forms of work organisation gradually emerged. Most of them were judged to be better than the older forms by those who had participated in working out and had experience from working within the new forms of organisation. However, to those who had not participated or had no experience from the new work organisations, being enlightened about the general positive features of the new forms of work organisation did not make them “see the light”. In effect, the Enlightenment model of knowledge did not work very well: neither in the process of creating new forms of work organisation, nor in the process of dissemination of these new and more democratic forms of work organisation.

To make a long story short, the problems that the researchers working with the industrial Democracy project were confronted in the realisation of their action research strategy, over the years led to considerable changes in this strategy. The first major steps were made on the basis of the experiences during the seventies with involving the actors at the workplace not only in the process of implementing new democratic forms of organisation at the local level, but in the very process of designing these local forms. This development of methods and procedures of “participative redesign” enforced both the local projects and the process of dissemination. The next major steps were made during the eighties, where the task of creating new organisational forms was enlarged to comprise tasks of improving the workplace along a broader spectrum of issues, from work environment issues to product development. This broadening of the scope of issues was enabled by the research based development in methods and procedures for broader involvement in the work of improvement and development at the enterprise level. A new agreement between the main parties of working life granted financial and professional

support to enterprises that wanted to involve in principle all employees in the combined development into a better and more competitive enterprise.

Thus, during the eighties and the early nineties it appeared that the overall strategy of action research for democratising working life in Norway had undergone a kind of transformation during the three preceding decades, in particular regarding the *tasks and role of the researchers*: The main research task had changed, from being a question of providing models of democratic forms of organisation, to becoming a question of providing models of democratic procedures for forming the organisation by the members of the organisation themselves.

This change in the action research strategy was manifested also by the version of this strategy that in the mid-eighties was ‘exported’ to Swedish working life and became known as the “democratic dialogue” approach (Gustavsen, 1992). This approach was developed in co-operation between the Norwegian Work Research Institute and the parties of working life in Sweden and Norway, and it was carried out in Sweden as a tripartite co-operation between governmental agencies, the parties of working life at the national level and work research milieus. This anchoring in democratic institutions of working life was a solid base of legitimacy for the “democratic dialogue” approach.

The term “democratic dialogue” calls attention to the fact that the key element of this strategy for developing and enforcing democratic procedures within working life is various kinds of *dialogues*. This focus on dialogues may serve as a point of departure for summing up some general elements of this Scandinavian approach as a strategy for making action research contribute to democratic development of working life.

Firstly, as noted, the question of democratisation is conceived as a question of expanding and increasing the possibilities for people at work to participate in the processes of development, not only of their workplaces but of the enterprise as a whole. Thus, the task of research in contributing to democracy at work is to provide theoretical models, perspectives and knowledge of ways of organising and performing dialogues that are in accordance with criteria for democratic procedures. The practical use of these theoretical models and knowledge has to be undertaken in accordance with both the general societal

and specific local conditions. Questions of who are legitimate participants in the dialogues, and how to organise them, will be dependent on what are the issues at stake, who are dealing with these issues, who are affected by them etc.

Secondly, it follows from this that democratisation is conceived as a question of developing and enforcing more democratic ways of dealing with issues that are subject to *conflicting* interests, opinions and values among those concerned. Democratisation is not considered a question of creating some kind of new organisational forms that presumably should represent a stable base for consensus and harmony. Neither is empowerment considered simply a question of creating new organisational forms that mean delegation and redistribution of power within the organisation. Rather, democratisation and empowerment are considered a question of empowering people, in the sense of increasing their opportunities to take care of their interests by participating in dialogues where everybody in a certain sense participates on an equal footing. As members of the same (organisational, institutional or societal) entity, every person is, on one hand, confronted with the challenge of legitimising one's own interests by somehow relating them to the common interests of the whole entity; on the other hand, no individual is in a position to define what are these common interests. The topic of what are the common interests is a subject to a common deliberation among the members of the entity. This of course does not mean that all members of e.g. an enterprise are equal in power; it means a procedure to empower the many who have less powerful positions in hierarchical organisations.

Finally, the emphasis on democratic procedures through dialogue means that this research approach can only approach partners for collaboration through dialogue. This implies that this strategy for making action research contribute to democratic development of working life cannot be imposed on people, organisations or institutions that have not 'asked for it.' This may be regarded as a weakness of this approach, regarding it as an action research strategy for democratisation that aims at societal impact. However, it should be pretty evident that in a society based on democratic institutions, these are the conditions for any action research approach which aims at further democratisation of society: not just in Scandinavia, but worldwide.

### **A Scandinavian action research methodology for impact on society and social science**

Above, I have highlighted some of the main aspects of the development of this Scandinavian action research approach, considered as a strategy for having broader impact on working life, preferably by contributing to a more democratic development. I started out from the question “who wants democracy?”, and continued by presenting some main developments in the practical methods by which this question has been dealt with. There is, however, one more rather fundamental question to be posed, in order to understand why this Scandinavian approach has developed in its specific way: “Why seek impact by means of *research*?”

Needless to say, there are more direct ways to trying to change and democratise working life than by means of action research. As we know, the emergence of action research originated from the wish to make social research become more useful in practice: in that respect, it was a strategy for creating better forms of social research, reforming social science. Once established as a form of research practice, though, the purpose of action research projects, more than often, tends to be oriented towards creating practical change in some societal field; the purpose of reforming social science is not necessarily part of the projects.

In the Scandinavian approach, however, the developments in the design and performance of research projects have been based on the perspective of conceiving action research as a strategy for contributing to reforming both working life and social science. In order to highlight some important ways in which this perspective has had consequences for the development of this Scandinavian approach, it might be fruitful to start with a brief characterisation of this approach as seen from ‘outsiders’.

In their introduction to “The SAGE Handbook of Action Research” (Second edition, 2008), the editors Hilary Bradbury and Peter Reason make use of the concept of first-person, second-person and third-person action research to classify different approaches of action research. The editors’ characterisation of second-person action research goes like this: “Second-person action research/practice addresses our ability to inquire face-to-face with others into mutual concern ... and includes the develop-

ment of communities of practice and learning organisations” (Bradbury & Reason, 2008, p. 6). Since the Scandinavian approach definitely cannot be categorised as a first- or second-person approach, I will quote their characterisation of the third-person approach at length:

“Third-person research/practice aims to extend these relatively small scaled projects – i.e. second-person projects ØP – to create a wider impact. As Gustavsen points out, action research will be of limited influence if we think only in terms of single cases, and that we need to think of creating a series of events interconnected in a broader stream: which we can see as social movements or social capital (Gustavsen, 2003a, 2003b). So third-person strategies aim to create a wider community of inquiry involving persons who, because they cannot be known to each other face-to-face (say, in a large, geographically dispersed co-operation), have an impersonal quality. Writing and reporting of the process and outcomes of inquiries can also be an important form of third-person inquiry” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 6).

Although probably neither Gustavsen nor I would fully subscribe to this concept of third-person action research, I think it may serve as an apt point of departure to remind of some important elements of this Scandinavian action research approach. As has been noted, this approach has from the beginning been developed on the basis of a strategy for research to have a wider impact on working life. This has had strong consequences for the subsequent development of both *methods* and *theory*.

The development of practical *methods* that make it possible to involve practitioners, in a number that is far beyond what the action researchers can have personal contact with, and communicate with in action research projects, has been one main important element of this approach. The use and development of theories of knowledge that are critical to the belief in scientific knowledge as a superior kind of knowledge, that in principle may be able to express all other kinds of knowledge and experience, has been an important part of the *theoretical* efforts of this approach.

Due to these development in methods and theory, this Scandinavian approach has for decades been based on the presupposition that action researchers neither *can*, nor *need to*, understand all the local knowledge that exists among the practitioners. That is part of the reason why this approach to such

a large extent is based on organising dialogues among practitioners, in which researchers neither participate nor make recordings of (the dialogue conferences). On this methodological and theoretical basis, there is no need for action researchers to understand more of the local practice and local knowledge than is required in order to organise dialogues among the practitioners on how they should organise their work with the *development tasks* in their company/organisation.

This is why the action researchers using this approach do not need to have an in-depth knowledge of the unique constellation of the local circumstances in order to help the local actors find practical solutions to their challenges and the need for local change and development. What we really do is to help the practitioners themselves find their way within exactly their own ‘unique constellation’ of circumstances. This we do by collaborating with the practitioners on organising new kinds of dialogues amongst themselves. The main issues of these dialogues are what they define as their problems, what they would suggest to do, and finally the crucial question of *how* they will organise the practical development process by which the solutions to these problems might be brought forth. Therefore, our task in this collaboration is not to ‘suggest changes’ in the form of proposals of solutions to their problems. What we do suggest are changes to the development process by which new and better solutions are to be brought forth. These changes are mainly questions of organising the development process and the dialogues that is part of it. We barely address questions about what solutions they should go for: rather, we address the question about what way to get there.

Thus, in order to be able to collaborate with representatives of the practitioners in organising such dialogues in ways that work, in this approach we do not need to have an extensive knowledge of what N. Dohn has termed the ‘action practice’ of the practitioners. She may be right when she claims that this is a quality issue that is “potentially present in very many action research projects” (Dohn, 2104, p. 61), but the action research projects based on the Scandinavian approach here presented are not among these ‘many projects’. Indeed, we also have quality issues to deal with, but they are of a different nature. The most precarious ones are the quality of the *dialogue processes we organise*, and the quality of the *scientific publications we write*. I will elabo-

rate shortly on both these two issues, since they are interconnected, also regarding the question of social impact of action research.

### **Creation and publication of knowledge to have impact on society and social science**

Turning firstly to the quality issues of the dialogue conferences, I think it is worthwhile to start with emphasising that a certain *dis-belief in scientific and other kinds of linguistically expressed knowledge that aim at representing a comprehensive picture of the situation as a basis for action* is an important part of the background for why dialogue conferences are organised the way they are. I have earlier expressed one aspect of this problematic in the following way: “whatever the quality or the aptness of a diagnosis: it is never *identical* with what is diagnosed, because it is a linguistic simulation”. My claim is that people who do not realise this, run the risk of “end(ing) up with simple words about complex deeds, words with very little practical potential” (Pålshaugen, 2001, pp. 214-215).

A crucial point in this respect is that the risk of ending up with ‘simple words about complex deeds’ is a risk that is run not only by researchers, but quite as much by practitioners. To put it briefly, my point is that also practitioners may easily enter into modes of discourse which are de-contextualised and de-coupled in relation to their practical experience and knowledge, and in this sense they perform a ‘theoretical’ discourse. Therefore, practitioners may over and over again find themselves in a situation where they *in practice* perform a ‘theoretical’ kind of discourse, even though their *theoretical understanding* of themselves as practitioners makes them blind to seeing this (theoretical) point (Pålshaugen, 2001, p. 210).

This is why the researchers in the Scandinavian approach try to help the practitioners make their own discourse more practically relevant. More specifically, this is why the final session of a dialogue conference is never about the *content* of the problems to be solved or about the content of solutions, but about the *work forms* by which the solutions can be realized in practice.

Finally, this is also an important part of the rationale behind an epigrammatic statement Gustavsen once wrote about the outcome of dialogue conferences: “The outcome is a work agenda, not an analysis” (Gustavsen, 2001, p. 21). That this is a main outcome of dialogue conferences, as part of an action research project, does not mean a downgrading of the goals they aim at for the conferences, as some seem to have interpreted it (Drewes Nielsen, 2006). Rather, the opposite is the case. Dialogue conferences are usually not an objective in themselves; they are part of years-long action research projects where the overall aim is the creation of a *development organisation* within which practically all employees participate (Engelstad, 1996; Pålshaugen, 1998). In turn, the overall action research strategy that is common for these long-term projects has been to contribute to the further development of democratic working life reforms.

The main reasons for this ‘upgrading’ of dialogue conferences and development organisations as means for democratic working life reforms and democratisation of working life, are to be found in the way they allow for broad participation in enterprise development processes, and thus participation in the formation of future working life. A strategy of action research for democracy would remain a number of single events for ‘the happy few’ if the strategy is not carried out in practice by methods that allow for broad participation, both in the events where action researchers are involved, and the practical developments processes that the practitioners carry out themselves as follow ups from the dialogue conferences. The anchoring of the projects in some kind of democratic institutions that have a role in processes of dissemination is also part of the strategy to make action research for democracy affect even larger number of ‘third-person’ actors. In this sense, the strategy for having social impact and the strategy of action research for democracy coincide. This is conceptualised in various ways, e.g. by Gustavsen and myself. Gustavsen has written extensively about ‘democratic dialogue’ while I have written about ‘discourse democracy at work’ based on ‘public spheres in private enterprises (Gustavsen, 2014, 1992; Pålshaugen, 2004, 2002).

Applying the third-person perspective to this Scandinavian approach may make it easier for outsiders to see that this approach is not primarily oriented towards *co-creation of new knowledge* by practitioners and researchers. The

collaboration between practitioners and action researchers is oriented towards the *creation of new practice*: primarily among the practitioners, and aiming at a larger impact within working life.

As for the question of knowledge, the main issue is *to make knowledge used in practice* for purposes of democratic procedures of improvements and innovation. Such knowledge may be both existing knowledge (including tacit knowledge) and new knowledge created in the course of the project (regardless of whether created by the practitioners, the researchers or in collaboration). The creation of new scientific knowledge, however, is solely a responsibility of the action researchers.

There are many ways of creating new knowledge, and there are many forms of knowledge. However, no new knowledge can come into existence as new scientific knowledge without writing a scientific publication that is presented to the scientific community through one of its publication channels. In the Scandinavian approach, the responsibility of creating new scientific knowledge is not the responsibility of the practitioners, it is a sole responsibility on the side of the action researchers. Regardless of the kind of collaborations on many kinds of tasks that have taken place throughout an action research project, the writing of a scientific publication is a task that involves only researchers. The publication may be of interest to the practitioners, or perhaps not; that depends on the purpose of writing the publication (cf. Pålshaugen, 1996).

However, it is an unconditional requirement that the scientific publication should be of interest to the scientific community that is addressed by the publication. As we know the scientific community is not one, there are a number of scientific communities: among these also communities of action research. More specifically, there are a number of discourses that take place within the scientific community, and researchers from different communities may participate in more than one of these. Thus, any new scientific publication has to be written with an awareness of the status of the knowledge, issues and problematics at stake in the very discourse(s) it addresses, in order to contribute with something *new* to the(se) discourse(s).

The newness of a new contribution may be new empirical knowledge, new perspectives etc. However, contributions from action research to scien-

tific discourses do not necessarily need to be contributions in the form of pieces of new knowledge that somehow add to the accumulation of knowledge in the social sciences. In addition to constructive contributions, there is a need also to publish *critical* contributions. Our strategy for contributing to the reform of social science is to produce both kinds of publications; and also to write publications that combine constructive and critical contents (Eikeland, 2007; Pålshaugen, 2006).

In both cases, the scientific publication is intended to work as a *critical intervention* into the discourse within which it is being published. As for the constructive contributions, like the perspectives on dialogue conferences as a kind of ‘democratic dialogue’, or as a part of ‘public spheres in private enterprises’, these are deliberately written to present perspectives that are *critical supplements* to the already existing perspectives on democratisation of working life within the social sciences. The need for critical supplements stems from the fact that most of the already existing theories focus on democratisation in the form of some kind of representative democracy, or they focus on direct participation as a kind of participative democracy that is practised locally without any connection to democratic institutions of society.

As for the critical contributions, they can be of different kinds regarding their content. A general critical point, that has been addressed in various ways in many publications, is the still rather common tendency within social research to presume that general scientific knowledge on social phenomena is inherently actionable (Pålshaugen, 2006). Many scientific publications from social research appear to be written on the tacit presumption that in society, outside the scientific community, there is a kind of *general actor* that is the imagined addressee of *general knowledge*. In this way, the criteria for general knowledge and actionable knowledge become confused, and thereby most of the challenges pertaining to the question of the *use* of scientific knowledge: which are a main concern in action research, is as it were ‘outsourced’ to the practitioners outside the scientific community.

From the perspectives of this Scandinavian approach, the ‘solution’ to this pertinent weakness of social science is not to be found in battling general knowledge. Rather the opposite: in order to obtain broader impact, local action research projects are to be analysed from broader perspectives, and

presented in scientific publications as part of a larger development within working life and society: which they actually are. The local action research projects have to be analysed and understood from the more general context of which they are a part, and therefore the kind of knowledge generated will have, and shall be of, a certain general kind. This goes for action research as it goes for social research. The main difference, and the main problem, is that social research tends to overlook or neglect a very important part of the societal context when producing general scientific knowledge: namely the societal context of *its own use*. This is the perhaps most general reason for the still pertinent need for reforming social science: a reform process in which this Scandinavian approach still participates in, and still has the ambition of having critical impact on.

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