Action Research and the Promotion of Democracy

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Abstract
A major effort to promote not only workplace democracy, but democracy in general, with the help of action research, occurred with The Quality of Working Life Movement. From around 1970 the movement made major advances, to die out as an international movement around 1990. The major pressure under which democracy finds itself today makes it of interest to recall the experiences from this movement, with a view to what can be learnt of relevance to the present situation. Can action research help promote democracy? At the core of the discussion is the relationship between theoretical constructions and practical experiences.

Keywords: Action research, democracy, innovation, learning from differences, Quality of Working Life, theory and practice

La Investigación-Acción y la promoción de la democracia

Resumen
Un gran esfuerzo para promover no sólo la democracia en el lugar de trabajo, sino la democracia en general, con la ayuda de la Investigación-Acción, ocurrió con el Movimiento de Calidad de la Vida Laboral. Desde aproximadamente 1970 el movimiento hizo grandes avances, para luego desaparecer como un movimiento internacional alrededor de 1990. La principal presión bajo la cual se encuentra la democracia hoy en día hace que sea de interes recordar las experiencias de este movimiento, en vistas a lo que se puede aprender de relevancia para la situación actual. ¿Puede la Investigación-Acción ayudar a promover la democracia? En el centro de la discusión se encuentra la relación entre construcciones teóricas y experiencias prácticas.

Palabras clave: Investigación-Acción, democracia, innovación, aprender de las diferencias, Calidad de la Vida Laboral, teoria y práctica.

Introduction

When Werner Fricke first became known to this author, it was within the framework of the Quality of Working Life (QWL) movement. Triggered by the discovery of the role of autonomy in work performed around 1950 at the Tavistock Institute in the UK (Trist & Bam-

forth 1951), followed by some successful field projects in Scandinavia (Emery & Thorsrud 1976), the QWL movement was made up of actors who wanted to promote the notion of autonomy in work within a wider context: in principle no less than the whole wide world. Main actors in the movement were researchers, but other actors could be counted as well, such as employers, unionists and consultants.

Those who came to join the movement did so from different interests and motives. The most common denominator was, however, the notion of democracy; initially in the version «industrial democracy», later in the form of democracy in general. Threats against democracy were not unknown at the time when the QWL movement appeared. These threats were however modest, compared to those that appear today, when a global democratisation process seems to have stagnated, at the same time as a number of formerly democratic societies are turning towards a kind of post-democratic hybrid. Is this development of concern to social research in general and action research in particular? If so, what can or should be done? Questions of this kind make it relevant to look at the QWL movement: what kind of actions were initiated, on what grounds and with what effects, leading up to the question of what can be learnt of relevance for the situation today.

Like all phenomena answering to the notion of movement, the QWL movement was loosely structured, and no specific membership figure can be quoted, nor is it possible to provide an exact picture of its penetration in the various parts of the world. That activities emerged in perhaps as much as 30 different countries, ranging from the US to India and from Norway to Turkey, is, however, reasonably well substantiated (Quality of Working Life Council 1977; Ejnatten 1993). When a conference was organised, in Toronto in 1981, not only was the number of participants around 2000, but many came from industries, unions and employer associations. The hope of a global success seemed realistic. A few years later, however, most of the movement had disappeared. No further conferences were organised, a series of publications initiated by an elected council came to an end. A research seminar in 1987 came to conclude the movement and whatever has taken place later in terms of joint activities has been national, regional or in other ways linked to specific contexts.

Much of these events lie up to five decades back in time. What interest do they have today? Looking at thoughts and events from a historical perspective does not only mean going back in time, it also makes it possible to trace their impact over a long period, and there are aspects that can be uncovered only within such a framework.

Theories and movements

The notion of movement is generally taken to imply a kind of loosely structured, network type phenomenon, characterised by many participants with shared interests but not necessarily a shared specific understanding. When the QWL movement first appeared, it did, however, go well beyond this notion of a loosely formed network. What emerges from a document made by one of the chief architects of the movement for the 1981 conference (Trist 1981) was the notion of a research driven development based on a shared, or general, theory. Largely developed by Fred Emery and Eric Trist the point of departure was the early studies of autonomy in work. These were, however, expressed in an «anthropological»,

participant observer style that did not automatically open the door to wide generalisations. When Emery joined the Tavistock his first major move was to rephrase the early studies into a systems theoretical framework, relying upon concepts like open systems, equifinality, steady state, directive correlations and similar (Emery 1959; his system's theoretical sources can be found in Emery 1969). The early studies pertained to elements of work organisation within larger enterprises and the next step was to expand the systems theoretical approach to cover the organisation as a totality. Since the core concept in this context was the one of «open systems», the focus moved towards the relationship between the organisation and its environment, giving rise to a distinction between different types of environments: the random, placid environment, the clustered envronment, the disturbed-reactive ennvironment and, finally, the environment where turbulence can occur (Emery & Trist 1965). The underlying dimension is the degree of links, or organisation, between the elements, where the notion of turbulence is associated with a maximum of links, ties and relationships. These provide channels for diffusion of disturbances and the potential for accelerating them into major upheavals. Having placed environmental complexity in the centre Emery concluded his theoretical construction by reflecting on how to stabilise situations with potential for turbulence, reflections that gave rise to thoughts about a «social ecology» (Emery & Trist 1973). Such an ecology should provide stable and fruitful conditions for life and work for everybody. At its core would not be another economic theory, but values that are shared between all actors. Among such values could be found willingness to listen to each other, to form trustful relationhips, to refrain from accelerating crises to pursue ones` own benefits, and similar. For such values to be binding for the actors they need to participate in their formation. Commitment to values can take place through voluntary action only, it cannot be enforced on people. Even though the value formation processes would have to span far wider than each separate workplace, Emery saw the workplace as the point of origin for the value formation processes. In the workplace people could relate, share and learn in ways that could set the course for processes also beyond the workplace (Emery referred, among others, to Selznick 1957 on this point). To this can be added, from the perspective of today, that for many people the workplace is the only place where they meet other people not chosen by themselves. In civil and political life everyone can enter an «echo chamber» of people with identical views.

Many elements in this set of arguments can be said to have appeared in a sketchy form: the distance between identifying why democracy is necessary and actually bringing democracy about on a broad front is a long one. Emery can, consequently, be criticised for theoretical excesses and gaps. This kind of critique was, however, seen by Emery as largely irrelevant. He was a radical democrat in the sense that he saw practical knowledge as equal to theoretical knowledge. Academics have no privileged position compared to, say, workers. Emery's view on the need for democracy should, consequently, not be settled in academic discourse, but in the choices people make in their practices, and the ways in which they, themselves, find it reasonable to concretise their choices. This led to the need for a movement that could include practitioners as well as researchers, and that could have the potential for transforming, if not the whole wide world in one sweeping movement, at least major parts of the industrially leading world, and do it within a reasonable period of time.

The general and the contextual

This theory was a strong one, in certain respects even brilliant. In achieving its main importance in the period from about 1970 to about 1990 it was still short lived. This short life was not due to the theory being overtaken by anonther general theory, but to the problems inherent in the notion of general theory, or universal reason, in itself. Even from the beginning it could be seen that the various QWL projects came to show different characteristics. These differences depended upon at least three sets of circumstances: first, differences in the specific, local socio-technical conditions under which the projects occurred. There are major differences between creating autonomy in a process plant versus a banking office.Second, differences in the wider contexts in which they took place, such as the existence and modes of operation of labour market organisations. To this can be added changes that occurred over time as experiences with projects and project design accumulated: in an article from the latter 1970s Elden (1979) writes about «three generations» of work democracy projects. One important dimension in this distinction is the balance between research and those concerned, giving rise to notions like participative design and even user driven change. While, in the early experiments, research performed elements of a directive role, the tendency was to rely more and more on the workplace actors themselves to develop the new patterns. Along with this went other changes, such as a tendency to cover continuously larger parts of each organisation and to make more organisations participate in the same projects (Gustavsen 1992). In this way more actors were reached in each project, and the «mass» of ideas and other impulses in each project could be increased.

It is always possible to hide differences under a highy abstract conceptualisation. This, however, does not change the actual, practical situations within which the projects unfold, and the need to respond adequately to these situations. In spite of these differences being recognised in the QWL movement and its literature, their significance for general theory was not raised and by the latter 1980s the differences had become of such a major importance that the movement fell apart. The last event to take place was a research seminar, held in 1987 as a tribute to Eric Trist when he retired. For the first time the relationship between the universal and the contextual came explicitly on the agenda. The background was, however, not experience from the QWL movement itself, but the invitation of Gareth Morgan as external keynote speaker. Having recently published «Images of organisation» (Morgan 1986) he argued a post-modern and relativistic perspective on organisation, something that stood in sharp contrast to Emery's universal reason. There are, unfortunately, at least as far as this author is aware, no published sources where this discussion is documented and we can do little more than note that it took place and that it was the last organised event in the global QWL movement. Whatever has taken place since has been local, regional or national. The notion of a global movement, initiated and steered through one single reason, was gone.

This story is in many ways trivial. It constitutes one example (among many) of schools of thought in research that have had a promising beginning followed by a high time that was, in turn, followed by a downwards slide. In the light of the wisdom presented by postmodernism, post-structuralism, de-constructivism and similar, this kind of development is to be expected rather than giving rise to surprise. It does, however, leave some questions.

While deconstructivism may be highly relevant from the perspective of critical theory, the same does not apply to action research. For research to enter into action, it is not only necessary to consider something as better than something else, but also to accept a far stronger element of constructivism in the role of research. Research cannot stay content with tearing down what others have put together, it must itself positively pursue specific ideas about what constitutes a better world. QWL theory delivered, furthermore, strong arguments for democracy as a universal order. According to Emery, peak performance even within areas like productivity and innovation can be reached only within a democratic order. To this can be added that the need to examine the performance potential of democacy, and even to act in its defence, is greater than it has been since the 1930s. There is a need not only to take a stand in favour of democracy, there is an equally strong need to identify what action research should do in this context, and what arguments should guide these actions. On these points experiences to which the QWL movement gave rise are still of major relevance.

Levels of contexts

If it is the case that all action in real life is bound by context: how then can we generalise? In spite of the academic originator of the notion of action research, Kurt Lewin, seeing change as a long term process based on a continuous interplay between research and action, the notion of action research was to a large extent redefined into small-scale, short term projects where the broader change was to be carried by texts emanating out of the limited projects. Action research emerged as another way of generating data, but not as a break with textually expressed theory as the main measure in the enlightenment of society. Most of the QWL participants did not fully share this view. Rather, they saw an interplay between action, theory and text as a permanent process, although with a changing relationship between them. In some periods, action projects would be the main activity, followed by the construction of theory, to be followed by still new phases of intensified action, and so on. Even though the notion of permanent action was generally accepted, the dominant view within the movement was that this implied a continuous development of one theory. To help bridge the gap between the one theory and complex and shifting realities, the notion of «paradigm» was called upon (Emery 1978; Ejnatten 1993). Made popular by Kuhn (1967) to help describe such shifts and discontinuitues between schools of thought in research that could not be ascribed to logical analysis or new facts, the notion of «paradigm» came, by many, to be used for the opposite purpose: To identify «basics», «fundamentals», «generalities» and similar within a paradigm. This use of paradigm falls, however, subject to the same critique as against foundationalism. As pointed out by, for instance, the historian of science Stephen Toulmin, the general can be reached only by comparing the contextual (Gustavsen 2010). How, then, can we transcend the essentially local projects of the QWL movement, to draw conclusions on a more general level? For most of the researchers involved in the QWL movement, and who wanted to continue their efforts with work reform, the response became to turn national. This implied opening up major new areas for research and development. Two examples:

Following in the wake of the publication of «Silent Spring» (Carson 1962) the debate on the environment emerged, including a debate on health and safety in work, eventually encompassing the whole industrialised world. Throughout the 1970s reforms emerged in practically all industrialised countries. Peculiar to the Norwegian version was an article about autonomy in work in The Work Environment Act that passed the Parliament in 1977 (Gustavsen 1977). By proponents of general QWL theory (i.e. Trist 1981) it was thought that this was a direct imprint of this theory, entering the legislation because of the self-evident truth of the theory. In actual practice the situation was different: for getting this section into the act, research had to argue and demonstrate several major points: First, that the most important threats to health in work can be found within such areas as ergonomics, psycho-social challenges, interaction between separately unharmful factors, long term exposure to low-level hazards, and similar. Second, that challenges of this kind cannot be met through threshold limits and similar specifications, but are in need of workplace based processes of continuous improvement. Third, that employee participation would be crucial to the success of such processes. Fourth, that this participation depended on autonomy in the work role. Finally, research had to help identify what measures could be applied in the making of improvement programmes, including demonstration of how they would work in pracrtice. These tasks occupied about half of the resources of the Work Research Institute over a period of several years.

Another and related area pertains to the agreements between the labour market parties. While the QWL movement generally recognised the significance of the labour market parties, little attention was paid to the more specific nature and characteristics of such measures as negotiations and agreements, and even less to differences between different orders within this area. While it was experienced that agreements that implied co-operation between the parties could be an advantage in launching QWL projects, it was an early experience that the running of specific workplace developments demanded forms of communication that went beyond those of traditional negotiations. Within the Norwegian context it fell to research to interpret these experiences, hold the interpretations up before the parties and help convince them that there was a need for forms of communication that went beyond negotiations. On this background an agreement on development was made, based on negating traditional negotiations to include all concerned rather than representatives only, pertaining to all sorts of topics and not time and money only, and to take place in a spirit of co-operation rather than one of oppositional interests. Research helped, furthermore, formulate criteria for the practical carrying through of these forms of communication: i.e. dialogue conferences, and particiapted in a number of demonstration events (Gustavsen 1992).

Examples illustrating the need to reach different levels in society can be taken from a number of other countries such as Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Holland and Germany. Since the QWL movement referred all practical experiences back to a general theory and not to variable national or other contextual conditions, there were no comparative studies of nations and their differences done at the time. This kind of comparison-based knowledge cannot be recovered today and the individual author is generally unable to offer examples from outsided his or her own context.

The main learning to come out of this is that it is not possible to go directly from workplace cases to universal reason. In-between there are various (meso-) levels that need con-

sideration and specific development strategies. The challenges and possibilities on these levels vary between nations, regions, industries and more. But is it possible to move from this meso-perspective to reflections about a general democratic order? Going by the experiences from the QWL movement there is no theory that will allow us to perform this kind of jump. In a sense this was experienced from an early point in time in the form of a dualist approach to democratisation: on the one hand, democracy was seen as subject to ordinary research: studies that identify the characteristics of democracy, the conditions that bring it forth, and its consequences. These studies are to be expressed in texts and the texts are presumed to further the democratisation process. However, there was also another approach: to organise the democratisation process in such a way that the participants could experience democracy, not only as its end product but in the process itself. Given this, an impact rich movement of democratisation will have to make itself manifest in terms of a substantial number of local developments where the processes expose the participants to democratic experience. What possibilities exist for creating this kind of development today?

Crossing boundaries

When, for instance, Totterdill and colleagues make a summary over a few pages of the characteristics of innovative organisation (Totterdill et al 2016) they can build on research in general rather than one specific school. This reflects a situation within research where yesterday`s sharp dividing lines between theories have largely disappeared, to be replaced by a much stronger element of convergence. Various aspects of autonomy in work are on the one hand conceptualised as autonomy, control, freedom, discretion, empowerment, space for judgment and learning and more, but there are, on the other, considerable overlap and fluid boundaries between what hides under the concepts. This opens up co-operation between researchers needed to transcend single projects, and enter upon the development of a broader social movement. With the link to a specific context characterising all practical action no researcher can, on his or her own, make a broad impact. This can be achieved only by working together

While there is a convergence on the level of more or less general theory, the splits reoccur, however, when turning to the projects that actually unfold under the heading of work research. Worklife development projects have long ago been converted from quasi experiments with a high profile research role to more modest research inputs into processes largely driven by those concerned themselves. The contributions of research become less visible, a development that has given rise to the view that there are no longer any QWL projects at all. Experiences indicate, however, that this is an issue of visibility rather than existence. Projects where research contributes in some way or other to processes implying more autonomy in the workrole actually seem to be ongoing in quite a number of countries. A major move, then, is to make the relevant developments visible. For a development to become visible to a broader audience it needs to become visible to representatives of other developments of a similar kind. A workplace development can hardly be expected to attract gobal attention when it is unknown to its closest neighbours.

Traditionally, this kind of challenge is approached through comparative studies. Comparative studies are, in this context, the reverse of bringing each case into the realm of a general theory. Instead, the point is to bring to light the characteristics of each case, but do it by by contrasting it with other cases. Bringing to light differences also makes it possible to identify what they may have in common. On the basis of such commonalities, cases can be clustered to form families where some characteristics cut across all cases. The next step will be to compare the clusters, including identifying what the clusters have in common, and so on until the level of the general is reached. While some efforts have been made to support this kind of development, in particular through organising research in programmes, for instance in the Scandinavian countries (Gustavsen 2011), the advances have up to now not been sufficient to initiate a new QWL movement.

The notion of «comparative studies» indicates a process where research is in a leading role, assembling data and performing the comparisons. With the growing emphasis on participation from workplace actors in the process as such, it follows that even comparisons across workplaces need participation from those concerned. Engelstad & Ødegaard (1977) report, from an initiative as early as the 1970s, how comparison of experiences between project groups from different enterprises was used to map out paralells and differences. In a study from the 1990s (Ennals & Gustavsen 1999) the extension of this kind of procedure within a broader European context is discussed and some examples presented. The idea of «learning from differences» is emphasised, against a background where the core point is that learning occurs in language but where language, to become innovative, must identify something new in its context. The richer a specific context is in terms of different phenomena, the more likely it is that new combinations will be discovered. Since this is also a main argument behind multiculturalism in general, which is currently under dispute in many parts of the world, there is a need to add that democracy has to be the organising element: differences without dialogue leads to little but conflict.

In the early versions of QWL thinking, the direct experience of democracy was thought to take place through a redesign of the work role, away from monotonous specialisation to a role that implied variation, self-determination and learning, The problem with this approach was that workplace actors in highly specialised, «Taylorist» work roles would lack democratic competence when the process was to start. However, this went against experience, as it unfolded even in the first projects where the workers concerned played very active roles from the beginning (see for instance the Hunsfos case in Emery & Thorsrud 1976). These roles played themselves out in meetings and other forms of communication. Given this, it was found reasonable to shift the ground for the democracy argument, from the turbulence challenge to the foundations behind the kind of discussions needed for the workplace actors to be able to jointly improve on their conditions (Gustavsen 1992). A new ground could be found in the human rights that constitute a major part of all democratic constitutions: the freedom of speech, the freedom of association, the right to be heard, the prohibition of retroactive decisions, and similar. Not least, the union movement can be seen as an almost direct expression of these rights and it is, consequently, possible to anchor democracy in these rights. These rights need, in turn, to be translated into operational criteria for workplace discourses, the main point in the above mentioned reforms occurring in the 1970s and early 80s. Learning by doing becomes possible rather than being told, by experts and dis-

tant authorities, what «democracy is». One of the first to argue that the workers have full democratic competence from the beginning of development processes was Fricke, who built a project on this assumption as early as around 1970 (Fricke 1983).

This anchoring is historical rather than theoretical. Historical validity is, however, as far as it is possible to come as universal criteria are concerned. Theories promoting the argumentative necessity of democracy may look fascinating, but it is hard to see how they can be empirically substantiated. As the turbulence theory is concerned, there are only two studies known to this author from the QWL movement period where efforts are made to operationalise the environmental categories: one by Stymne (1970) and one actually by this author (Gustavsen 1972). They both demonstrate some of the potential of this theory, but also that it is almost impossible to imagine how this potential can be converted into convincing empirical support for a general notion of democracy.

Given such a communicative anchoring of democracy it is possible to imagine a movement encompassing successively more people and exposing them to democratic processes as represented by dialogic forms of communication. There will be a demand for co-operation between researchers, but also directly between other concerned actors. For a broad movement on the level of an area like Europe to emerge, there would be a need for support from major political actors, like the bodies of the European Union. Since this union was formed on the basis of the idea of pursuing likenesses and identities: everybody is a player in «the same market», the road towards learning by differences is a long one. Perhaps recent events can promote a European self-reflection and eventually trigger a development based on the simple fact that the Union and its associates is about 30 countries, split into numerous regions and with a large number of different languages but also with a major potential for learning just from the differences that are such an overwhelming characteristic of Europe. A unit such as Europe is more than enough for one single social movement. However, it is not unreasonable to believe that if people in all workplaces all over the world were exposed to democratic forms of workplace discussions, they would, perhaps, express a stronger support for democracy even in civil and political life.

Concluding remarks

While the different schools of thought in social research have traditionally offered alternative texts, a core charcteristic of the QWL movement was that it offered alternative experiences: people formerly existing in non-democratic contexts could experience democratic life and, through this, develop a deeper commitment to democracy. To create a development in this direction as a global movement was obviously not a realistic goal. This does, however, not mean that no transcendence of the contextual is possible. The point is to make the cases talk to each other and bring the participants to form networks that can encompass a continuously growing number of partcipants and networks until a general impact built on experience can be achieved. In spite of its claim to universal reason and short period of existence the QWL movement actually demonstrated that such a development is possible. What is called for from the side of research is a broadly framed co-operation, where each unit works with its own partners in its own context, helps identify

what is achieved through what kind of process, and holds this up against parallel expriences from other contexts.

By locating his leading project in The Humanisation of Work Programme within the specific German discourse on qualification rather than general QWL theory, Fricke (1975) laid a foundation that could be developed through an ascending order of layers in German working life until the international could be reached from a platform of broad experience among many actors. Fricke himself is quite modest in estimating the impact of his own work. However this may be, he may have been the first of the actors within the QWL movement who fully recognised the need to construct the images that are to guide the actions of research bottom-up.

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