Editorial

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This issue is of special interest for any action research debate, as the four papers published here represent a broad range of organizational development concepts and practices between action research and consultancy. In the days of the present journal’s predecessor „Concepts and Transformation“, which changed its name into „International Journal of Action Research“ (IJAR) in 2004, the editors had planned to provide a forum for a debate between action research and consultancy. Now the Groningen World Congress of Action Research in August 2006 is welcome as an opportunity to realize this plan, and thus contribute to and enhance the discussions taking place at the congress.

When the ALARPM/PAR congress was first announced, I approached the organizers and offered to publish a special issue of our journal about organizational research with – among others – some papers to be presented at the congress. The organizers proposed to invite the keynote speakers from section III about „Organization and Development“ plus Julia Preece, keynote speaker in section II about „Participative Action Research“, to publish their papers in IJAR. All four speakers accepted our invitation. Unfortunately only three of them (Julia Preece, Sandra Schruijer and Michiel Schoemaker) were able to submit and finish their papers in time. Øyvind Pålshaugen, the fourth one, was not; his paper will be published this autumn in IJAR 2 (3) 2006.

Besides the three conference papers we are happy to publish an article by Marianne Kristiansen and Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen. Although their paper will not be presented at the conference, it may well be regarded as an important contribution to the conference discussions.

The issue to be discussed between action research and consultancy is not so much the differences in concepts (or theory), but in practice. This may very well be demonstrated by the understanding of participation in organiza-
tional development and in the related literature. „Whether participation is about participating in organization or community development, participating in the research process or both“, my colleague Øyvind Pålshaugen states in his introduction, „the message is unequivocal: practical involvement is to the benefit for those involved“.

But if we look beneath this general and unequivocal appraisal of participation, we find a lot of very different practices and understandings of participation, all of them hidden under the same umbrella. Let’s have a look from this perspective into the papers published in this issue.

In Marianne Kristiansen and Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen’s paper on „Involvement as a dilemma“, dialogues between employees, managers and action researchers are the fore to identify ways and possibilities for organizational change in a participative way. Their paper is an example of genuine action research (and action research writing) as compared to consultancy approaches.

What makes the difference?

One way to describe the difference is by using Bion’s term of „negative capability“ (Bion 1988): „This negative capacity is not a passive capacity. It is a way of being. It contains an active component of ‘creating space’ for finding out, as well as a passive element of ‘taking time’ to allow things to emerge and to feel the resonance“ (Bion 1988, quoted from Vansina 2000: 331). To my understanding, this is exactly what Marianne and Jørgen are doing, when they try to create space1 for dialogues and for employees’ involvement in organizations.

And what did they find? The result of listening to the members of the organization and of reflecting on what they heard and experienced, is a very authentic and deep analysis from an action research perspective of what is going on in participation processes. To enhance involvement in existing organizations with their uneven power structures is far from realizing 1:1 an ideal concept of participation. Participants experience the borderlines of participation in organizations, they are confronted with different kinds of dilemmas,

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1 See their concept of sharing, daring, and caring, as described in Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen (2005).
such as between management and employees (the traditional dilemma), between team members in their situation between self-management and self-exploitation (the modern dilemma) and – last but not least – between team members and action researchers (the action research dilemma).

The paper on „Involvement as a dilemma“ is both realistic and value oriented, because it demonstrates that the authors are engaged in the difficult and challenging process of enhancing participation in existing organizations, without giving up the positive value of involvement as a principle that guides efforts to organize industry, services or administration in a democratic way. They are devoted to Thorsrud’s and others’ visions of industrial democracy and democratic dialogue (Gustavsen 1992) in a realistic way.

Julia Preece’s paper is not written from within an ongoing research process; it is a review article including a critical analysis of two examples of „participative rural appraisal“ (PRA) resp. „participative appraisal“ (PA) projects, in which she did not take part herself. Nevertheless we learn something very interesting about what is practiced as „participation“ in a World Bank project in Southern Africa. The project aimed at identifying strategies to prevent sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV infection in three rural communities. „Through village elders who introduced the team to the project“, the local authority AIDS Action Managers organized a „process of involvement“ within the communities, as Julia Preece reports. However, instead of HIV/AIDS and STDs, the participants ranked child diseases (measles, dysentery), meningitis, typhoid and others as their main health concerns. Accordingly Julia Preece concludes that lack of health care services was secondary to wider development concerns related to poverty, such as existence of potable water, access to credit and agricultural markets. „Yet the project’s priorities were STDs and AIDS. This remains the title of the project and these items are the only ones identified in the report summary. This would suggest that although the consultation process was adhered to as a strategy, the research team still filtered out the issue that they intended to spend their energies on“ (Preece: 212). In another PA process in Botswana, minority ethnic groups and women were systematically excluded from consultation opportu-
This practice, nevertheless called „participative (rural) appraisal“ is clearly a misuse of participatory values in order to legitimize one’s own interests or decisions. Julia’s comment, though very decent, points to another deficit: „Both cases … highlight that the situation to be changed is rarely identified by the target participants. It is the external agent who stimulates the exploration of the issue, and the participants contribute to identifying the complexity or detail of the issue or problem situation. Therefore, the extent to which participatory appraisal is a truly grass roots led process is entirely dependent on how flexible the researchers are prepared to be regarding research outcomes“ (Preece: 218).

It is not the purpose of this editorial to evaluate or comment systematically all four papers of this issue – Øyvind Pålshaugen does this in the following introduction. My intention is to draw the readers’ attention to the manifold practices that are assembled under the umbrella called participation or involvement, appropriately or not. I focused on the two papers by Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen and Julia Preece’s critical report about two PRA projects, because they mark two extreme positions on the continuum between genuine participatory action research and the instrumentalization of „involvement“ for purposes, which are not the stakeholders’ purposes. We meet this instrumental approach not only in World Bank and – though less extreme – in many a consultancy project for organizational change, but also as part of modern „participative“ management strategies creating forms of market driven work organization (Peters 2001). The instrumentalization of involvement in organizations results in a „modern dilemma of involvement“ (Kristiansen/ Bloch-Poulsen in this issue). Employees find themselves in an ambiguous situation between self-management and self exploitation, which is management’s price for a certain degree of their increased autonomy at work. In general the employees are very much aware of the ambivalent work situations created by participative management: see the employees’ reflections on their situation as quoted by Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (164-165).
My message: Any discussion about participation (and action research as well), especially within the action research community, should be aware of the great differences between concept and reality, between words and action, and secondly of the efforts necessary to engage in the messy process of doing genuine action research and enhancing democratic participation in real organizational contexts. „Our ethical responsibility“, Julia Preece concludes, „is in respecting differences, being open about power differentials but trying to avoid exploitation of these differences in a way that will undermine the very people we are trying to help“. With the exception of the attitude to „help people“ this is in tune with Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen’s dialogical action research practice.

Are there standards and ethics of genuine action research, defined as being devoted to the values of participation, democratic dialogue and industrial democracy? Most important is the practice of action research processes: do they open space for participation, democratic dialogue and joint reflection? Another criterion certainly is the attitude of the action researcher.

Back to Bion. He named three basic attitudes, which he called most relevant for the practice of the action researcher:

„’Without memory’ … (means) that nothing is to be anticipated as to what is about to happen „here and now“, on the basis of the past“.

„’Without desire’ to cure or to develop people“.

„’Without understanding’: „Not knowing“ is so important because familiarity with theory or concepts often stands between the consultant and the client’s emotional life“.

„Such a basic attitude of being present is impossible to maintain, if the researcher is (passionately) involved with making the system work better, or with introducing concepts or methods to work on a given task“ (Vansina 2000: 331/332). In action research it is, without exception, a matter of joint

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2 We find this attitude „to help and support“ (the community of work) and „educative elements“ built into the change process also in Michiel Schoemaker’s paper (260). Schoemaker understands himself as a consultant whose „explicit assignment was to follow a participative approach“ (252). In many cases he worked as an „external consultant“ (256).
reflection and democratic dialogue, between researchers and practitioners, to find out what should in which way be changed.

References

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