40 years in 40 minutes

Interview with Øyvind Pålshaugen

Danilo and Miren:
Thank you, Øyvind, for granting this interview to the *International Journal of Action Research.* After your long trajectory with AR, and also in this journal, we want to integrate your insight in the emergent discussions we propose in this issue about the future challenges of AR. Let us start by giving the reader a perspective of your trajectory. How did you come to AR? You could certainly not study it at university. And how did you come to The Work Research Institute (WRI) in Oslo?

Øyvind:
That is correct. Even though I started to study sociology in the hope that if I understood society better, I would be better equipped to change it. I was far from the only one with that hope. However, those examples of action research that some of the academic staff were involved in, did not attract my interest. They were exerted mostly for the sake of using scientific knowledge to reinforce action, and less for using action to reinforce scientific knowledge. Having refused to join the army after college, my interest in politics rose considerably. This was in the early seventies, and the options for jumping into political action were many: there were many white feathers on the left wing, to put it that way. However, I could not fail to notice that pretty much of the political activity of the student's at the university was much about "paroles" and that the "parliament of the streets" was in fashion. It was a politics of words, which were both written and shouted out with lots of energy, but the fate of this energy appeared to me like the steam from a safety valve: it dissolved in the air.

I turned my back on the streets and went into the libraries. At the time, also Marx was in fashion, and after having read his texts on historical materialism I acquired a Danish translation of *Das Kapital:* all three volumes (12 in Danish), to read and discuss it within a not too large group of like-minded. We read this work not in the spirit of any kind of Marxism, but in the spirit of the last sentence in Marx' foreword to *Das Kapital:* "Every opinion based on scientific criticism I welcome. As to prejudices of so-called public opinion, to which I have never made concessions, now as aforetime the maxim of the great Florentine is mine: *Segui il tuo corso, e lascia dir le genti*" [Follow your own course, and let people talk (paraphrased from Dante).

Thus, while reading Marx, it was necessary also to read Keynes and followers. To make a long story short by an understatement, it became pretty clear to me that attempts to change society, without engaging in the question of how to change the production system of society, were simply too superficial. This led me to join a group of students who were devoted to "the sociology of work and industry", and finally to a Master degree in this field in sociology. An empirical study of how economic and technological parameters conditioned the shaping of the

specific patterns of workplaces at a cable factory through the period from 1945–1975, was the outcome.

Having besides studied psychology, mostly Freud, and critical philosophy of language, I had not given much attention to what I should do for a living after having obtained my Master degree. I had heard about WRI, since the professor that was responsible for teaching on "sociology of work and industry", Ragnvald Kalleberg, had a collegial and intellectual relationship with Bjørn Gustaven, who at the time was the director of WRI. This was due to their common interest in Habermas' theories of society, communication and dialogue. My impression of WRI at the time (1981) was that it was a social-democratic milieu that in their research co-operated closely with the employers' and the employee's national organizations.

Regardless of my impression, a few months before I finished my Master degree, I was headhunted to WRI by Gustavsen, via Kalleberg, to undertake a one-year study of the work environment of the garbage collectors of Oslo city. So I did. During this year I discovered that Gustavsen had a great intellectual capacity – and appetite. In particular his ability to grasp philosophical and theoretical ideas he found exciting, and to make productive use of them in the action research he and his close colleagues were doing, was striking. By the end of this first year I wrote a 120 pages research report about the garbage collectors, which led to nothing. Per H. Engelstad, the closest colleague to Gustavsen, and the researcher at WRI who was most engaged in the renewal in the kind of conferences that came to be termed dialogue conferences, suggested to organise one, with a large contingent of garbage collectors and their management as participants. From then on, real improvements of their work environment came to be exerted. The same happened to me, albeit in a different way. I told Gustavsen that I wanted to read Habermas' book *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns,* which had been published in 1981, and write an article about it. He answered "fine". Shortly after, Engelstad invited me to join him at a dialogue conference on regional development, in Western Norway. I answered "fine". The rest is history…

Danilo and Miren:
What authors have been important reference points in your work? Could we say that Wittgenstein had a special influence on it?

Øyvind:
That would not be wrong, but if so, Wittgenstein is to be regarded *primus inter pares* with Foucault in my work with action research. With your permission, I will elaborate a little on this point.

My first publication in English on action research was written in 1987 for an international conference in Oslo, devoted to the memorial of Einar Thorsrud. The heading of the session for which I wrote my contribution, was: Can Social Science Contribute to Industrial Democracy? My article opens with a suggestion of posing this question slightly differently: Can a flow of words contribute to industrial democracy? To this question there might be many ways to answer. However, none of them can be given without using just a flow of words; but not just a free flow: Any use of words must be undertaken appropriately if the words are to be understood by others, and that what is appropriate is dependent on which kind of discourse the actual use of words is embedded in.

By opening my article in this way, I could easily remind us of the fact that within society there are many kinds of discourses, of which the discourse of social science is one. Then, I

could launch this perspective: "Applied science is an application of words to already existing discourses." Further, I referred to contemporary research on the use of applied science, which shows that non-use or abuse are as common as proper use. On this basis I put a statement: "… there seems to be a main tendency within applied social science to neglect the *discourse of the user.*"

Admittedly, an overstatement; but it worked as a rhetorical means to pave the way for my presentation of a research approach that did not neglect the discourse of the user, but rather made this discourse one main element in the very research process. Making this approach into an identifiable unity was made by a kind of "speech act", namely the title of the article: "A Norwegian Programme of Action Research for Participative Democracy".[1]

You will easily recognise some of Foucault's main perspectives on discourse in the excerpts from this article. However, you will also notice my frequent use of the phrase "use of words". This is not only a sign of the influence from Wittgenstein, it is indeed a deliberate use of the phrase. The philosophical projects of Foucault and Wittgenstein are pretty different, but to use another phrase of Wittgenstein, there is a multitude of "family resemblances".

However, as Nietzsche once remarked, it is a weak eye that only sees similarities between philosophers. And it is just by means of the differences between Foucault's perspectives on *discourse* and Wittgenstein's perspectives on *language games* that we can elaborate new perspectives that are influenced and enriched by the philosophical writings of both.

To put it bluntly, discourses may be said to be made up by language games. I do not put it this way in order to build some coherent theory of linguistic practice, from macro to micro-level, as it were. Rather, it is a way to suggest in what ways Foucault's perspectives on discourse and Wittgenstein's perspectives on language games can be relevant to understanding important aspects regarding our many different kinds of use of language; and above all, their relevance for making us more aware of all the *misunderstandings* in this respect.

The influence from Foucault, or, as I would prefer to put it, my productive use of Foucault, is also pretty apparent in my book with the subtitle: "Language as a tool in organisation development and action research"[2]. This book, which was originally published in 1991, is a monograph on an action research project that was undertaken in a Norwegian tobacco factory over three years. The research strategy was based on the use of dialogue conferences as the main means for management and employees to co-operate on enterprise development. The exercise of this strategy requires that the dialogues at these conferences are very carefully organised, that is, in ways that are conditioned by a number of parameters that have to be considered in order to make the *content* of the dialogues be of maximal relevance with regards to a number of parameters: the various kinds of interests of the various groups of employees and management; the overall purpose of the enterprise development, the need to make the experience and knowledge of all groups of employees/management be played into the process, and to make all this take place in accordance with the socio-technical conditions of this particular enterprise.

It goes without saying that it is not possible to give equal attention to all these parameters in one and the same dialogue. Thus, any dialogue conference has to be organised in sequences of parallel dialogues in groups, in a way that are in accordance with the versions of the general parameters that are specific to any enterprise. Now, to the relevance of Foucault: The organising of these dialogue conferences in the course of a 3-years project, served to create new

1 This article was first published in German, cf. Fricke, W. & Jäger, W. (Hrsg) 1988.
2 Pålshaugen 1998

kinds of discussions, conversation and communication; in short, new discourses – among the various groups of employees and management within the enterprise. Notably, it is by means of these new kinds of discourses that the generation of new ideas on what kinds of development is needed for, how this work with development tasks should be organised and exerted, and how to judge the outcome of the development work, is figured out as a collective process. In order to highlight this emphasis on organising dialogues as part of an action research strategy, and its crucial importance as a condition for succeeding in enterprise development based on broad participation, I adopted Foucault's perspectives on discourse in my interpretation of this strategy. By playing on preceding strategies for reorganising enterprises by means of action research, I coined a new phrase in order to emphasis the *differentia specifica* of this "refined" version: an action research strategy for reorganising enterprises by reorganising their discourses.

Finally, I will just mention that the perspective I have adopted in some articles on the distinction between practical and theoretical discourse as part of a strategy to undermine the common but all too simple distinction between theoreticians and practitioners, is also based on a productive use of Foucault's perspectives on discourse. Olav Eikeland has made me aware that "already Aristotle" made this distinction, but that has not been may path into it. (In parenthesis, Habermas' distinction on theoretical and practical discourse is of a quite different kind, not akin to whether Aristotle's nor Foucault's conceptualisation.)

Danilo and Miren:
From influential authors, we move to influential organizations. How do you evaluate WRI's impact on Norwegian society? And, to what extent has Action Research dominated the direction of research at WRI?

Øyvind:
The question of WRI's impact on Norwegian society is indeed an interesting one: not least to myself, for whom WRI has been my only workplace for a period of nor less than 40 years (1981–2021). However, to answer this question in some appropriate way is a task that goes far beyond what can be completed in an interview. There is no lack of viewpoints on this question, based on experiences, anecdotes and impressions of a great variety of kinds, but any serious, comprehensive study I think will never appear.

As we know, the question of the impact of the social sciences (and the humanities) has during the last decade climbed higher on the agenda in the EU: and also in Norway. Leaving aside the many oversimplified attempts to create indexes for measuring such impacts, we find that there is a growing stream of literature of social research that aims at contributing to developing both theories and methods for how to measure, and judge, the impact of social science. So far, the best parts of this literature have made good efforts in establishing empirical and theoretical analyses that forbid any quick way to jump to conclusions (cf. e. g. Lauronen 2020). What we can hope for are not prescriptions for studies that are able to give "final answers" on questions of impact, but empirically and theoretically founded ideas on what kind of constellations of different kinds of, and sources of, knowledge seem appropriate when searching for "sufficiently reasonable" answers to more specific questions on the impact of social science.

The second question is somewhat easier to answer. Since I came to WRI (1981), action research has never dominated WRI. As WRI grew larger during the 90-ies and the first decade

of the new Millennium, I believe the relative number of action researchers was diminishing. Also, when the last of the research programmes of the Norwegian Research Council about ended about 10 years ago, the financial foundation for doing action research was utterly shrinking.

Thus, the relative number of researchers mainly occupied with action research probably has been never less than today. But this information does not provide the right impression of to what extent, and in what ways it is experienced. Knowledge and competence gained by action research, and other action-oriented research at WRI, has dominated (or perhaps better, influenced) the direction of research at WRI. Today, a dominant trend is research projects that combine research on aggregate levels with research on local development work at the organisational level, where participation from "rank and file" usually is a prerequisite. This combination allows for gaining and developing new, research-based knowledge on how to make use of systematically organised development work in a number of different institutional contexts within working life. These projects are generally more or less loosely linked to some general investments in efforts of improvements and development in different fields of working life. The main fields are 1) renewal of public sector; 2) inclusive working life; 3) health-promoting work environment; 4) organisational innovation; 5) new forms of management, organisation and co-operation in networks. Practically all research projects within these fields are founded in certain democratic values, operationalised in practice by different forms of participation in the development of new organisational and other kinds of solutions to local problems that are generally experienced in the actual field of working life.

By this very general description of the kind of action-oriented research that is dominant at WRI today, we may recognize some of the main features of action research, exerted within a somewhat different framework. The two main differences might be that interventions by the researchers in the field of research are less direct, and that projects mainly devoted to enterprise development in private sector are far less frequent.

Danilo and Miren:
That gave us a perspective of AR in Norway, but what has been your experience of AR outside Norway? Is there something like a Scandinavian school or tradition of AR? If there is, what are its key features?

Øyvind:
I would definitely not claim that there is a *school*, and I am happy with that! We know from many examples of "schools" within academia, and also from attempts to shape/form "schools" within action research, that such schools tend to be less marked by excellent scholarship, than by rather restrictive and narrow-minded followers who try to teach what they think is the right doctrine of this school. It is not for nothing that many great thinkers have publicly declared that they will abandon all attempts to establish them as founders of some "school".

A *tradition* is something else: by definition it is subject to be transferred and thereby inevitably also somehow transformed. If we in the first place narrow it down to a question of a Norwegian tradition, and even narrower, a tradition in the wake of Einar Thorsrud and the industrial democracy project in the sixties, the word tradition might fit very well. Especially in the writings of B. Gustavsen we can easily read how the successive attempts to deal with and overcome the shortcomings of the action research approach of the industrial democracy project have formed their foundation for improving and renewing this approach.

To some extent we can here talk about a division of labour, in the sense that some of the researchers (at WRI) were undertaking the work in the field with developing new practical methods for workers participation in enterprise development, while others: *in casu* Gustavsen, were undertaking the work with developing new interpretations of how this field work contributed to renewal and improvement of this action research approach. Eventually more researchers were included in these theoretical and practical attempts, by which this tradition continued to exist by the attempts to improve it: also myself.

From the mid-eighties, when Gustavsen was hired to design and participate in the exertion of the Swedish so-called LOM-programme[3], the research and development programmes in working life of Norway and Sweden took on a number of similarities that made it possible to start to talk about something like a Scandinavian tradition of action research. Of course, there were many differences between these programmes, regarding both the national and regional infrastructure for these programmes and on the enterprise level where the research projects were undertaken. Nevertheless, the theoretical perspectives from within the research activities in these programmes were interpreted, had so much in common that it made sense to talk about a Scandinavian tradition, to some extent.

Or, to put it more precisely, the discourse on work life research and action research that was created on the basis of these programmes, in connection with the broader common discourse of action research, made it possible not only to *talk* about a Scandinavian tradition, but to *write* about it. This is not a play of words: well, it is, but not only. From Foucault's perspectives on discourse, we may realise that the objects and phenomena of social science are not to be considered only as social constructs; they have to be regarded also as linguistic constructs. Thus, the objects of social science: notably, as these objects are *represented* in some discourse within the scientific community, are partly constituted by this very discourse itself. This also goes for the issue we are dealing with here, the question of whether there is something like a Scandinavian tradition of action research. My answer would be: yes, there is, but this tradition has a fragile existence, due to both the fact that at the time there are neither currently very many action research projects that seem to fit neatly into the discourse on this tradition, nor are very many publications being written which take this tradition into consideration.

Consequently, as for the question of what the key features of this tradition might be, I think the best I can do is to refer to my last publication on this issue: which regrettably is not very recent.[4]

Danilo and Miren:
Considering the previous and other experiences, what would you highlight (positive and/or negative) from your lifelong AR practices?

Øyvind:
On the positive side I am happy to have been partaking in the exercise and development of the kind of action research in which the importance of *broad participation in well organised dialogues* for development and innovation has been demonstrated in so many kinds of workplaces, within both private and public sector of working life. On a more personal level, I am also happy that, as regards my interests and critical engagement in the often-un-

3 Gustavsen, B. 1991
4 Pålshaugen 2015

acknowledged potentials in our use of language, as well as the no less often unacknowledged traps: within both working life and within the scientific community in particular, my action research practice has offered great opportunities to pursue these interests, both in theory and practice. In the end, that is, today, I have to realise that the question I posed in 2004, whether we in the future might witness that the field of action research was moving "towards a linguistic turn"[5] has to be answered negatively.

However, I do of course not consider a "linguistic turn" a precondition for future improvement, enforcement and greater positive impact of action research within working life and society. I see no particular approach as univocally better fit than others, in order to succeed in those respects. Rather, I would point towards a more important issue, an enduring problem that is common for all kinds of approaches: the enduring lack of [sufficiently strong] efforts to institutionalise action research, and other kinds of intervention research, within academia, [universities/university colleges]. By and large, the community of action research is still a community of (mostly individual) "convertors". Theories and methods of action research are not commonplace in the education of future social researchers, neither on the graduate level nor on the post-graduate level. There are exceptions, many more than when I was a student, but still these are exceptions that confirm the rule: action research is a form of social research you may "convert" to when you have ended your academic education, in fact, mostly first when you have got a job as researcher.

Danilo and Miren:
In one of your contributions to CAT (7/2 2002)[6] you ask the question: "Has the democratisation of work come to an end?" What is your answer to this question 20 years later, regarding the many changes of working life caused by atomization of work, digitalisation, data business, surveillance and power by algorithms?

Øyvind:
Right you are: I asked this question, but certainly I also tried to suggest an answer that aimed at being valid within the conditions of the working life to come. I did not list exactly those keywords you mention in your question, but I touched upon some of them, formulated like this in the abstract to this article: "The concluding section presents some principal arguments as to why a strategy for discourse democracy is particularly apt today, in a working life characterised by trends like increasing knowledge industries, individualism on the personal level and globalisation on the societal level." These trends have grown stronger during the last 20 years, and they have so to speak been both enforced and supplemented by those trends you mention. In my view, all these trends have also enforced, or rather actualised, my line of arguments from 2002, on the need for pursuing what I termed "discourse democracy at work".

The backdrop for my question was that, neither in the public debate nor in the debate within and among the infrastructure and the institutions of working life, there was at the time any strong voicing of the quest for [further] democratisation of work in the Western societies: as compared to what the situation was in the 60-ies , 70-ies and to some extent also in the 80-ies. Not that such efforts were not still going on, but the quests for further reforms and intensified/increased activities in this field had not been issues that engaged the rank and file within working life, as in the preceding decades [this could also be noticed in surveys].

5 Pålshaugen 2004
6 Pålshaugen 2002

However, this did not mean that issues of democracy at work were no longer there, but they had taken on somewhat different shapes. Not least due to the fact that the conditions for co-determination and co-operation had been somewhat improved throughout these decades, regarding both the institutionalisation and the practicing of them, it was more commonly expected that democratic values were valued also within working life: at least within Northern Europe, which forms the limits of my scope. Of course, in the daily run the work had to be performed in accordance with the established (hierarchical) organisational structures and routines of any organszation. But when issues of changes were raised, that is, attempts of improvements and development regarding how the work was [to be] organised and performed, the expectance of management's adherence to democratic values, which had become increasingly common in large parts of working life, meant that those affected by these changes wanted these to happen as *democratic processes.*

Of course, there were exceptions to this rule – and there still are – but such exceptions are inevitably stigmatised as examples of "authoritarian management" (admired by some, though). So the question/issue faced by most management (and the representatives of the employees) is usually not *whether* processes of change, development and innovation should be undertaken as democratic processes. The central question is: *how to organise and perform* the actual processes in ways that can meet the requirements of both the organisational goal/purpose, the management's plans/intentions and the employees' expectations to the processes of change and development. As we know, there are many ways to do this, and there is no lack of well-intended suggestions. Your own and others experience, text-books, consultants – not to mention action researchers; but as we know, the path to failure is paved with good intentions. What is needed, is good judgement, and good judgment in working life/organisational matters is dependent on and requires good deliberations among those concerned: this is the *petito principii* of the approach I have been advocating and working on/within throughout my long trajectory with action research.

For the theoretical and practical elaboration of this approach, which we at WRI started out with calling "A Norwegian approach of action research for democracy": later to be renamed a "Scandinavian approach", I have to refer to the publications of the main protagonists of this approach, all well represented in IJAR and its forerunner CAT. As for the question I am supposed to answer, about the actuality of this approach and its potential and relevance for [strategies for] future democratisation of work, I would like to highlight one point: It can hardly be overestimated to what extent exactly [the] processes of change, development and innovation in working life are what is shaping the future of working life, both its institutions and its outcomes: which include all the people doing all the work, if we take into consideration the word of one of the "founding fathers" of the Scandinavian tradition, Philip Herbst: "The product of work is people".

Therefore, participation in development and innovation processes are of utmost importance to all people in any work organisation, relatively regardless of which branch(es): industry, trade or service, and regardless of whether the work performed is about "hard core" tangible realities or about intangible "virtual realities". In all cases the medium that is most apt to face and to grasp all kinds of realities, subjective as well as objective, imagined as well as realised matters, is – surprise: language. At the same time, language is also the medium by which we can fail to grasp exactly the kind of realities we are searching for – and perhaps longing for. Thus, the need for organizing dialogues within the institutions and organisations within working life in ways that enables our/the ability to form the future of working life in

ways that are sustainable at all levels – also on the personal level, will be as urgent in the times to come as it has ever been. My general perspectives and suggestions on how this need might be institutionalised within working life, is described in my presentation and elaboration of the concept of "public spheres in private enterprises" (which also, *mutatis mutandum*, will go for work organisations within public sector). As for the question of how to do this, there will necessarily have to be lots of ways, all of which have to be in accordance with both the specific, local context and the larger context.

Danilo and Miren:
Action research is very much based on case studies. What is the role of case studies in organisations? Can or should AR move beyond individual case studies?

Øyvind:
In action research, I think the important question is not really about single case studies or multiple case studies, or between case studies and representative surveys of different kinds. This opposition is established on a too narrow basis; it is too one-dimensional, so to speak.

The idea behind going beyond case studies usually is that this will enable action research to produce more generally valid knowledge: in short, general knowledge, that is, knowledge that by dint of the method used to produce it is regarded to be valid also beyond the selection of units that has been subject to study. There are two main motives for pursuing this idea:

1. By using research methods that allow for (statistical) generalisation, knowledge from action research may obtain the same status of unquestionable scientific knowledge that pertains to social research that apply methods by which the validity of the knowledge can be clearly stated.
2. If action research projects can be undertaken by methods by which the knowledge from the projects can claim to be general knowledge, with a more specified validity, it would be much easier to argue for the relevance and transferability of this knowledge to other actors in other contexts: in short, to disseminate the knowledge, and make it come to use in a broader spectrum of working life and society in general.

These two motives are not identical, but to some they may very well coincide. The first motive we find in particular by those who want action research to be better accepted within academia, and who [personally] are pursuing an academic career. For many of these, the second motive is not really separated from the first: by dint of its impeccable academic status, knowledge from action research would so to speak have an inherent reason to be disseminated and put into use. Dissemination in this case is regarded mainly a question of information: potential users have to be made aware that this knowledge exists: then to be used, for free!

The second motive we find by action researchers who may be neither very academically oriented personally, nor very strong believers in the impeccability of scientific methods. However, from a more pragmatic perspective they realise the advantages that may lie moving beyond case studies, in order to enhance possibilities of dissemination of, and increase the practical use of, knowledge from action research. If such efforts also increase the status of this knowledge and thus of action research within academia: well, that is fine with them.

The problem with the focus of these two motives is that they tend to overlook or underestimate that outside the scientific community, where the research knowledge is supposed to be used, that is, within and among the actors, organisations and institutions of working life,

the *content* of this knowledge is of far greater interest than its form. Whether some new knowledge is generated by action researchers, by consultants or by practitioners in other companies and organisations, is far less important than whether the knowledge is of interest with regards to the practical problem horizon of those who are assumed to be users of this knowledge. In other words, it is not the "context of discovery" but the "context of use" that is of critical importance to action research projects if they are to succeed with their ambition of generating knowledge that will come to be used in practice. Careful considerations on the "context of use" are as important to the *design of the research project* as the considerations on the scientific methods and theoretical framework of the project. These considerations and reflections on the context of use have to be undertaken in beforehand, in order to be able to generate just that kind of knowledge which by dint of its *content* will be of great interest to the supposed users. To put it on a formula: the conditions for the use of knowledge have to condition the very research design of the project.

What are the most important aspects of the conditions for use of knowledge will of course vary between contexts, but there are some common features that have to be considered more specifically by every research project/programme to be undertaken within a working life context.

First and foremost: there always already exists a lot of knowledge among the actors within that part of working life in which the research efforts are carried out. This knowledge may be of different kinds, it may be unevenly distributed among actors, and it may as well be partly tacit as it will be "out of use": but nevertheless, it is *already there.* Thus, the action research project design should comprise devices that aim at releasing the kind of knowledge already there, of relevance to local processes of development/improvement/innovation.

Secondly, on the basis of this releasing and generating of knowledge that come to use in developments that take place in the course of the project, the most important research task is to figure out: What kind of new knowledge may/might be generated which can *supplement* this already existing (and newly released) knowledge, regarding the need for research based knowledge that may support and contribute to sustain similar or corresponding efforts of development and innovation within working life – presumably based on broad participation and dialogical means in these efforts, given the kind of action research(ers) attempt to address in this interview. Figuring out the answer to this question, is identical with writing the scientific publication(s) from the research project.

As you may imagine, this strategy for generating new and useful knowledge through the process of writing is not about telling "the whole story" of the project.[7] It is about creating some knowledge that, on the basis of the researchers' close experience from the particular field where the project was undertaken, and their general overview of the kinds of knowledge and practices pertaining to these kinds of fields, may appear as new, supplementary knowledge of general interest and of general use, to those concerned. If so, who are those, and how to reach them?

The precondition for thinking about apt strategies for the use of knowledge from case studies in the way I have sketched out here, is that the answer to the question I just posed is thought of and built into the strategy for knowledge generation and dissemination of the project before it is started. Generally speaking, there are three main kinds of "contexts of use" that may surround action research projects within working life. One not very common kind is

7 Cf. Pålshaugen 1996

the kind we know from Norway, where national programmes for work life research that are formally linked to company development process have been the context for action research project, during some decades (from the mid-nineties to some years beyond 2010).

A bit more common context is the kind we know also from other Nordic countries like Sweden and Finland, and e. g. Germany, where national governmental programmes for development in working life have been launched. These programmes have created opportunities for financing research projects that are expected to partly support those programs and partly to document results and/or evaluate them, and action research projects have been welcomed as part of such nationally or regionally anchored "research portfolios". Moreover, in countries and/or in times where such programmes are not on the agenda, a third kind of "context of use" are situations or periods of time where larger parts of working life are exposed to certain kinds of common challenges or "problematics" that have to be dealt with. Recent examples may be challenges pertaining to the steady proliferation of new aspects of "digitalisation of work", challenges regarding work life policies like e. g. the quest for an "including work life", challenges pertaining to the reoccurring quests for a "more efficient public sector" etc.

The common denominator of all these kinds of "contexts for use" of knowledge from action research is that work organisations within whole sectors, branches and regions are confronted with the task of doing some development work by which they can meet these challenges and "problematics". Not only are the management and employees of the work organisations aware of this, also the institutions and actors within the infrastructure of working life are (more or less) alerted. Thus, given the, both in absolute and relative numbers, small resources allocated to work life research that are expected to provide knowledge that can be useful to working life development, there is no sustainable way to develop and exert strategies for disseminating such knowledge without co-operating with actors and institutions of the infrastructure of working life. This co-operation may comprise e. g. the use of established channels, work forms and fora for dissemination, and the creation of apt new kinds of temporary channels and fora. Without any kinds of such co-operation, there will be practically no dissemination.

In the more exceptional case where research programmes to support working life development, like the case of Norway mentioned above, facilitating such kind of co-operation between work life research and the infrastructure of working life is a so to speak self-evident issue. However, also in the above-mentioned national programmes of work life development where work life research has been a more "optional" feature, facilitating such co-operation has been prioritised.

Thereby, some important experiences of dissemination scientific knowledge have been made, and some adhering lessons have been learned, not least about what does not work. Of no less importance, some critical theoretical insight has been confirmed. I will give one example.

This example concerns the issue of the transferability of research-based knowledge. It is commonly regarded that knowledge that has proved to be generally valid by statistical methods is easier to be transferred to units outside the sample of units that have been the objects of study. This validation has so to speak "proved" that the knowledge in question will also be valid in other contexts: that is, to other organisations in more or less similar contexts. However, it turns out that for knowledge to be used in practice, it cannot be just transferred as an entity to be "put into use" some other place. Just like the content of some general knowledge has been created within one location in the first place, it has to be re-created in the

local discourse of another location, in order to appear as a locally useful knowledge. To elaborate this point, I may quote a passage from an article I wrote on the question about the use of knowledge from case studies, in which I refer to a point made by a researcher whose research was undertaken in connection with a Finnish program of work life development[8]:

"… what takes place at some local site, may create knowledge of general value and interest to enterprises at other places – not necessarily similar enterprises, but enterprises that are involved in and struggle to find their way in similar processes. In case of knowledge about enterprise development and innovation processes, we may term this kind of knowledge specific knowledge of various kinds of "good practice". And as pointed out by Alasoini (2006) and stressed by Arnkil, ""good practice" needs to be understood as *generative ideas*, rather than "ready made objects""(Arnkil 2008). For this reason, the question of how to create common arenas for practical discourses, which allow for general knowledge from some specific enterprises (single cases) to be *re-generated* as useful knowledge to other specific enterprises through this common practical discourse, is just as important as the question [of the generality of the knowledge ØP].

As already mentioned, the kind of context within which the most of my own action research has been exerted within, namely a context where the national and regional infrastructure of working life has been actively involved and engaged in promoting and disseminating knowledge from action research and related kinds of work life research, is not very common. Outside the Nordic countries, we might perhaps say Northern Europe, such contexts are rather rare. –The Basque region may be an exception that "confirms the rule". However, in most countries we will find the kind of "context of use" that I mentioned above, where larger parts of working life are exposed to certain kinds of common challenges or "problematics" that have to be dealt with.

In fact, I have myself been project leader for a kind of action research project within this latter kind of context, in the course of 2016–2019. This project was about the challenges faced by media enterprises in the global trends of digitalisation of news media. It was undertaken in co-operation with 4 small and medium sized Norwegian newspapers. One of these was particularly concerned with trying to cope with these challenges, by means of staging innovation processes that included the whole staff. Dialogue conferences and related methods of participation were applied rather successfully, and among the publications from the project there is a case study from this process. This case study verifies and illustrates a point I made above, about the way in which "democratic values" within working life today tend to appear as a quest for democratic processes and procedure: in this case, innovation processes that involved the whole staff.

In the the publication from this case we didn't try to tell "the whole story"[9]. Rather, we tried to extract and present the most relevant knowledge from the experiences with the innovation processes in a way that made it possible to grasp the *usefulness* of this knowledge, rather than its generality. Due to the particular conditions for organszing innovation processes within media enterprises, conditions we characterised with the phrase that they were obliged to "creating the new while producing the news"[10], the management could not establish one overall process of innovation that included all. Rather, they had to initiate certain more limited processes regarding various aspects of the total work processes required to produce the news: processes that were more or less interrelated, and which comprised a larger or smaller part of the total staff. This strategy took the form of what we conceptualszed as "staging a con-

8 Pålshaugen 2009
9 Pålshaugen, Ø. and Clegg (2019)
10 Pålshaugen, Ø. and Landsverk Hagen, A. (2019)

stellation of innovation processes". Such constellations neither could nor should be configured by the mangement in beforehand: this had to be done through the practical staging of the processes, by configuring them *along the way* in accordance with the specific conditions and prerequsits of the company. Like with all publications from this project, we did not present this knowledge as a kind of "general model" that can be blue-printed by other media enterprises. Rather, we presented it as an exemplary model to inspire and guide the creation of local constellations of innovation processes in accordance with the local circumstanstances: as seen from within the actual media enterprise.

Finally, I would not at all say that case studies will be sufficient to fulfil all kinds of objectives of action research. In particular, if we for example aim at documenting scientifically that some strategies and methods based on participation in development processes are more effective than other methods based on more limited participation, we should not reject research design that comprises an RCT-design. To the contrary, it is quite possible to create a research design that comprises both intervention by action research methods and an RCT [randomised controlled trial]-design that provides accurate scientific knowledge about the effects of the intervention.

Danilo and Miren:
AR, as social research in general, is always involved with power relations. Given that participation is a key feature of AR, what do you think about the notion/thesis "participation as enactment of power"?

Øyvind:
Personally, I have always considered this thesis as having a paternalistic flavor. Of course, power is always an issue of importance when you deal with development work in hierarchical organisations, which is the rule in the private as well as the public sector. Dealing with aspects of power and power relations have in the kind of action research projects I have worked on, have usually had two forms. Mainly, they have been dealt with as one of the conditions for how to organise the dialogues in ways that minimize the risk for power relations to reduce the quality of the dialogues that are to be performed. Besides, they have also been dealt with in direct conversation with people who are, or may be, particularly affected by power relations, whether on the "weak" side or the "strong" side. Such conversations have been undertaken in quite various forms, dependent on the specific situation. As a rule, such conversations have been a prerequisite for not making wrong choices and decisions regarding the design and exertion of the processes of dialogues.

To put it otherwise, I am most concerned about the possible "transformative power" of participating in dialogues on development and innovation, considered as a mean to "humanize" the work and workplaces. It is important to have in mind that democratic procedures – and democratic institutions, are important as means to deal constructively with conflicts of interest. Therefore, democratic procedures of development work should not aim primarily at obtaining some "consensus": rather, they should aim at making "compromises" in the form of creative solutions which represents something new to those who represent the various kinds of conflicting interests.

Danilo and Miren:

To close the interview, we would like to ask you about the *International Journal of Action Research* (IJAR). What do you see as the distinctive role of IJAR?

Øyvind:
Here I may give a quick and short answer: I think the former editors' appreciative thanks to the work Danilo has done, includes what kind of "tradition" Miren has to transfer and transform, in ways that I am sure she will have far better ideas on than what I can come up with. Truly!

Danilo and Miren:
Which are your ideas, which your wishes regarding IJAR's future development?

Øyvind:
My most urgent concern is that IJAR will not have to continue to exist behind a "paywall". From my own and many others' experience, I know that journals that are not part of the "grand packets" of journals by which most universities make those journals available for free to the academic staff (and the students), have very limited chances to be widely read to the extent they deserve. How to do this, I would not know: but that it ought to be done, I know.

Danilo and Miren:
Thanks very much, Øyvind, for your insights.

About Øyvind Pålshaugen:

Øyvind Pålshaugen is research professor emeritus at The Work Research Institute (WRI), Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo. The larger part of his research has been action research projects on enterprise development and organisational development in work organisations. The research design requires both some kind of institutionalised cooperation between management and employees, and extensive participation from all groups of employees in the dialogue-based work that form the core of the developmental work in the projects. Using critical theory for constructive practice might be an apt "label" for his work.

About the interviewers:

Miren Larrea is senior researcher in Orkestra- Basque Institute of Competitiveness and lecturer at the University of Deusto in the Basque Country, Spain. She is also associate researcher at Praxis Research Institute in Rafaela, Santa Fé, Argentina. Her research focuses on regional innovation systems, multilevel and collaborative governance, local development, and shared leadership. She is one of the proponents of action research for territorial development, practiced by a multilocal community of researchers in the Basque Country (Spain), Agder (Norway) and Santa Fé and Tierra del Fuego (Argentina).

Danilo Streck is Doctor of Education from Rutgers University. He has been a Visiting Scholar at the Latin American Center, UCLA, and at Max Plank Institute for Human Development in Berlin. Danilo is Professor at the Graduate School of Education of the University of Caxias do Sul (Brazil). His research projects focus on popular education, Latin American pedagogy, participatory social processes and research methodologies. He is author

of "A New Social Contract in a Latin American Educational Context" (Palgrave/McMillan), co-editor of "Paulo Freire Encyclopedia" (Rowman & Littlefield).

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