

Participatory hierarchies: A challenge in organisational Action Research

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This article focuses on employee participation in organisational action research (OAR), presenting three examples of OAR in one private and two public organisations in Denmark, respectively. Each of these examples shows how participatory hierarchies between employees and between them and action researchers are constructed in OAR projects, leading in these cases to the exclusion of silent pedagogues, elderly foremen, and a critical employee.

Based on these examples, the article has three mutually connected purposes, an empirical, theoretical, and methodological purpose. First, the empirical purpose is to show that a participatory approach can unintentionally create new hierarchies or reinforce existing ones, thus leading to the exclusion of certain employees (or action researchers) in terms of voice and/or choice.

Second, the theoretical purpose is to show how participation in OAR projects can be understood as a contextualising mechanism. That is, partners and action researchers produce new project contexts by their ways of speaking, acting, and organising. These new contexts are always already embedded in several simultaneous, organisational and societal contexts. This means that participation in OAR projects works in the interface between communication and organisation.

Third, the methodological purpose is to show that handling of these participatory hierarchies ought to become a goal in OAR projects to be included along with producing practical and theoretical results. The article argues that this might contribute to handling participatory hierarchies and power relations in more transparent ways in OAR projects if partners and action researchers decide to do so.

Key words: organisational action research, participation, hierarchy, power, context, communication