

Does organisational action research have a future?

Marianne Kristiansen & Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen

Abstract

This is not an ordinary article. It was written in response to some questions that the current and the former IJAR editors-in-chief asked us to reflect on. We did so gratefully, because this was a good opportunity to look back on 25 years of doing AR in organisations.

The article describes four challenges of future organisational action research. Firstly, in the future an increasing number of skilled employees will make it necessary to move from co-influence of how to implement goals, to a greater degree of co-determination. Secondly, the article argues there is a need for an increased focus on documenting AR processes. Thirdly, the article calls for more self-critical reflections on the concrete ways action researchers exercise power. Fourthly, questioning the possibilities of doing AR in organisations will become important in the future, due to socio-economic conditions such as lack of time.

The article is based on a four-year research project that we carried out on various American and European approaches to action research in organisations in the 20th century. It includes, too, a description of our different personal ways into AR and some of the AR concepts we developed along the way.

Keywords: organisational action research, participation, power, documentation of action research processes.

¿La investigación-acción organizacional tiene futuro?

Resumen

En realidad, este no es un artículo normal. Fue escrito en respuesta a algunas preguntas que el actual y el ex-editor de IJAR nos pidieron que reflexionemos. Lo hicimos con gratitud, porque esta fue una buena oportunidad para mirar hacia atrás en los 25 años de hacer IA en las organizaciones.

El artículo describe cuatro desafíos de la futura investigación-acción organizacional. En primer lugar, en el futuro, un número cada vez mayor de empleados calificados hará que sea necesario moverse de la co-influencia de cómo implementar las metas a un mayor grado de co-determinación. En segundo lugar, el artículo argumenta que existe la necesidad de un mayor énfasis en la documentación de los procesos de IA. En tercer lugar, el artículo hace un llamado a más reflexiones autocríticas sobre las formas concretas en que los investigadores- acción ejercen el poder. En cuarto lugar, cuestionar las posibilidades de realizar IA en las organizaciones se volverá importante en el

futuro debido a las condiciones socio-económicas como la falta de tiempo. El artículo se basa en un proyecto de investigación de cuatro años que llevamos a cabo sobre varios enfoques americanos y europeos para la investigación- acción en organizaciones en el siglo XX. También incluye una descripción de nuestras diferentes formas personales de IA y algunos de los conceptos de IA que desarrollamos a lo largo del camino.

Palabras clave: Investigación-acción organizacional, participación, poder, documentación de procesos de investigación-acción.

Introduction

When reporting that we, as we reached the age of 70+, had chosen to stop as action researchers, Danilo Streck and Werner Fricke, the current and the former IJAR editors-in-chief, asked us to answer the questions below, which we were welcome to relate to freely:

- 1. You have a long and productive trajectory with Action Research (AR). Where, how and when did you come across AR? How did you learn about AR and how to do AR? Were there researchers or experiences that had a special impact on you and your research practice?*
- 2. In your writings, theory and practice are intertwined in a critical and creative way. Could you reflect on this process? What are some key concepts that an action researcher should pay attention to? Based on your practice, what concepts did you develop?*
- 3. What perspectives do you see for AR to play a role in social changes, such as the strengthening or defence of democracy, in the articulation of new visions for humanity, for the people's organisation in digital work processes?*
- 4. Organisations and companies were in many cases privileged sites for AR, involving the various stakeholders. With the changes in the work context (crowdwork, platform economy, etc.) what could be possible implications for action research?*
- 5. In international social science discussion (Burawoy et al. in USA; Dörre, Aulenbacher etc in Germany) there is a growing discussion about public sociology. Would AR have to play a role in this context?*
- 6. You have recently published the book "Inddragelse i forandringsprocesser. Aktionsforskning i organisationer [Participation in change processes. Action research in organisations]". Could you tell us a little of the background for writing the book and its content?*
- 7. Looking back at your experience as researchers, what learnings for yourself would you highlight? What would you recommend or advise for old and new researchers engaging in action research?*

We are very pleased to have been given this opportunity, because we have worked as action researchers for at least 25 years. We do not know enough about action research in general. The following is therefore solely about action research in organisations, from which we have experience. Thus, we do not have sufficient knowledge to comment on the 5th question, nor

do we know enough about ‘crowdwork’ and ‘platform economy’ (the 4th question). We would also like to mention that we are limited by our professional backgrounds: Marianne in interpersonal and organisational communication and psychotherapy, Jørgen in the history of ideas/philosophy and psychotherapy.

Primarily, this article is based on a four-year research project that we carried out on various approaches to action research in organisations in the 20th century, such as change-oriented social science in USA in the 1940s, socio-technical systems thinking in England in the 1950s, experiments with Industrial Democracy in Norway in the 1960s, democratic dialogue conferences in Norway and Sweden in the 1980s, and pragmatic action research in Spain in the latter part of the 1980s. So far, our research is only published in Danish in 2018. Our monograph is titled: *Inddragelse i forandringsprocesser? Aktionsforskning i organisationer* [Participation in change processes? Action research in organisations].

The monograph is based on readings of many sources within each approach written by some of the founding fathers, analyses of examples of projects within each approach, as well as studies at the Tavistock archives in London. Unfortunately, we are not able to document our studies, due to the limited scope of this article, and because the documentation is available in Danish, only. This leaves us with a methodological problem, because later in the article, we criticise the approaches for lacking documentation of the action research processes. We do the same in this article. We have tried to handle this problem by meta-communicating about it, as we do now in this paragraph, and by giving a few examples. We know that this “solution” does not pay the tribute to the various approaches that they deserve.

The article is structured as a response to the questions asked by Danilo Streck and Werner Fricke.

The first paragraph starts with question 7 where we present four overall points of view.

The second paragraph is followed by answering question 2. Here we present two narratives of our different personal ways into action research. Moreover, we present some of the major concepts that we developed along the way such as, e.g., self-referentiality, dialogue and dissensus, emergence and not-knowing, always-already contextualised.

The third paragraph answers questions 3 and 4. It deals with power and participation.

The fourth paragraph answers question 6. It deals, too, with power and participation and describes different concepts of power in the previous approaches to organisational action research in the 20th century. It describes organisational action research as applied research, facilitation, and co-generative research.

The final and fifth paragraph returns to question 7, and describes some challenges in future action research projects.

Four future challenges of organisational action research (question 7)

We will start by presenting four overall points of view, which we will elaborate on below:

The first argument is that, historically, organisational action research has allowed employees to contribute with suggestions on how to achieve the goals that management have decided in advance – possibly in collaboration with action researchers (Kristiansen &

Bloch-Poulsen 2018). Often democracy has been practiced as deliberative democracy in the soft sense of the concept (Mansbridge et al 2010) meaning co-influence on implementation. We do not consider this to be sufficient in future action research projects. An increasing number of employees are highly skilled, and will demand a greater degree of co-determination. Based on our experiences, they will not accept participating only by making suggestions, they will expect to participate in decision making, too. On the other hand, today, many socio-economic changes make it increasingly difficult to practice democracy as co-determination in organisational action research projects, e.g., the crisis of trade unions and the growing dominance of new types of individualised hierarchies in organisations.

The second argument is that we would like an increased focus on documentation of the actual action research processes. In our monograph, we show that the various approaches tend to write about action research processes in general. We have often missed documentation of the actual organisational action research processes in the form of, e.g., transcripts or descriptions of processes, conversations, and interviews. As readers of these approaches, it has been difficult to see what took place when AR researchers co-operated with their partners. Sometimes, we could not distinguish between the researchers' own interpretations of their work, and what the partners and the researchers said and did, respectively. What has been particularly surprising to us is that often, such methodological problems were not reflected on by the researchers themselves. Some tended to present their conclusions as truths, rather than as possible interpretations of different perceptions of organisational processes. Moreover, some authors did not reflect on which voices were included and excluded, during action research processes and in the final analyses. In this way, we think it might become too easy for colleagues within academia to reject action research as consultancy.

The third argument is that we would like more critical self-reflections on the ways action researchers exercise power and understand their own roles. Several action researchers within the various approaches write about power in general terms such as, e.g., Gustavsen (2001), Greenwood & Levin (1998), Schafft & Greenwood (2003). But only a few of them describe and analyze in concrete terms how power is unfolded in the actual action research processes, and how action researchers exercise power themselves. Thorsrud & Emery (1970) is an early exception. Later organisational action research shows a different picture as, e.g., in Arieli, Friedman, Agbaria (2009). Moreover, often we have seen how the action researcher is portrayed uncritically as a helper, or as an expert, who apparently has the Enlightenment patent of truth and interpretative monopoly. In the future, we would like to read problematisations of this tendency (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2018).

The fourth argument is that over the past 25 years, we have seen how time has become increasingly scarce in organisations. We consider ourselves to have been privileged as action researchers. Generally, in our projects in the 20th century, we have had time to reflect with our partners, but we experienced the lack of time in our projects in this century. Today, there seems to be an inverse proportionality between the time spent on talking about the need for development and innovation, and the actual time spent on doing this. In practice, it seems that operations and daily production have outcompeted development. From our perspective, a central question has become whether you can do organisational action research at all today – without it becoming an example of quick consultancy on a more or less scientific basis.

We know this might sound negative. It is our intention to say to younger action researchers that there is good reason to question the self-understanding of organisational action research as a promotor of democracy as well as the conditions and possibilities of doing it today.

Our paths towards organisational action research (question 1)

Marianne: About silent girls

In retrospect, I realise that I practiced elements of action research many years before having read or heard about it. Thus, this section deals with my own coming home to action research, through research and communication processes that went from practice to theoretical knowledge and development of action research concepts.

From a Ph.D. project on foreign language teaching to a project on silent girls in a Danish high school

From 1977 to 1980, I carried out a Ph.D. project on foreign language teaching at Roskilde University in Denmark. I started reading literature on the subject and found most of it boring.

I decided then to initiate a practical, educational project at a Danish high school close to Copenhagen, where many students came from non-bookish environments. I wanted to study if and how students could learn English by using the language in many different teaching situations organised by me. I was qualified as a high school language teacher, because I had a master's degree in English and had passed a pedagogical exam.

I began teaching English in a first-grade high school class. I wrote field notes from classes, and compared them with the ones written by my observer. In the autumn holidays, I spent a week at the Royal Danish Library in Copenhagen reading notes.

I found a pattern. A group of girls participated actively in pair- and group work and in writing individual exercises. However, they became silent in joint activities in class as, e.g., discussions, role plays, presentations of group work. I decided to change the project into a study of if, how, and when this group of silent girls could unfold their voices in the public class space. Thus, I renamed the project: "the silent girls".

This change was made without including the girls in my decision-making process. They neither had voice nor choice in the research process.

Communicating about the project in a book and at different high schools

For the next three years, from 1978 to 1981, I wrote a book together with the high school class (Kristiansen & 3. G, 1981). It was based on taped individual and group interviews with all 23 students in the class. It was sold as classroom material, and several high schools invited us to lecture at their schools.

“Now, I am no longer silent”

On an autumn day in 1981, 12 young people from the class, who had now graduated from high school, and I, were in the auditorium of a high school in Jutland. There were about 500 students and teachers in the room. Alternately, the 12 students told which roles they had played externally in class, and how they had experienced them internally. The roles included narratives of, e.g., a bookable girl, a silent girl, a swarmed boy, a technical interested boy etc. Gradually, the high school audience moved closer. They began laughing, clapping their hands, and asking questions. Sometimes, there was complete silence in the room.

Afterwards, a former silent girl approached me saying: “Now, I am no longer silent”. “No, you are not”, I replied smiling through tears.

In that moment, I decided to become a researcher. If research could contribute to helping groups of people such as “silent girls” unfolding their potentials and becoming happier, then I would become a researcher. Then my research was not only going to be about me and my career, though it helped me too; but also about becoming part of a larger community, and contributing to something bigger than myself. I did not understand my choice of vocation as an action researcher, only as a researcher.

Some action research elements and two major shortcomings

When seen in the rear-view mirror, I realise that the project of silent girls had elements of action research:

- The silent girls and I, too, unfolded some of our potentials in the project. We wrote a book and told about the project in newspapers and at different high schools. Moreover, some of the girls changed their choice of education. Instead of becoming a nurse, e.g., like their mothers, one of them chose a creative education using, e.g., her skills as an illustrator. I got a job as an adjunct professor at Aalborg University.
- The process was developed emergently from a more traditional qualitative, foreign language study into a project of silent girls.
- The process was documented by using observations, field notes, taped individual and group interviews with all students, and taped feedback on these interviews.
- Participation was practiced as communicating the process in books and lectures, where everybody contributed in different degrees.

The project had a least two major shortcomings:

- It did not include participation in the research process. I alone chose the issue of the project and wrote scientific articles about it. I did not include the girls nor the class in my scientific interpretations of data.
- I was left then with many ethical problems, due to the distance between my interpretations and the students’ experiences. I decided then that this was going to be different in the future. However, I did not know then how, and in what ways.

A project on mentors and dialogue at Bang & Olufsen in Struer, Denmark

15 years later, in the mid-1990s, Jørgen and I initiated an organisational action research project on mentors and dialogues at the audio-television company, Bang & Olufsen in Struer, Denmark. This time, too, my way into the project went from practice to a study of mentor conversations. Earlier, I had worked as a consultant at B&O, and as a supervisor of adult teachers in the Northern part of Denmark. The issue of the project emanated from these practical experiences, too: How do mentors or supervisors meet partners in conversations when power is present in asymmetrical, organisational contexts?

At this stage, I began reading action research literature, in particular about participation in action research processes (Reason 1994a, 1994b; Heron & Reason 1986), because I realised that I had practiced elements of action research without knowing since the project of silent girls.

Coming home

About 2001, I listened to a keynote given by Peter Reason at Aalborg University, Denmark. While sitting in the auditorium, I got a sense of finally coming 'home'. From now on, I would not only be a researcher, but an action researcher. A couple of years later, we got in touch with Werner Fricke, who had read our book of the B&O mentoring project (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2005). I still remember when Werner's mail ticked into my mailbox, I did not know him then. Imagine there was a human being out there who could see and understand what we had been trying so hard to do. I was almost crying for joy and gratitude. To be seen and met by Werner as an action researcher initiated a lengthy action research process, which has not stopped.

Jørgen: About cardiovascular disease

In 1969-1970, as a young student, I wrote a philosophical dissertation on neo-Marxism in European thinking. It showed, among other things, how the dissidents in Eastern Europe used the young Marx's works in their criticism of Stalinism. In particular, they based their criticism on "The Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts" from 1844, first published in 1932. In my reading of the young Marx's works, I came across his 11th Feuerbach thesis. It says that philosophers have interpreted the world differently, but it is about changing it. This thesis came to act as my bad conscience for several years, when as a young university teacher, I studied the history of the working class in Denmark. My work did not transcend interpretations.

In the late 1970s, I went into psychoanalysis. It made me look more inwardly, for example on my identification with my father who died at the age of 59 from a coronary occlusion. I was afraid to repeat this, so in 1983, I wrote a psychoanalytic book about possible psychological causes of cardiovascular diseases. A doctor contacted me and proposed a collaboration between us. In conjunction with a dietitian, we made a project with approximately 100 people which lasted for several years. We called it health training. From a holistic perspective, the purpose was to prevent lifestyle diseases, and to reduce or remove possible symptoms. I learned, for example, that people with high blood pressure normalised their blood pressure during health training. My work was no longer only about interpretation, but also about change. In retrospect, I see this work as a kind of action research, though I did

not know this then. Here I developed an idea that the more you as a human being can be in control of your own (work) life, the less the risk of cardiovascular disease. Thus, autonomy, self-determination or co-determination became key concepts.

I therefore continued to establish a consulting firm, where I, in co-operation with foremen or first level managers at various companies, created a series of organisational processes. The purpose was to increase productivity by 10 to 15% in a year by reducing the level of stress and thus hopefully, reducing the likelihood of cardiovascular disease. These consultant projects succeeded to some extent at, e.g., Danish, international companies such as Rockwool, Ecco, B&O, and Lego.

Along the way, it struck me that first level managers would almost always give a piece of advice when a colleague or employee presented a problem. We started to discuss whether, in relation to more knowledgeable colleagues or employees, it would be more efficient to ask questions, too, so that the people concerned could solve their problems themselves, or so that first level managers and their colleagues might create a new idea, collaboratively.

Developing concepts through organisational action research projects (question 2)

About self-referentiality, dialogue, not-knowing, always-already-contextualised

The project with first level managers at B&O made the two of us (Marianne and Jørgen) start an action research project in the business development department of B&O in 1995. We combined action with research and participation in the various processes (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2005). The company's immediate purpose was to reduce personnel turnover in the software department. Our purpose was to study what created new insights and changes in conversations.

We started with a future workshop with the approximately 100 employees in the development department (Jungk & Müllert 1981). They were mainly engineers. They pointed out that staff turnover was due to the lack of managerial concern for their long-term personal and professional development. They only had project managers or subject managers within audio, video, mechanics, software, and hardware. Together, we called this absent management function a mentor. The task became to develop the mentoring function, collaboratively. For a year, we carried through a process with all the managers and some of their employees, where the focus was on helping younger colleagues and employees through conversations, i.e. on mentoring, so to speak. One of the directors characterised this process as "Employee development through product development. Product development through employee development."

The conversations were based on employee assessment interviews between managers and employees. All conversations were recorded on video. Immediately afterwards, managers and employees saw sequences from these conversations and gave feedback to each other, just as we gave feedback to them. These conversations were also used for training the managers as mentors, and in the production of two training videos. In the fall of 1995, we lived in the city, and spent many hours with managers and employees.

Along the way, we developed several concepts based on the conversational practice we had observed. We noticed, for example, that managers almost always acted as advisors when someone presented a problem. They did not check if their colleagues or employees wanted a piece of advice, but acted as the first level managers had done in the earlier projects. This was often a good way of communicating when their partners needed advice, but hardly otherwise.

Self-referentiality

In the training processes for future mentors, we noticed, too, that many managers were inclined to convince others of their own points of view. Open, inquiring questions were rare.

The tendency to speak from one's own perspective, to take for granted, e.g., that a person with a problem needs a piece of advice, we chose to call self-referentiality (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2004, 2005). Self-referentiality is basically about translating the other's perspective into one's own. Self-referentiality encompasses both contents and relations. Contents may be about expressing opinions and views, e.g., in the form of advice, when a piece of advice is not asked for. Relations may be about meeting the other with one's own preferred way of approaching life, e.g., about downplaying another person's concerns with one's own optimistic way of relating. The concept of self-referentiality includes the researchers, too. We acted, e.g., self-referentially when presenting our own interpretations as if they were truths, instead of listening to employees and managers. In our understanding of self-referentiality, we were inspired by Gadamer (1960), Torbert (2001), and Marshall & Mead (2005).

In particular, self-referentiality fell short in situations where employees and managers could not continue by doing more of the same. Here it became necessary to involve others, in order to create new perspectives or solutions collaboratively. We chose to define involvement or participation in a shared knowledge producing process as a dialogue. The B&O managers suggested understanding dialogues as midwifery or midwife conversations (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2005).

Communicative analyses of videotaped sequences showed how it was possible to describe dialogue or midwifery as a special quality in these conversations. New knowledge or insight were produced, when managers, employees or we, as researchers met our partners with empathy, mirroring, congruence, acceptance, and meta-communication. This often happened in combination with humor. These concepts were developed in collaboration with managers and employees to varying degrees. We introduced the concept of self-referentiality, while the managers contributed with the concept of midwifery. At B&O, managers and employees were used to working with developing new products and processes. This meant, they often criticised our first draft of new concepts, and presented alternative suggestions. In different organisations, participation in the research process has been more difficult.

Dialogue and dissensus

For 25 years we have worked to strengthen dialogues in many different organisations and to develop a dialogic action research approach.

Today, we understand dialogue within a dissensus perspective (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2013). Dialogue does not mean constructing joint understanding. It means a shared inquiry into whether it is possible to create a joint understanding, by inquiring into different points of view and approaches. Often, dialogue is conceptualised as a noun, i.e., as a specific type of conversation differing from other types. Bohm (1996), e.g., has a distinction between dialogue and discussion. We do not understand dialogue as a noun, rather as a cross between a verb and an adjective. It is a processual concept encompassing the below mentioned conditions and characteristics. Thus, one might use 'dialoguing' or 'dialogic' about parts of a conversation:

- when a joint inquiry might qualify a perspective or a decision
- when, if possible, a framework has been decided indicating:
 - what the conversation can deal with and not deal with
 - whether the object of the conversation is goals and/or means
 - whether this kind of participation means co-influence (i.e., being able to present suggestions) or co-determination (i.e., being able to participate in decision making)
- when no other decisions about the conversational subject have been made in advance
- when the parties present views, including disagreements, for common inquiry without attempting to convince
- when the parties ask questions and check interpretations in order to understand their partners' views
- when the parties communicate in ways trying to maintain relationships.

In retrospect, the concepts of self-referentiality and dialogue were developed within an organisational context. We do not understand this as an example of applied research. It was not possible to use familiar dialogue concepts, because often they were developed in different contexts such as a philosophical or a therapeutic context, or ideally. Bohm's concept of dialogue was, e.g., conceptualised cosmologically (1996), Habermas' ideally (1996, 1971), Buber's concepts were existential and religious (1957).

As mentioned above, all conversations were recorded on videotape. There were conversations between managers, and between managers and employees in various training contexts, and between them and us in these contexts. In the evening we analyzed them. The following day, we presented and discussed our ideas with the managers and employees. In particular, we discussed which dialogic competencies might create new shared perspectives or solutions in the conversations. As mentioned, our ideas were occasionally problematised. As such, there were dialogues at many different levels and contexts such as, e.g., organisational, training, and research contexts. Through these conversations, we realized that action research cannot be described as collaboration between theoreticians and practitioners. We began to understand it as interdisciplinary teamwork between various professionals from universities/ educational institutions, and private or public organisations (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2017).

During our project at B&O, we participated in various dialogue workshops and conferences in the USA. Here we met and were inspired by some American dialogue communication researchers such as Cissna & Anderson (1994), Hawes (1999), Isaacs (1999), and Stewart (1999).

Emergence and not-knowing

We knew from previous projects that complicated processes could not be planned beyond the first phase. We later realized that Lewin (1947) had emphasised this earlier. But it became particularly clear in the B&O project that processes are emergent, and that we as action researchers must live with our not-knowing (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2008). Greenwood & Levin (1998) discuss, too, emergence and not-knowing. Not-knowing, therefore, became an important concept. Fortunately, the engineers at B&O were accustomed to working with emergent processes when developing new televisions or loudspeakers. They could never predict exactly how such processes ended.

Always-already-contextualized

Along the way through our projects, we have had many discussions about how to understand the organisational conversations we were studying: how much derived from the individual person's communicative competencies, how much could be understood within the power relations between the participants, how much could be understood in relation to the various contexts. For several years, Marianne was tired of listening to Jørgen's tendency to overlook organisational contexts, because he thought he saw the same individual competencies and relationships across different organisations. It was not until later, when we lost a year's project work on the floor because we had not taken the context sufficiently into account, that Jørgen understood the meaning of the concept of always-already-contextualised (Kristiansen 2013; Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2014). As action researchers, we never enter virgin land. Every organisation and every project have their own history, their own power relationships, which are constantly evolving and in which you yourself are embedded, influenced, and influencing in complicated ways.

Dialogic or applied?

For several reasons, it has been a challenge to develop concepts through the action research processes. The concepts of Not-knowing and Always-already-contextualised imply a dialogue between theory and practice, i.e. developing concepts and theories through practice and practice through theory. To speak with Gadamer (1960), our prejudices, or our theoretical understanding of organisations and change prior to the action research processes, could not be taken for granted and excluded from the dialogues. Applied research would be insufficient, because this approach could reduce our partners to scientific objects. We experienced our co-operation with partners as tough and rewarding concept-developing work. At Bang & Olufsen, the managers and some employees contributed to this process: not as practitioners, but as professionals with backgrounds differing from ours. In different organisations, it turned out to become more difficult often due to fiscal crisis, cuts, lack of time, etc.

Participation and power (questions 3 and 4)

We have written about the challenges, dilemmas, and paradoxes we encountered as action researchers (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2006, 2014, 2016). We have talked in favour of the

greatest possible degree of employee co-determination, but what happened when management did not want employees participating in the project management group, because the company was in a crisis (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2018)? How did we balance economic demands of efficiency with demands for improved work life quality? What would we do if management wanted to start a project now while many employees felt that the timing was unrealistic? What could we do when facing the managers', the employees' and our own powerlessness and grief when a government intervention removed the outcomes of a year's action research project (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2013)?

The worst were almost the paradoxes. They emerged when the efforts towards participation ended in their opposites, i.e. when some of our projects led to certain groups being excluded despite our participatory intentions. For example, in some projects we have excluded elderly, first level managers who had difficulties practicing dialogues; also, younger employees who were at their first employee appraisal interviews. We chose the contradictory concept: participatory hierarchy, to describe this paradox (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2016). Today, we are still in doubt whether this was an expression of our own inadequacy or whether this cannot be avoided?

Gradually, we realised that our challenges with participation and power can be grouped around these five key themes in action research projects:

- Who decides that an action research process should be initiated?
- Who decides what its purpose or goal is?
- Who decides how to design it?
- Who decides how to interpret and evaluate it?
- Who decides who should communicate what about the process and its eventual results to whom in what way?

In our own action research processes, it has always been management who decided that a process should be initiated. As far as possible, organisational goals have been determined by management and employees (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2018). The theoretical goals have been decided by us as action researchers primarily. It has also largely been us who developed the design. As far as possible, the ongoing analyses and evaluations have been made through dialogues between all parties. As action researchers, we wrote articles, books etc. about the project – often in collaboration with employees and managers (Dalgaard, Johannsen, Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2014).

Along the way, we developed an understanding of power in organisational action research projects. There are at least three different concepts (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2017):

One understands power as a possession to be exercised by different agents. This perspective sees power as dominance and control, that is, as 'power over' (Clegg & Haugaard 2009).

The second concept broadens the scope to include power as societal, political, and economic structures and understands power as economic, political, and societal exploitation. This understanding is often seen in projects inspired by critical theory such as the German Frankfurt School (Horkheimer 1937).

The third concept understands power as relations and discourses present in all aspects no matter whether they deal with the micro-or macro level. This view is inspired by Michel Foucault's (2000) power analytics which deals with the effects of power. No matter how power

works, within this perspective, there are no power-free or safe spaces in organisational action research; participation will always be linked with power relations negotiating who and what to include or exclude.

We came to understand power as a combination of these three ways, i.e., as a combination of possession, structure and discourse.

Positions of power in previous organisational action research projects (question 6)

The challenges we have had in our own change processes with the above mentioned 5 key themes led us to examine how some of our action research predecessors had handled them. How did they, e.g., practice participation in relationships between action researchers, managers and employees? As mentioned in the introduction, in 2018, we wrote a book about this.

In the book, we describe and analyze Lewin's change-oriented social science in the United States in the 1940s, exemplified by the Harwood project; the start of socio-technical systems thinking in England, exemplified by the Tavistock Institute studies in the coal mines in the 1950s; the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project, exemplified by some of the Work Research Institute (Oslo) studies in the 1960s, e.g., at the Christiania Spigerverket and the Eidanger Salpeter factories; democratic dialogues in Norway and Sweden in the 1980s carried through in the Work Research Institute's Network Programme for Business Development (1981-91) and in the Karlstad Program (1986-92), located at the University College in Karlstad, Sweden, affiliated with the LOM program (Ledelse, Organisation, Medbestemmelse, i.e. Management, Organisation, Co-determination), exemplified by the project at Avestad Sandvik Tube AB in Storfors, Sweden; as well as pragmatic action research, exemplified by a project in the Spanish co-operatives in Mondragon in the latter half of the 1980s.

Generally, in these projects, employees do not participate in decision making, dealing with whether an action research project should be initiated, what its purpose should be, how it should be designed, what its evaluation criteria are, or how to communicate about it.

However, the projects write about participation, co-determination, co-generative research, and dialogue. It became our interpretation that primarily, these concepts should be understood as the employees' opportunity to present proposals for implementation, i.e. as ideas about how-to-methods. Decisions are usually made by management, possibly in collaboration with the action researchers.

The book also contains a self-critical chapter on our own challenges with these key themes exemplified by a project at Danfoss Solar Inverters in Denmark in 2008-10.

Our studies of these organisational action research projects from the 20th century ran into a methodological problem. Only to a very limited extent, the projects have documented how participation has been practiced in organisational action research processes. In vain, we have looked for documentation. We have asked for help from research librarians at Aalborg University, CPH, because the problem of documentation could be due to our own shortcomings. We have also looked for documentation in the Tavistock archives in London. Despite these efforts, we conclude that documentation of action research processes in organisations seems largely absent.

We have chosen a random example from the project in Mondragon in Spain, where the research team describes one of their methods, the roundtables, a kind of focus group:

In all six roundtables, participation was excellent. All participants selected and who received a personal explanation of the motives behind them, attended. The atmosphere, except for a few moments at one of the roundtables, was characterised by cordiality, progressive opening up of dialogue, and the free expression of personal opinions. At the end of each, the participants expressed satisfaction for the opportunity to state their opinions and discuss these issues (Greenwood et al, p. 125).

The quotation uses several interpretations such as “excellent”, “cordiality”, “progressive opening up of dialogue” and “free expression.” It is not possible for us to find documentation of these interpretations; what, e.g., do the participants say themselves? As readers, we are left to believe the interpretations of the research team.

In our book (2018), we have tried to solve the problem of lacking documentation by distinguishing between what the individual approaches write themselves, and what we conclude based on the self-understanding of the individual approaches. Moreover, we have included examples from action research projects within the individual approaches, to get as close to their practice as possible.

We conclude that participation seems to have been practiced in one of these ways in the 20th century organisational action research projects:

- Organisational action research as applied research

This approach has different versions. To Lewin and his partners, this meant moving their labs into the field, i.e. into organisations, and applying pre-existing theories on the relationship between participation and productivity in the experiments with their new partners. At the Tavistock Institute, this meant that in some mines, the researchers followed some experiments with self-governing groups initiated by the local management and the miners; afterwards the researchers applied these results in different mines. In the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project, this meant implementing the theories of the English coal mines in various Norwegian industries. In these projects, generally, the researchers acted as professional experts, advising employees and managers on how to organise their work.

- Organisational action research as facilitation

In the democratic dialogue projects, the action researchers are described as facilitators of processes between management and employees. Democracy is not seen as structure, i.e. as self-governing groups, but as a process that follows special guidelines for democratic dialogues. This meant that a special process design is applied.

- Organisational action research as co-generative research

In pragmatic action research, action research is understood as co-generative research, where managers, employees, and researchers co-produce a number of practical and theoretical results based on their different knowledge and interests. However, our study of the Mondragon project points out that “co-” means that only the research team, which primarily consists of the action researcher and the managers of different personnel departments, seems to be able to determine if employee statements are valid or not (Greenwood et al, 1992 p. 120).

Across the projects, we miss self-critical reflections on the ways action researchers position themselves in terms of power. We will give two examples:

In the action research processes in the English coal mines it is taken for granted that self-governing groups are superior to other forms of organisation. In the so called Bramwell mine, some of the miners and local managers preferred the former Tayloristic mode of production. The researchers, Trist, Higgin, Murray & Pollock (1990) understood this reaction as resistance, based on Bion's psychoanalytic theory:

This paper describes and analyzes an episode in an action research project undertaken by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in the British coalmining industry that continued, with interruptions, for eight years during the 1950s. It shows how what Bion (1961) called the "hatred of learning through experience" all but defeated an innovative collaborative endeavour by occasioning conflicts in which management and labour regressed to traditional adversarial positions (p. 476).

We miss self-critical reflections: How can you as actions researchers use psychoanalytic interpretations like "hatred of learning through experience" or "regressed", without positioning yourself as uppers (Chambers 1997)? We think the use of psychoanalytic interpretations works as a power mechanism, positioning the researchers and the miners in an asymmetrical relationship.

In the democratic dialogue projects, it is taken for granted that processes must be facilitated according to the guidelines that the researchers have decided. We think these guidelines are based on a Habermasian, consensus understanding of dialogue. They are claimed to be developed through experience (Gustavsen 2001), but we have not been able to find documentation of this. As far as we can see, the design is applied by the researchers. It does not seem to be made the subject of a dialogue between researchers and partners.

In general, such power issues seem to have been excluded from dialogue within the history of organisational action research. An exception is, e.g., Thorsrud & Emery (1970). In the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project, they asked self-critical questions about the ways the researchers positioned themselves as outside theoretical experts, grounding their knowledge on foreign results and not on local experience: "... where they became defenders of theoretical views that had support in foreign research results, primarily" [our translation from Norwegian] (Thorsrud & Emery 1970, p. 73).

Some focal points in upcoming organisational action research projects? (question 7)

Based on our study of these organisational action research approaches from the 20th century (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen 2018) and on our own projects, we think the following focal points are important to consider in future organisational action research:

- Is it possible to increase or develop employee participation from co-influence to co-determination on one or several of the five key change themes?
- Is it possible to make theories, methods, and ways of facilitation subjects of an ongoing dialogue with managers and employees in order to make the power positionings of action researchers more transparent?
- Is it possible to improve documentation of organisational action research processes, so that colleagues can check arguments and interpretations in accordance with basic scientific standards?

- Is there time enough to carry through an organisational action research project that is not only instrumental, i.e. a short-term intervening consultancy project on a limited scientific basis?

References

- Arieli D., Friedman V. J. & Agbaria K. (2009). "The paradox of participation in action research". *Action Research*, 7(3), 262-290. doi: 10.1177/1476750309336718
- Bohm D. (1996). *On Dialogue*. London: Routledge.
- Buber M. (1957). "Elements of the interhuman". In M. Buber (1965). *The knowledge of man* (pp. 72-88). New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Chambers R. (1997). *Whose reality counts? Putting the first last*. London: Intermediate Technology.
- Cissna K. N. & Anderson R. (1994). "Communication and the Ground of Dialogue." In R. Anderson, K. N. Cissna & R. C. Arnett (Eds.). *The Reach of Dialogue: Confirmation, Voice and Community* (pp. 9-30). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Clegg, S. & Haugaard, M. (Eds.) (2010). *The SAGE Handbook of Power*. London: Sage.
- Dalgaard L. G., Johansen L. V., Kristiansen M. & Bloch-Poulsen J. (2014). "Differences as a potential vehicle of organisational development? – co-researching-on-action." In M. Kristiansen & J. Bloch-Poulsen (Eds.). *Participation and power in participatory research and action research*, (pp.199-228). Aalborg: Aalborg University Press.
- Foucault M. (2000). "Power". In James D. Faubion (Ed.). *Michel Foucault: Power. Essential works of Foucault* (1954-1983), vol. 3. London: Penguin books.
- Gadamer H. G. (1960). *Wahrheit und Methode*. Tübingen: Mohr.
- Greenwood D. J. & Levin M. (1998). *Introduction to Action Research*. London: Sage.
- Greenwood D. J., Santos J. L. G. with Alonso J. G., Markaide I. G., Arruza, A.G., Nuin I. L & Amesti K.S. (1992). *Industrial democracy as process: Participatory Action Research in the Fagor Co-operative Group of Mondragón*. Assen-Maastricht: Van Gorcum.
- Gustavsen B. (2001). "Theory and Practice: the Mediating Discourse." In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.). *Handbook of Action Research Participative Inquiry & Practice*, (pp. 17-26). London: Sage.
- Habermas J. (1996). *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen. Studien zur politischen Theorie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Habermas J. (1971). "Vorbereitende Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie der kommunikativen Kompetenz". In J. Habermas & N. Luhmann (Eds.). *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie – was leistet die Systemforschung?* (pp. 101-141). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Hawes L. C. (1999). "The dialogics of conversation: Power, control, vulnerability." *Communication Theory*, 9, 229-264. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2885.1999.tb00170.x
- Heron J. & Reason P. (1986). "Research with people". *Person-centered Review*, 4(1), 456-76.
- Horkheimer M. & Marcuse H. (1937). „Philosophie und kritische Theorie.“ *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 6(3), 625-647. Retrieved from <http://ia800501.us.archive.org/21/items/ZeitschriftFrSozialforschung6.Jg/ZeitschriftFrSozialforschung61937.pdf>
- Isaacs W. (1999). *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. New York: Currency, Doubleday.
- Jungk R. & Müllert N. (1981). *Zukunftswerkstätten: Wege zur Wiederbelebung der Demokratie*. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe.
- Kristiansen M. (2013). "Dynamics between Organizational Change Processes and Facilitating Dissensus in Context Inquiring Dialogues". *International Journal of Action Research*, 9(1), 95-123. doi: 10.1688/1861-9916\IJAR\ 2009\ 01\ Kirkeby
- Kristiansen M. & 3. G. (1981). *Helt ærlig – om unge i gymnasiet*. København: Informations forlag.

- Kristiansen M. & Bloch-Poulsen J. (2018). *Inddragelse i forandringsprocesser? Aktionsforskning i organisationer*. [Participation in change processes. Action research in organisations.] Aalborg: Aalborg Universitetsforlag. The book can be downloaded for free here: <http://aauforlag.dk/Shop/andre/antologier-and-monographier/involvement-i-changeprocesser-aktionsfor.aspx>
- Kristiansen M. & Bloch-Poulsen J. (2017). "Organisational Action Research» In C. R. Scott, L. K. Lewis, J. Barker, J. Keyton, & P. Turner (Eds.). *The International Encyclopedia of Organizational Communication*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Kristiansen M. & Bloch-Poulsen J. (2016). "Participatory hierarchies – a challenge in organisational action research." *International Journal of Action Research*, 12(2), 144-171. doi: 10.1688/IJAR-2016-02-Kristiansen
- Kristiansen M. & Bloch-Poulsen J. (2014). "Power and contexts – some societal conditions for participatory projects – Clashes between economic-management and pedagogic-social Discourses." *International Journal of Action Research*, 10(3) 339-375. doi: 10.1688/IJAR-2014-03-Kristiansen
- Kristiansen M. & Bloch-Poulsen J. (2013). "Participatory knowledge production and power – co-determination through dissensus in dialogic organizational action research." In L. Phillips, M. Kristiansen, M. Vehviläinen & E. Gunnarsson, E. (Eds.). *Knowledge and Power in Collaborative Research: A Reflexive Approach*, (pp. 193-212). London: Routledge.
- Kristiansen M. & Bloch-Poulsen J. (2008). "Working with "not knowing" amid power dynamics among managers: From faultfinding and exclusion towards co-learning and inclusion." In H. Bradbury & P. Reason (Eds.). *The Sage Handbook of Action Research: Participative inquiry and practice*, (pp. 463-472). London, Sage.
- Kristiansen M. & Bloch-Poulsen J. (2006). "Involvement as a Dilemma. Between Dialogue and Discussion in Team Based Organisations." *International Journal of Action Research*, 2(2), 163-197. Retrieved from <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-356431>
- Kristiansen M. & Bloch-Poulsen J. (2005). Midwifery and dialogue in organizations. Emergent, mutual involvement in action research. München: Rainer Hampp Verlag.
- Kristiansen M. & Bloch-Poulsen J. (2004). "Self-referentiality as a power mechanism. Towards dialogic action research." *Action Research*, 2(4), 371-388. doi: 10.1177/1476750304047981
- Lewin K. (1947). "Frontiers in group dynamics, II. Channels of group life: Social planning and action research". *Human Relations*, 1, 143-153. doi: 10.1177/001872674700100201
- Mansbridge J., with Bohman J., Chambers S., Estlund D., Føllesdal A., Fung A., Lafont C., Manin B. & Mart, J. L. (2010). "The Place of Self-Interest and the Role of Power in Deliberative Democracy." *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 18(1), 64-100. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9760.2009.00344.x
- Marshall J. & Mead G. (2005). "Self-reflective inquiry and first person action research," *Action Research*, 3(3), 235-244. doi: 10.1177/1476750305055999
- Reason P. (Ed.) (1994a). *Participation in human inquiry*. London: Sage.
- Reason P. (1994b). "Co-operative inquiry, participatory action research and action inquiry: three approaches to participative inquiry." In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, (pp. 324-39). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schafft K. A. & Greenwood D. J. (2003). "Promises and Dilemmas of Participation: Action Research, Search Conference Methodology, and Community Development." *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 34(1), 18-35. doi: 10.1080/15575330309490101
- Stewart J. (1999). *Bridges not walls. A book about interpersonal communication*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Thorsrud E. & Emery F. (1970). *Mot en ny bedriftsorganisasjon. Experimenten i industrielt demokrati*. Oslo: Johan Grundt Tanum Forlag.

- Torbert W. R. (2001). "The Practice of Action Inquiry." In H. Bradbury & P. Reason (Eds.). *The Handbook of Action Research*. London: Sage.
- Trist E., Higgin G., Murray H. & Pollock A. (1990). "The Assumption of Ordinarity as Denial Mechanism – Innovation and conflict in a Coal Mine." In E. Trist & H. Murray (Eds.) (1990). *The Social Engagement of Social Science: The socio-psychological perspective, vol. 1*, (pp. 476-493). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

About the authors

Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen, Ph.D., has worked at different Danish universities since the beginning of the 1970s, as an organisational development consultant since the mid-1980s, and as an organisational action researcher since the mid-1990s; he has focused on improving co-determination through dialogue in public and private organisations, e.g., at Bang & Olufsen, Lego, Ecco and Danfoss.

Marianne Kristiansen, Ph.D., has worked as an associate professor at Aalborg University within interpersonal and organisational organisation, and as an action researcher focusing on participation, power, and dialogue since the mid-1990s in public and private organisations. She has worked as a psychotherapist, supervisor, and consultant trying to combine academic and practical work.

Authors' address

Marianne Kristiansen, ph.d. & Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen, ph.d.
Frederik VI's Allé 2, 3. th.
DK-2000 Frederiksberg

Marianne: +45 20275655; mariannek@dialog-mj.dk
Jørgen: +45 40177352; joergenbp@dialog-mj.dk

www.dialog-mj.dk