

Editorial

This issue of IJAR consists of papers that were presented at the conference: “Coping with the future: Business and work in the digital age,” in Kristiansand, Norway October 8-10, 2018. The conference focused on structural and systemic changes in business and work life, not least driven by digital technology, and the need to find more sustainable solutions for society. Nobody can say for sure that we are facing a new industrial revolution; however, there are strong indications that fundamental conditions for business and work are changing. The conference asked what should be the role of social science in such changing processes. One important thing to observe is that traditional research methods, such as gathering historical data, will not necessarily help us in understanding systemic change. In addition, this discussion comes at a time that has been called the post-truth society, when, among other things, society has been questioning the validity of research and science.

Action Research is affected by this discussion in at least three ways: firstly, the changes we see in technology, and in the call for more sustainable solutions, challenges workplaces in new ways; thus opening up new issues, new ways of participation in discussion, collaboration and the like. So, Action Research is needed to update our understanding of these new challenges. Secondly, as even Action Research has a bias towards the present or the past, it also faces challenges related to an unknown future. Thirdly, the focus on validity and truthfulness is not least an issue for Action Research.

The current special issue makes a solid contribution to addressing these challenges. As we see it, the issue contains three groups of articles. The first group formed by the two articles *New Challenges for Action Research* by Werner Fricke, and *(Why) Does Action Research need to intervene and change things?* by Olav Eikeland, both address the philosophical roots of Action Research. A core argument in Fricke’s article is that Action Research oversteps some of the traditional dualisms in social science, for instance the interpretive versus the positivistic approach. Action Research brings into this traditional divide, the discussion of democratic dialogue and just social change. More specifically, the article deals with the illusion of self-determination, and argues that it is limited in the execution of work. It makes a strong statement of the first challenge for Action Research. Eikeland brings in a variety of knowledge forms that transcend some of the traditional dualisms in philosophy of science. Both articles open our mind to the plural challenges we see in work life. Eikeland,

specifically, challenges researchers of Action Research to think deeply about what type of change is produced by the research.

The second group of articles include *Action Research and Social Transformation: Memories and Projections* by Danilo Streck, *Participatory research in Latin America as engagement* by Emil Sobottka and *Democratic Dialogue and Development: An Intellectual Obituary of Björn Gustavsen* by Richard Ennals. The two articles, as well as the obituary of Björn Gustavsen, can be read as contributions to the history of Action Research. Streck's article has a focus on history of this journal. Sobottka takes us through some main events in the development of Action Research in Latin America. Björn Gustavsen, whom we honour in this issue, was a major contributor to the development of Action Research. In particular his work managed to bridge the communicative turn in philosophy of science and Action Research. We argue that one of the preconditions for addressing the challenges of the future is to reflect on experience from the past. We cannot copy the past in the future, but we can learn from the past in order to prepare for the future. The articles demonstrate the importance of contextual issues in Action Research; doing Action Research in Latin America and in Scandinavia has some similarities, but is at the same time quite different.

Thirdly, three articles address different methodological approaches to some of the challenges we already see emerging in work life related to new technologies. *The Contribution of Action Research to Industry 4.0. policies: bringing empowerment and democracy to the economic efficiency arena*, by Miren Larrea, Miren Estensoro and Eduardo Sisti, presents a methodological approach to addressing new technological challenges at the workplace, through the context of regional development where territorial governance is central. *Alternative learning frameworks: workplace innovation programmes and smart specialisation policies in the Basque Country*, by Egoitz Pomares, addresses regional policy initiatives to support workplace innovation through addressing issues of multilevel governance. *Doing Research Upside Down: Action and Research in Cross Self-Confrontations* by Laure Kloetzer argues for a psychologically base approach to Action Research. The usage of Cross Self-Confrontations helps the co-generation of knowledge and development of dialogues across the hierarchical boarder. All three articles acknowledge some of the challenges that we are facing with technological and societal shifts.

What role can social science in general, and Action Research in particular, have in times of social transformation? This is a grand question, and subsequently difficult to answer. We think that learning from the past is one important role. It is important to discuss what were more generic, versus what were more contextual, dimensions in the past. Things that created injustice, or reduced empowerment in the past, might not be the same things that will do so in the future. Even the content of these terms might change: What is participation or autonomy in the platform economy? What is the new form of oppression, or emancipation under new technological conditions? These are issues that need to be addressed.

Several of the article in this volume refer to Kurt Lewin. Lewin is often seen as the founding father of Action Research. It could be relevant to recall Lewin's comments in his 1947 article *Frontiers in group dynamics: Concept, method and reality in social science; social equilibria and social change*¹. Here he writes: "One of the by-products of World War

1 Lewin, K. (1947): "Frontiers in group dynamics: Concept, method and reality in social science; social equilibria and social change", published in *Human relations*, 1(1), 5-41. 1947.

II of which society is hardly aware is the new stage of development which social sciences have reached. [...] by demanding realistic and workable solutions to scientific problems, the war has accelerated greatly the change of social science to a new development level. The scientific aspects of this development centre around three objectives: 1) Integrating social sciences. 2) Moving from description of social bodies to dynamic problems of changing group life. 3) Developing new instruments and techniques for social research." (Lewin, 1947). Lewin, who had participated in the Vienna Circle before the war, was strongly influenced by logical positivism. Logical positivism grew out of what was seen as misuse of science and invalid scientific claims in their time. The remedy was a strict, logical and fact-based foundation for science. Lewin saw a clear and proactive role for social science in modernising society in the post-war period, based on the new insight into social science techniques.

Articles in this volume show that even if one shares ambitions for science, one might still discuss its logical foundation and explore what the most relevant methodology should be. Furthermore, today the challenge is not the lack of scientific techniques, nor that we are unaware of imbalances in society. The challenge is rather that our previous solution to these challenges through economic development and growth, may not be the way forward. We should share Lewin's optimism and belief in science, but we should continue to discuss how social science in general, and Action Research in particular, can move society forward. For this task, the articles in the current volume represent a useful contribution.

Hans Chr. Garmann Johnsen and Halvor Holtskog
Guest editors

About the editors

Halvor Holtskog is professor at NTNU (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, department of Industrial Economics and Technology Management. He has a background in economics and organisational theory, and is currently teaching the transformation to Industry 4.0. He has published articles and books about technology management and organisational theory. His latest books are *"The Learning Factories: The Nordic Model of Manufacturing"* (Palgrave, 2018) and *"Coping with the Future – rethinking assumptions for society, business and work"* (Routledge, 2018). Research interests lie in the field of studying socio-technical concerns, ranging from organizational towards technology based studies.

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