

Participation, Power and Democracy: Exploring the Tensional Field between Empowerment and Constraint in Action Research

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The question of how to understand and approach the relationship between participation and power in Action Research is widely contested. Drawing on data and experiences gathered while taking part in a value-creation pilot in Norway (2007-2010), this paper seeks to fill a general void in the literature in terms of exploring the relationship between participation, power and democracy in participatory Action Research. The findings suggest the necessity of overcoming traditional dichotomies between pragmatic-constructivist and power-knowledge approaches to Action Research. By acknowledging the co-existence of both consensus and dissent as natural parts of any development process, this paper argues that a more reflexive, democratic and actionable approach can be taken in navigating the unfolding tensional field between empowerment and constraint.

Key words: participation, dialogic Action Research, democratisation, power/knowledge, Scandinavian work-life tradition

1. Introduction

Recently, the under-explored relationship between participation and power in dialogic Action Research has been placed back on the agenda (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011; Fricke, 2011). The overall perspective presented by Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2011) is to bring participation, as an ‘enact-

ment of power', into the centre of the dialogic, organisational Action Research process and into Action Research that is understood as participatory. This implies focusing on how power is enacted and carried out in concrete contexts. The relationship between participation and power is understood in terms of the on-going struggles between the participants involved in 'defining reality' (Kristiansen & Block-Poulsen, 2011, p. 348). Fricke (2011) criticises this 'one-dimensional' approach for being too pessimistic, arguing that it takes a too-general, formal and narrow view of both participation and power. According to Fricke, a distinction has to be made between participation and *democratic participation*, which Action Research is (should be) concerned with:

...organising dialogic participation processes, in which all members of an enterprise or of the participating group develop their ability to take part in defining reality. The more the Action Research process succeeds in giving participants a voice, the more the initial distribution of power changes (Fricke, 2011, p. 384).

This dispute reflects the age-old epistemological controversy regarding how to understand and approach the relationship between participation and power from a democratisation perspective (see also Flyvbjerg, 2001; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008). Translated into practical settings and seen from an Action Researcher's point of view, this implies operation in an unfolding tensional field between empowerment and constraint (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011).

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this valuable discussion. Drawing on data and experiences gathered during participation in a value-creation project in a large-scale, national R&D programme called 'Creating New Assets in the Cultural Heritage Sphere' in Norway (2007-2010), the aim of this paper is to explore the challenges, dilemmas and tensions that emerge when conducting open-ended participatory Action Research in practice. It seeks to fill a general void in the literature in regards to exploring the dynamic relationship between participation, power and democracy in participatory Action Research. Secondly, by acknowledging the co-existence of both consensus and dissensus as natural parts of any development process, it is argued that a more reflexive, democratic and actionable approach can be

taken in order to navigate the unfolding tensional field between empowerment and constraint.

Table 1: Presentation of participants and their roles in the development process

Abbreviations	Participants/Actors	Role
VCPH	Value Creation Pilot Hammerdalen	National pilot in the large-scale R&D program 'Creating new Assets in the Cultural Heritage Sphere' (2007-2010)
TF	Treschow-Fritzøe AS (partner)	Property owner/private company
ML	Municipality of Larvik (partner)	Local authorities
LM	Larvik Museum (partner)	Local historical museum
LL	Larvik Link (innovation, industry and competence centre) (partner)	Private/public industry organisation
VUC	Vestfold University College (partner/project manager)	Regional development agency/R&D
VCC	Vestfold County Council (partner)	Regional authority/development agency
	The Directorate for Cultural Heritage and the Ministry of Environment	National program owners/employer
	Artists/cultural entrepreneurs in Hammerdalen (approx. 50 individual enterprises in 2009)	First group of tenants established in Hammerdalen after industrial closure
SPNAM	The Society for the Preservation of Norwegian Ancient Monuments	NGO, cultural heritage preservation/interest organisation

In the case of the *Value Creation Pilot Hammerdalen* (VCPH) (2007-2010), a regional partnership was established between the property owner and a private company, Treschow-Fritzøe (TF); the municipality of Larvik (ML); Larvik Museum (LM); Larvik innovation, industry and competence centre (LL); Vestfold County Council (VCC); and Vestfold University College (VUC). The aim was to investigate, through a co-generative learning process, how the cultural heritage (tangible and intangible) of one of the oldest industrial areas in Norway could be preserved and used as a creative resource to attract new businesses to compensate for workplaces that had left the area.

Thus, the cultural heritage could be ‘transformed into new values for the maximum benefit of the property owner, the local community, the region and the nation’ (Project Plan, 2007, p. 2). In the analysis, I explore what happens when a pluralistic coalition of actors, knowledge interests and motivations come together in longitudinal participatory Action Research processes; how the involved participants understand, define and evaluate the pilot, their own participation and others’ participation in the process and how emerging challenges, dilemmas and tensions are dealt with from an Action Research point of view.

To shed light on the involved participants’ various constructions of reality, I contrast the official version of the report, promoted by the five partners in the VCPH (Final report, 2011), with the stories told by other involved and affected actors (voices) in the area. These include established artists in Hammerdal, a NGO: The Society for the Preservation of Norwegian Ancient Monuments (SPNAM), and my own first-person reflections accrued due to my combined positions of project leader and co-researcher, as well as my actively taking part in the learning process as it evolved over time.

2. Theoretical framework

If we accept the conjecture that an Action Researcher operates in an unfolding field between empowerment and constraint (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011), the ultimate question that emerges is how to approach this complex situation within an uncertain unfolding participatory Action Research process. Seen from an Action Researcher’s point of view, this implies taking a stand regarding orientation in time and space: deciding what to focus on and what to emphasise and prioritise within continually new, unique, complex and open-ended emerging settings. Equally important is the definition of and continual reflection upon one’s own role in relation to the participants with whom you are engaged, and how to approach the development field in general. I will devote attention to two approaches in this inquiry: the *pragmatic-constructivist* approach and the *power-knowledge* approach.

2.1 The pragmatic-constructivist approach and participation

The so-called *pragmatic-constructivist* approach to Action Research characteristically focuses on the creation of the procedures, preconditions and social infrastructures that must be fulfilled for a decision or a process to be termed ‘democratic’ (Gustavsen et al., 2008; Fricke, 2011). The Action Research-oriented Scandinavian work-life tradition can be linked to this pragmatic-constructivist attitude (Gustavsen, 2011). The founding idea highlighted within this tradition is based on the notion of *democratic dialogue* as the main constructive force for socially responsible learning and innovation (Gustavsen et al., 2008; Shotter & Gustavsen, 1999). Dialogue, in this respect, refers to conversations between ‘equal partners, characterized by openness, willingness to listen to each other, to accept good arguments and generally to learn from each other’ (Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999, p. 81). However, this apparent social disposition, which is represented by mutual understanding, trust and respect, is insufficient unless it is actively coupled with actionable knowledge of development processes, organising and learning, as well as being made subject to systematic development work (Gustavsen et al., 2001). Deep-rooted power inequities can and should be challenged through participatory knowledge strategies and dialogue-structured arrangements, such as the search conference or the dialogue conference (Shotter & Gustavsen, 1999). The aim is to facilitate a kind of social infrastructure that enables the involved parts to *create connectedness*. From this, the discovery of ground for mutual commitments, further contacts and joint efforts results (Gustavsen et al., 2001). Based on this spirit, a range of large-scale national R&D programmes have been carried out in Scandinavian countries over the last four decades; among these is the national programme that is the basis for the empirical case discussed in this inquiry. The R&D programmes are, in and of themselves, a means of bringing various players and diverse bases of knowledge together in projects (Alasioni, 2011). According to Shotter and Gustavsen (1999), it is by taking part in these kinds of joint activities that ‘...each participant can, from their own unique place in the relational landscape they all share, make a unique contribution to the region’s development in a way that fits in with those of all others’:

... It is this social power of a group of people in dialogically structured, living contact with each other to create a shared, shaped, and vectored sense of their surroundings, a sense that enables them all to orient towards the future in a co-ordinated way (Shotter & Gustavsen, 1999, p. 14).

Within this perspective, knowledge production becomes more 'relevant', 'reliable' and 'socially robust', because those affected participate in its production in order to meet a practical need and become useful through its application (Nowotny et al., 2001). Although dissensus and conflicting interests are acknowledged to be natural parts of any development process, it can be argued that the focus within this tradition has been placed on the proactive principle of 'learning from differences' through dialogue-structured arrangements (Gustavsen et al., 2001). A key principle in these organising efforts is the notion of *broad participation*. By extending the circle of actors, conflicts, blockages or other problems can be mitigated through the core strategy of 'bringing new partners into the discourse rather than attacking the problems head-on' (Pålshaugen, 2004).

...If the context is reasonably broad, involving a number of actors of different categories and providing some degree of influence for all, the likelihood of irresponsible innovation – or indeed any other kind of act putting common interest at risk – is, if not removed, at least minimized (Gustavsen, 2011, p. 2).

Conflict agendas are, from this point of view, seen as 'hybrids': '...the introduction of new actors often generates a change of agenda that makes conflicts disappear or at least "makes the actors able to move on"' (Gustavsen et al., 2008, p. 72). As such, this view resembles Fricke's argument outlined in the introduction. Participation is defined as an organising activity that takes place 'within the face of power', and knowledge *is* power. The ideal is that 'argumentation ensures that all concerned in principle take part, freely and equally, in a co-operative search for truth, where nothing coerces anyone except the force of the better argument' (Habermas, 1990, p. 198).

2.2 The power-knowledge approach and participation

The other trajectory is what I call the knowledge-critical approach, or the *power-knowledge* approach. Inspired by the work of, among others, Foucault, advocates of this tradition stress that emphasis should be given to ‘how power works’ in concrete practices and contexts (Krisitansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011). Action and participation *are* the exercise and enactment of power (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 179); as Foucault argues, ‘...there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 27). The core argument derived from this is that power and knowledge are mutually implicated in framing those truths that are held as self-evident and thus shape reality (Foucault, 1977). It is the facilitative and productive sides of power that are emphasised in this line of thought, which is in contrast to the traditional repressive understanding derived from the Hobbesian tradition. In simple terms, this means moving away from the assumption that power is a single body that can be viewed from an external point that is localised in centres and institutions or as an entity one can ‘possess’, which is often repressive in its nature (i.e., the sovereign’s power over his subjects). Instead, power is viewed as an ultra-dynamic phenomenon, a dense net of omnipresent relations. Rather than looking for ‘who has power’ and ‘why they have it’, the question also relates to ‘*how* power is exercised’. Power is not immediately given by a functional system, but is practically achieved through relational action, rules of the game and deeper ‘iconic’ systems of domination (Clegg, 1989). Furthermore, power is not only something one appropriates, but also re-appropriates and exercises in a constant back-and-forth movement of strengths, tactics and strategies (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Power works through discourses, institutions and practices that produce power effects, framing the boundaries of possibility that are conducive to action. Power defines what is possible; it is a network of social boundaries that constrains and enables the actions of all actors (Hayward, 1998, in Gaventa and Cornwall, 2006). Hence, organisational structures and systems are not neutral or apolitical, but ‘structurally sedimented phenomena’: there

will always be a history of struggles already embedded in all types of organisational or social activity because ‘power is always present’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Clegg, 1989, 2006). From a democratisation perspective, ‘power is needed to limit power’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

2.3 Between empowerment and constraint in participatory Action Research

The two trajectories outlined above highlight an essential tension in terms of thinking and understanding participation, power and democracy. From my point of view, a fruitful approach would be to overcome this traditional dichotomy. It would be futile, however, to attempt to integrate these two perspectives into a common methodological framework. Nonetheless, if the aim is to make Action Research even more reflexive, democratic and actionable, this paper suggests acknowledging the co-existence of consensus and dissensus in participatory Action Research. Both are possible within a development process. By paying more attention to this dynamic relationship, extended capability can be liberated from an Action Research point of view in terms of recognising the nuances of the complex, open-ended and emerging character of knowledge formation processes in the continuum between empowerment and constraint. As Flyvbjerg (2001) argues while referring to Habermas and Foucault as advocates of the two approaches, these perspectives should not be considered ‘simply opposites’, but rather one another’s ‘complementary shadows in their efforts to both understand and limit rationalisation and the misuse of power’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 89).

3. Methods

The inquiry is based on an Action Research orientation as a means of structuring collaborative work among a plurality of actors and interests while researching in practice (Dobson & Selman, 2012; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Gustavsen et al., 2001). Soon after the start of my employment at Vestfold University College (VUC) in August of 2008, I was asked to step in as a project leader as part of my ‘work duty’. The project had already been running for one year. Thus, the project organisation had been established among

the five main partners, and the overall project plan (2007), with its mandate, vision, key strategies and related measures and activities, was explicitly defined by the actors. The project claimed a flat and egalitarian profile, based on the idea that each individual partner contributed his or her expertise for the benefit of all. The role of the project leader could be described as more of a secretarial function or a facilitator than a traditional manager with decisional authority. In the period from August of 2008 to October of 2010, I was directly involved and actively took part in the facilitation of 30 project group meetings and ten executive board meetings, as well as initiating a range of activities and arrangements with the other participants involved in the pilot. In my position, it was expected that the researcher would enter into relationships with specific others in order to attempt joint innovation. Research is as such not only an opportunity to observe change affected by others; it is itself among the actors working for change (Gustavsen et al., 2001). Furthermore, the research strategy has been inspired by the Torbert and Taylor's (2008) 'developmental action inquiry' and first-person method, in which the focus is placed not only on items and practices outside the inquirer (third-person objects and practices) but also the inquirer's own changing practices, ways of thinking and quality of attention as the inquirer takes part in a development process.

Through this active participation as co-researcher, it has been possible to create data regarding emerging dilemmas, challenges and tensions within the process as it unfolded in action and reflection cycles (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). The interventions and their effects were recorded through a regular research diary and the minutes of meetings and encounters. Some of these texts, particularly the project group minutes, were used as points of departure for further inquiry and joint reflection and organisational tools to use in securing progress in the various activities set in motion. Through this type of co-operative inquiry, the participants and I were put in a position in which it was possible to question and challenge one another's assumptions, to share ideas and meanings, and to co-create plans and implement them in practice.

In addition to the Action Research approach, conventional qualitative methods were used throughout the fieldwork period. This encompassed 25 semi-structured interviews conducted with key representatives that were

linked to the pilot in various ways. The informants represented the various partners in the pilot, or they represented artists and cultural entrepreneurs established in Hammerdalen. Conversations and encounter with other interest groups engaged in the processes, such as SPNAM, were also undertaken. Some of the informants were interviewed several times in order to gain an in-depth understanding of how they experienced the development process over time. The interviews were documented through either audio recording or manual notes and later transcribed into complete manuscripts. Part of the data gathering was founded on various texts: official documents and reports, letters, notes and coverage in local and national media regarding the project. Of particular interest in this inquiry is the official Hammerdalen 'Final report' (2011), co-produced by the partners in the pilot after I finished my field work. Through this type of multiple-data-source collection, it was possible to follow the process from an 'insider position' as it evolved in real-time, that is, as a part of a co-generative learning process (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). At the same time, it was possible to contrast my own observations and data (first- and second-person inquiries) (Torbert, 2008) with other data sources and interpretations (third-person inquiry).

To shed light on the tensional relationships between participation, power and democracy, the data in this inquiry are delimited to the narratives from four 'voices' involved in the deliberative/conflicting processes of 'defining the reality' in the case of VCPH:

- The unified voice of the partnership of VCPH (Final report, 2011).
- The voice of the artists.
- The voice of an NGO (The Society for the Preservation of Norwegian Monuments).
- The voice of an Action Researcher (my own reflections through first-person experiences from the process).

4. The case

4.1 *The official version of VCPH: Participation and definition of reality*

...It is the project's experience and conviction that collaboration and dialogue is possible. The work of four years has created lasting relationships between people and environments and an increased understanding of the intrinsic value of cultural heritage in specific contexts, as well as its value creation force in general (Final report, 2011, p. 5; my translation).

According to the official Hammerdalen final report (2011), the point of departure for VCPH was based on an extensive change of use for a former industrial area, which has now been opened up for new business activities and made available to the public (p. 5). The report underscores how the project came about because '*actors who normally do not communicate*' found common ground in the form of the national R&D program, '[C]reating new assets in the cultural heritage sphere'. The project was financed as a joint venture among the partners, including funding from the national employer, the Directorate for Cultural Heritage (total budget approximately 1.8 million Euros). According to the report, the common denominator was the desire to protect and transform a traditional industrial area. Thus, it is argued that "...the ambition was to reconcile two often antagonistic societal processes, namely cultural heritage protection and industrial development" (p. 5). The report underscores the initial differences and motives identified among the individual players, and 'how demanding such pluralistic collaborative relationships can be' (p. 5). Nonetheless, the intention from the start was to search for mutually agreeable and sustainable joint solutions that would satisfy various needs, interests and important values in the area as a whole. Accordingly, the intent was to transform the old industrial area into a 'new quarter' that was based on the history, character and cultural monuments in the area.

To reach the main objectives defined in the initial project plan (2007), it was argued that it was necessary to construct a broadly composed organisational structure, enhancing proximate interaction on an operative level to ensure that the foundation of actors, responsibility and information flowed among the partners. Hence, the project was organised in the form of an

operative working group in which all the partners were represented. This group met monthly throughout the entire project period, and was supported by an executive board, including the head executives from each of the institutions, to ensure power and the necessary security for the decision-making processes. The report further describes how the project was organised based on four main strategies: i) Cultural heritage (LM); ii) Value creation/real estate (TF); iii) R&D (VUC) and iv) Project management (VUC). The purpose of this flat and distributed organisational model was to reflect the members' intention and willingness to engage in dialogue and activities across traditional boundaries. The subprojects were naturally delegated on the basis of formal expertise and roles in the project, and each of the individual players were given the mandate and responsibility, through a bottom-up process, to plan, conduct and implement the activities that were defined within their individual portfolios in the action plan.

Presentation of results: In their report from 2009, the Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research (NIKU) concluded that the pilot constitutes an exciting example seen from a professional cultural heritage point of view, as it exemplifies a new way to practice cultural heritage management with an emphasis on protection through new sustainable use (Berg et al., 2009). This conclusion is supported by a range of success stories, which are presented and highlighted in the Hammerdalen final report (2011). This report emphasises that *a good and transparent, although challenging, collaborative relationship* has been established between the partners. The success stories are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2:

Results	Strategy	Narrative
From industrial area to new <i>meeting places in a modern urban life setting</i>	2 Value creation/ real-estate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regeneration of large-scale industrial buildings (investments estimated to 500 billion NOK): e.g. the Public School of Culture and Art, (housing approximately 3,000 pupils every week), 53 student apartments in the old Mill (a 10,000 m² building complex), 'Nedre verksgård' (culture and art facilities) and 'Mekken' (modern facilities for architecture/engineering companies)
Regulation plan	1 Cultural heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparatory work and lobbying has resulted in a new regulation plan in which the vulnerable cultural heritage site will be preserved for the future.
R&D activities	1&3 Cultural heritage/ R&D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New knowledge regarding the cultural heritage (analysis of buildings, cultural environments, archaeological excavations, dissemination of cultural and historical research). • Cultural arrangements and educational projects (i.e., school children, local artists, art/design workshops) • Three PhD projects were used as a resource in the project (i.e., project management, website development and historical research). • Inter-reg/EU-project (cultural exchange Kategatt/Skagerak 18th century)
Registrations and documentation	1 Cultural heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical monuments, documents and photos from the industrial era were systematically filed due to good collaborative relationships established between the museum and the property owner.
New routines and collaborative practices	4 Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New collaborative routines and practices worked out between cultural heritage authorities and property developers, i.e., when two shipwrecks from the eighteenth century were discovered during the building of the new spa-hotel in the area. In contrast to normal procedures in such situations, often causing significant delays for the developer, the boats were effectively and carefully, moved and preserved, which did not cause any further delays for the property developer.
Market position strengthened	1,2,3,4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enterprises and industrial environments identify themselves with Hamnerdalen's history and character and use this as a basis for self-promotion.
The challenge of creative clusters and opposing forces	3 R&D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sustainable creative cluster of art/cultural industries was difficult to promote because of the high turnover of artists during the project period. • The pilot's non-traditional goals and methods have challenged some environments in the community, e.g., SPNAM, which has expressed strong displeasure with the project verbally, in letters and through various statements in the local and national media (Final report, 2011, p. 17).

4.2 The artists: Participation and definitions of reality

...For a long time, we have been the warm-up band that has contributed to and built up expectations – kept the audience in the ‘mood’ while waiting for the really big stars to arrive! We have lifted the area out of the shade of industry, given it recognition and new life. We have created enthusiasm and new interest in an area that for generations, has been unavailable for the public and been good ambassadors with a desire to contribute to the creation of “New Larvik” (Artist, my translation).

In a letter sent to the Vestfold County Council (VCC) and dated October 29, 2011, representatives of the artist community in Hammerdalen raise an official complaint in which they, as ‘actors in the value creation pilot’, require an explanation of the strategy, management and use of funds for the development of art in the project. According to the artists, there has been a lack of willingness from parts of the project to act on the terms of the art, and the artists further state that conditions for engaging in artistic activities have been ‘choked’ during the process. The letter describes how ‘...one after the other, serious players in the artistic community “have been driven from the area to make way for other considerations or had to move because the lease terms were too difficult or the price unreasonably high.”’ From being a cluster of around 50 actors, along with ateliers and workshops for art, hand-crafts and design, there is no one left today. As stated in the letter, “...Those in power in the project apparently had the attitude of business first and art afterwards.”

In interviews, several of the artists expressed a general feeling of broken expectations – a sense of being misused and exploited. One of the artists expressed that there was never an option to publically complain, because of ‘fear of reprisal’. This artist describes an asymmetrical relationship with the property owner, ‘a kind of David and Goliath relationship’.

...they are so powerful! It has been requested (by others) that I be extremely careful about what I say: ‘you certainly want to live on in this town afterwards, don’t you?’

Another artist expresses a similar view:

...this project was supposed to generate debate, wasn’t it? This is a paradox. You see the general trend all over with blogging, healthy debates and

discussions. This has not been the case here. It is necessary to release the art. To create debate and controversies is the function of art!

According to this informant, the artists were constantly exposed to new requirements from their landlords. Joint opening hours in the afternoons and on weekends were among the latest: 'This is pure shopping centre thinking; they assume that you have employees on shift!'

...At the same time as the project is terminated and the artists are moving out, I really have to ask myself: Is this simply a matter of controlled termination? Has this been the plan from the start?

4.3 The NGO: Participation and the definition of reality

SPNAM was highly critical of the project from its initiation, and characterised the project as a "...bad disguise for the property owner's development interests." SPNAM questions the role of public authorities and finds it strange that the state rather uncritically engages in a close partnership with a strong and powerful private company and thus gives this actor 'special treatment'. From their point of view, the VCPH was turned into a 'chief executive project' in which the local community and the local politicians were uninvolved and the absence of cultural heritage expertise was replaced by the property owner's expertise in real estate. In 2009, the VCPH sent a formal letter to SPNAM, inviting the association to take part in a mobilisation campaign to increase the rate and quality of applications to the national fund for cultural heritage regarding the rehabilitation of private households in the local community. In a letter dated January 14, 2010, the association responds:

...It would be political suicide, from a preservation perspective, to enter into a formal collaboration with VCPH to the extent that the project is expected to justify the proposed development of the oldest ironworks site in the country (my translation).

According to SPNAM, collaboration with the VCPH was out of the question as long as the most influential participant in the project (TF) made efforts toward 'removing the historic cultural environment in Hammerdalen' for the benefit of lucrative housing and the rest of the project silently or publicly accepted these plans. Thus, they chose to distance themselves from the

participatory process, playing the role of a traditional critical ‘watchdog’ or ‘janitor’ and informing the public and the media about on-going rationalisation processes and the misuse of power from their external, independent position.

4.4 The Action Researcher: Participation and definition of reality

From my point of view, the various narratives described by the actors outlined above give valuable insights into the ‘polyphony of voices’ and the complex, dynamic, open-ended and ambiguous character of participatory Action Research processes. Seen from my first-person position as Action Researcher and project leader (Oct. 2008 - Sept. 2010), the ‘official story’ of the partners in the VCPH pilot provide a quite ‘fair’ description of the development process and the results achieved. However, for obvious and various (selective) reasons, such reports often fail to tell ‘the whole story’. In the case of VCPH, there are a number of critical events that the employers and the public in general should have had access to in order to learn how such experiential participatory processes evolve in practice. This is where first-person inquiry (Torbert & Taylor, 2008) can contribute by providing valuable insights and perspectives because it enables us to investigate these processes ‘from within’ as they evolve over time. In the following, my first-person narrative will discuss and explore three statements outlined in the final report. These are framed within the continuum between empowerment and constraint.

The demanding character of pluralistic collaborative relationships

First, the official story refers to the initial differences and motives identified among the individual partners and ‘...how demanding such pluralistic collaborative relationships can be’ (p. 15). From my point of view, this became quite evident as soon as the partners started to work together and had to confront new and unexpected situations. As a participant in a value-creation pilot, like VCPH, composed of a coalition of various actors with very different knowledge interests, values and perceptions of the mandate, more-or-less open power struggles and opportunistic actions among those involved consti-

tute a natural part of daily business. My role as an Action Researcher and facilitator was to engage in nurturing the empowerment processes that enabled them to reconcile and transcend the boundaries that separated the partners and their activities, thus creating, as Huzzard et al. (2010) put it, ‘...an enabling environment for building new relationships and structures to achieve higher productivity and value creation.’ When I was introduced as a project leader in September of 2008, the situation could be described as follows: several of the representatives had dropped out of the project meetings because ‘there was not much to get out of the meetings’. After several replacements, the representative from VCC was soon withdrawn from the project group altogether due to the argument that VCC ‘...cannot, for principle reasons or for resource considerations, be engaged as a member in a project group with this type of cultural heritage competence.’¹ Considerable frustration was expressed from two angles within the partnership, especially between the local and regional level. On the one hand, a nearly-unanimous coalition of local antecedents (TF, ML, LM) argued that the researchers from VUC had operated more or less ‘independently’ during the opening phase, initiating research activities without first discussing them sufficiently with the rest of the project group. This was referred to as stakeholder analysis (2008), which was initiated by the researchers to identify the various actors and interests in Hammerdalen. According to some of the local representatives, this inquiry created much trouble because it facilitated the construction of ‘false expectations’ among the tenants (artists) in terms of what this pilot ‘was all about’ and ‘was able to achieve’. Another R&D initiative was the idea to arrange open dialogue conferences in Hammerdalen that were aimed at anchoring the development process on a broader scale as early as possible. This issue was on the project group’s agenda on three different occasions during the first half of 2008. The response the researchers received was that ‘the timing is not right’ and ‘we do not know if they are the right stakeholders’. Some of the participants questioned the role and relevance of academia and research in this sort of development setting. The researchers experienced these situations as being quite frustrating, especially as the most

¹ Official letter from VCC to the executive board in VCPH, dated October 22, 2008.

important part of this pilot, in their understanding of the mandate, was to facilitate and open up a transparent public debate regarding the potential future of Hammerdalen as a culture- and experience-based venue. As new project leader, I had to take action. However, this implied a difficult dilemma: on one hand, it was important to not lose sight of the other actors and interests in the area. On the other hand, it was necessary to take the criticism that was raised from key partners in the pilot seriously to avoid further escalation and the possible termination of the pilot. As I interpreted the situation at that time, it was not realistic to continue a pragmatic-constructivist line based on the assumption that the introduction of new actors would generate a change in the agenda that would ‘make the conflict disappear’ or at least ‘make the actors move on’ (Gustavsen et al., 2008, p.72). Instead, a two-step strategy was chosen: (1) the consolidation of the partnership had to be performed first, and (2) when sufficient trust was established, new initiatives could be undertaken to open up the process by extending the circle of actors through different R&D activities. Evidently, what I experienced was that the attitude in the project group quickly changed, and after some time, it was possible to initiate the same R&D activities that had been rejected during the opening phase.

Initial conditions and resistance towards alternative viewpoints

This resistance to the introduction of new initiatives and actors, as described in the narrative above, is closely related to a second observation made from a more reflective distance in advance of my fieldwork period: the role of *initial conditions* as both an enabling and constraining force in participatory Action Research processes. According to advocates for the pragmatic-constructivist approach, such as Toulmin (1990) and Shotter and Gustavsen (1999), “...participants must start from the *opportunities* available to them where they are, at the time they are there.” This pro-active attitude towards the opportunities of the present is undoubtedly of key value when participating in Action Research processes. However, as I experienced in the case of VCPH, this approach should not constitute blackmail used to prevent the recognition of historical patterns and how discourses at any time are ‘structurally sedi-

mented' phenomena, which are subject to preliminary structuration in terms of what can be said, who can say it, when they can say it and with what authority they can say it.

The official story highlights the fact that "*...the pilot came about because actors who normally do not communicate found common ground in the national R&D programme* (Final report, 2011, p. 5). It make sense to say that the local antecedents (TF, ML, LM and LL) had less experience working in close partnership with the regional actors (VCC and VUC) prior to the pilot. However, if we expand the scope by exploring the historical processes that constituted the formation and realisation of the VCPH, it is evident that an actor-network constellation and an 'action programme' at the local level were already established long before the pilot was acknowledged as a national pilot in the R&D programme. In a way, the tensional field had already been made subject to preliminary structuration in terms of framing processes and discourses that more-or-less defined the room for manoeuvring with regard to future actions. These initial processes, in which a comprehensive and strong coalition of actors establish mutual commitments and common ground across traditional sectors and specialist boundaries with direct support from national authorities, represent both legitimacy and the ability to impact the environment. Thus, this coalition building represents an efficient managerial tool 'to get things done', which the massive regeneration process of the cultural heritage site of Hammerdalen illustrates. At the same time, however, this also implies constraints on alternative viewpoints, ideas and interests in the local community, such as the marginalised voices of the artists, the highly critical interest organisation SPNAM, and the resistance towards the initiatives of the first generation of researchers to open up a public debate about the future of Hammerdalen.

Public performance and backstage activities:

...a transparent, good and challenging collaboration has been established between the partners (final report, 2011, p. 19).

The statement above is general and open to a wide range of interpretations. From my point of view, these types of statements may reflect a well-known

classical problem related to Action Research that is participatory, including contract research: the intrinsic potential for *underreporting*. One of the key challenges that can be related to this problem of underreporting is loyalty to the other partners. Another is a natural adaptation to the incentive system with which the partners are operating (R&D programmes). In other words, to increase the possibility of being rewarded with new funding from the employer during the coming year, the project must demonstrate impressive results. The pilots are even encouraged to produce and construct ‘success stories’ in their reporting. From my position, it is relevant to question the content and quality of these self-evaluation procedures and systems. One dysfunction that might emerge is a mismatch between complex back-stage activities and localised learning processes on the one hand, and consensus-oriented performance in the public on the other. In retrospect, perhaps the most critical finding in this case is how far apart some of the key partners really stood, despite the fact that they worked together for four years. An example of this is a distinct change of attitude among some of the partners as soon as the project period came to an end. We saw how the group of artists, a group that had a high priority among the researchers, seemed to be chased out of the area. Another example is the historical theatre play ‘Silent Voices’. This play was initiated by representatives from VUC and had been a part of the action plan of VCPH since 2009. Substantial resources, financial resources and working hours, had been put into this play, including the work of professional scriptwriters and historical researchers. A contract was signed with a professional regional theatre. However, when the production team made their last preparations in order to set up the play in 2011 (post-project), they were greatly surprised. In a meeting with a representative from TF, it was stated that ‘it is out of the question to set up this play in Hammerdalen’. Due to the ‘bad conditions of the buildings’ and ‘a lack of parking spaces’, it was determined that it was not appropriate to arrange such events in the area.

What is curious to note is that despite these types of disagreements and on-going struggles, I have identified a strong disposition among the partners (including myself) to remain fairly loyal to the partnership when confronted with difficult issues during encounters with the national employer (the Directorate for Cultural Heritage), external stakeholders or local or national media.

From my point of view, this experienced ‘power of loyalty’ of the partnership organisation, which one is engaged with and mutually dependent upon, raises new and relevant questions regarding the main topic discussed in this paper: illuminating the relationship between participation, power and democracy in participatory Action Research. More longitudinal dialogic Action Research is required to shed light on this question.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore the challenges, dilemmas and tensions that emerge when conducting open-ended participatory Action Research in practice. Drawing on data and experiences gathered while participating in a value-creation project in the large-scale national R&D programme in Norway (2007-2010), I attempted to fill a general void in the literature when it comes to exploring the still under-studied relationship between participation, power and democracy in participatory action research. The findings from the inquiry provide evidence of the need to overcome traditional controversies and trajectories when conducting participatory Action Research. In the line with the pragmatic-constructivist approach, this still implies actively taking part in the facilitation of social infrastructures that enable the various participants concerned or affected by the process at hand to have ‘a voice’ and the ability to take part in ‘defining reality’ (Fricke, 2011; Gustavsen et al., 2001). At the same time, it is necessary to pay attention to “how power is enacted and carried out in concrete contexts” (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011) and how power and knowledge are “mutually implicated in framing those truths that are held as self-evident and thus shape reality” (Foucault, 1977). By applying the power-knowledge perspective, I have illustrated the way in which ‘initial conditions’ may impact the social boundaries that constrain and enable actions by all the actors. By acknowledging the co-existence of consensus and dissensus as two sides of the same coin in participatory Action Research, this paper suggests that a more reflexive, democratic and actionable approach can be taken in order to navigate an unfolding tensional field between empowerment and constraint. The findings from this inquiry underline the importance for future dialogic Action Research to pay critical atten-

tion to the still underexplored dynamic relationship between participation, power and democratisation. As such, the expanded scope of participatory Action Research can generate an expanded space for transparency, deliberative learning and self-honest examination: the very foundation for the co-creation of social robust knowledge in participatory Action Research.

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