

Call for papers

International Journal of Action Research

Special Issue on Participation and Power in Participatory Research and Action Research

Across different theoretical and epistemological approaches, there is a long tradition within research from below, whether it is participatory research and/or action research, of practicing participation and democracy in projects in very different geographical and social contexts with very different participants (Brandão, 2005; Fals-Borda, 2001; Freire, 1970; Gustavsen, 1992; Kemmis, 2008; Rahman, 2008; Reid & Friesby, 2008; Swantz, 2008). This special issue focuses on the tensions between participation and power in participatory research and action research, which has been discussed recently in IJAR, 2011, 7(3) as well as in other professional contexts. What are the challenges, dilemmas and tensions of participation, power, and democracy in participatory and action research projects? How are these dealt with theoretically, and tackled practically?

Participation has become a buzzword within the knowledge economy where it is related to empowerment, dialogue and democracy (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny et al., 2001). To-day, the concept seems to cover a broad span, from minimalist versions meaning to take part in activities, to maximalist versions meaning to co-determine goals, research questions, design etc. (Carpentier, 2011; Fricke, 2011). This call for papers is an invitation to renewed reflections on the concept of participation in relation to power. How is participation understood theoretically, and what does it mean in concrete ways in specific contexts? Do partners for example participate in the researchers' project, in a shared project with common and/or different interests, or? Do researchers and partners practice the same kind of participation in a project or several versions? If they do, why do they do it and how?

We think most participatory and action researchers would agree on understanding their partners as co-producers of knowledge, and not as informants or respondents. This call for papers is also an invitation to reflect on the

meanings of the prefix “co”. Do partners and researchers share the same goals and knowledge interests in projects and/or do these differ? The answers to this question would depend, too, on the epistemological and theoretical approaches used in concrete projects. In humanist approaches to action research, for example, there would be a tendency to look for similarities and consensus, and to conceptualise communicative spaces as power-free spaces. In poststructuralist approaches for example, there would be a tendency to look for dissensus and differences, assuming that there are no power-free spaces or neutral knowledge interests in action research projects, and that power is present in all kinds of relations (Phillips, 2011).

Thus power seems to be pertinent in relation to multiple and/or opposing knowledge interests. Finally, this call for papers invites participatory and action researchers to present their understanding of power (see for example Clegg & Haugaard 2009; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008; Göhler, 2009) and their ways of handling it in relation to participation. We will give three kinds of examples dealing with contexts, emergence, and ethics.

Participation and power seem to be a question of interpreting the possibilities in specific contexts. Must the framework be taken for granted, or can it be questioned? In what kind of decisions and at which level do partners want to participate? Do they want to co-influence or co-determine the objective, the design, the evaluation and communication of project results? Who defines the research questions, and how are partners involved? This is a question, too, of the power to define whose reality counts. Participation in practice seems to reflect how researchers and partners participate in negotiating the character and level of participation in specific contexts based on different knowledge interests.

Participation and power cannot be defined once and for all prior to a project. As a researcher, you might have some ideas about the character and level of participation and power in advance, but interaction between researchers and partners in specific cultures and structures create unforeseen situations. Thus participation and power seems to be what emerges as such. How do we understand and handle these situations?

In this way, participation and power becomes a question of ethics, too. As researchers, our ideas of participation are questioned continuously: how do

we react for example if management in an organisation does not want the employees to participate in a project steering committee contrary to our expectations? What happens if all of a sudden, politicians change the framework of a project on participatory budgeting? What do you do as a researcher, if you realise that you have let yourself be used in a complicated, organisational power game? What do you do, if participation actually works as a way to allow certain special interests to appear as common while others are being excluded? Are you able to avoid (and if so, how) the possibility that the participatory turn, with its ideals of dialogue and democracy, reproduces a traditional researcher monopoly of decisions and interpretations or similar power imbalances? (Jørgensen 2008).

The concepts of power and participation have changed historically. In organisations, traditional hierarchical power seems to have been supplemented with dependent autonomy or concertive control, as Barker (1999, p. 137) for example writes about teams in modern organisations: “They were controlled, but in control.” How do or should researchers deal with this reality and with different cultures of participation and new forms of enacting power in market driven organisations (Peters 2001)?

We hope these questions have roused your interests and invite you to submit a paper to this special issue of IJAR on the tensions and challenges of understanding and handling participation and power in participatory research and action research projects. We hope you will share your experiences and knowledge of dilemmas, paradoxes and tensions related to participation and power in specific projects. We are particularly interested in publishing reflexive papers presenting context-thick cases combining theory and practice and walking the talk of participation and power. This includes single cases or a range of research practices over a larger span of time. It is important that these empirical cases are essential parts of the papers and not only illustrations of theory.

We would like to receive a draft of an abstract (max. 5000 characters) by July 15th, 2012. If accepted, the deadline for the final article is November 15th, 2012. The article is then to be published in IJAR, 2013 (1) in March 2013. The special issue is planned as part of an international conference on

participation and power to take place in Copenhagen June 05th to 07th, 2013 at the University of Aalborg, CPH.

Best greetings,

Marianne Kristiansen, Associate professor, Ph.D., Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University, CPH, DK (marian@hum.aau.dk)

Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen, Associate professor, Ph.D. Department of Learning and Philosophy, Aalborg University, CPH, DK (jbp@learning.aau.dk)

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