

## Discussion Forum

### **Some Critical Reflections on „ Participation as Enactment of Power in Dialogic Organisational Action Research. Reflections on Conflicting Interests and Actionability“**

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To discuss the relationship between participation and power in dialogic action research is an important undertaking, and IJAR is a good place to engage in it. I understand the following reflections as a start up of this discussion, stimulated by Marianne Kristiansen's and Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen's paper on „participation as enactment of power in dialogic, organisational action research processes“, this issue.

To start with: I have some problems with the authors' arguments in their present paper. To my opinion their approach is characterised by a too general, too formal, and at the same time too narrow understanding of participation.

Enactment is in German “Erlass, Verordnung, Verfügung“, auch “Auf-führung, Darstellung“; according to my dictionary this term is used in connection with law or theatre: I enact a law, would be a possible sentence. Another one: The theatre play was enacted.

So, what does the term “participation as enactment of power in dialogic ... processes“ mean? Does it simply say, that in any participation process power is present (whatsoever kind of power) or enacted like a theatre play: a comedy or a tragedy? The authors do not say: Power is enacted on the stage of participation in dialogic ... action research. This is a possible view – if one takes into account that participative processes are but one possible place

(field) among others to enact power (such as, e.g., workplaces, work organisation, military, economic relations, production processes, tariff negotiations etc).

The authors, however, present participation as enacting power in dialogic AR. This is, if at all, just *one* aspect of participation, and certainly not the most important one.

Of course, power is often (not always!) present in participative and dialogue processes. This is the case in the examples given by the paper (pp. 353-369). When however reading these examples and the authors' interpretation/reflection on them, the following questions come to my mind:

**1. What is the authors' understanding of participation?** Is it just persons being present in a situation (employees of the Sales Team; the VP p. 353 or the four VPs, the CEO Thomas, the sales team and the researchers p. 356 etc?). I am asking this question because I can imagine at least one different concept of participation, namely democratic participation. This is a normative concept of participation (see my paper in IJAR 7 (2), 2011, in which I argue that action research is about values).

Moreover there is a range of grades of participation such as

- being informed,
- being asked before a decision is taken
- co-developing a plan, a change concept (having a voice which is important to break the culture of silence: Freire)
- co-determining

The authors are using the term participation in a rather undifferentiated way. On p. 376 they argue, that co-determination is a necessary element of participation, which I agree (without co-determination no participation), but in their general argument they speak of participation in a general way.

In one of their previous papers the authors have developed the concept of dissensus sensibility which encourages participants to speak out, to participate by having a voice, which is another important characteristic of

participation. This is a more sophisticated way of discussing participation, because it draws upon the “obligation“, the aim of participative processes to enable so far silent people to speak up. (Democratic) participation is thus inherently connected with learning, it is not just a formal description of people “being together“ in a situation.

**2. What is the authors’ understanding of power?** Likewise the authors use the concept of power without any differentiation, although there are certainly different kinds of power and different kinds to use power (Macht anzuwenden). We may distinguish power generated by/associated with

- charisma
- eloquence
- function
- authority
- strength of the body
- behaviour (speaking loudly; sitting/moving in a certain way).

I am not familiar with theories of power (are the authors?) but I can see that the use of the concept of power in the present paper is too general.

Also the effects of using power may be different: Power may

- suppress participation and the interest/wish/ability to participate
- enhance participation if the researchers’; and the works director’s power (influence) may be used to create a space free of middle management’s power within an organisation (the authors deny that this is possible, but they do not report of any attempt to negotiate with top management of an enterprise about the possibility (conditions) of a space free of power.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary they report (honest as they always are) about deficits in negotiating the conditions for their action research project in DSI (see p. 356).

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<sup>1</sup> This is what we did in our AR project in the Peine screw factory (cf. Fricke 2011).

In these two cases participation cannot be called an enactment of power in a dialogic, organisational action research process. The use of the terms “power“ and “participation“ is too general and too formal to be able to cover experiences of different relations between power and participation.

The authors focus on one aspect of power only, “namely the power to define reality, whose ‘reality’ counts or does not, and whose knowledge is in- or excluded“ (p. 348). This is, however, a static sight of reality in an enterprise as well as of action research: Action research is (or should be) about organising dialogic participation processes, in which all members of an enterprise or of the participating groups develop their ability to take part in “defining reality“. The more the action research process succeeds in giving participants a voice the more the initial distribution of power changes.

I know that the authors have been and are quite successful in organising dialogues and participative processes of this kind (dissensus sensibility; the caring container),<sup>2</sup> the more am I astonished about the static character of some of their arguments and the too general use of the concepts of participation and power in this paper.

We meet the static character of arguments once more at the end of the paper. The authors call it a “principal question, whether you can have a dialogue with people whom you consider alienated“ (p. 374). Again, alienation is a term stemming from an elaborated theoretical concept. If we however take the culture of silence, which Paulo Freire is speaking about in his “Pedagogy of the Oppressed“, as an element of alienation, it seems to be clear that a person is needed who is able to create a long term learning process aiming at enabling the oppressed to re-discover their voice. Call these persons teachers or not: it is inappropriate to characterise their relationship as a “participatory dilemma oscillating between the researcher/teacher as uppers and the practitioners al lowers instead of dialogues between them on an equal footing“. Why so?

To unfold a participative dialogue process needs teachers/researchers and practitioners to engage in a process of mutual learning (the authors know this

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<sup>2</sup> See Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen (2010); see as well their concept of daring, caring, sharing in their great book (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005: 167 ff.).

very well; they have been engaged in such processes many times in their action research projects). This means: the teacher learns from the participants' practical knowledge while they discover that there is theoretical knowledge which they learn to develop (a) with the help of the teacher and (b) by the time by themselves.

Much more appropriate than characterising the teacher/learner relationship as a relationship between „uppers“ and „lowers“ is Olav Eikeland's concept of the master/apprenticeship relation. Not formal positions, titles, or distinctions (like researcher/teacher and practitioner in the authors' text p. 374) decide whether you are a master or an apprentice. „The master is the servant of the other's learning. If an unequal relationship is petrified as part of a social structure, it becomes conservative. But apprenticeship is not necessarily part of an unchanging hierarchical, social structure. *Qua* learning relationship it cannot be, since formally locked positions of authority and subordination („uppers and lowers“) are detrimental to the ‚masterly' autonomy to be learned ... the role of the master and apprentice is not formally determined nor permanently allocated between participants. It changes and alternates continuously. ... All in the relationship are on their way ...“ (Eikeland 2006: 223-224).

It is often argued, and so do the authors p. 373, drawing on Arieli, Friedman, and Agbaria, that practitioners are often “either unwilling or unable to act as researchers“, i.e. to participate “on equal footing“ (p. 374). This is however, in my experience, a wide spread prejudice of many researchers, which I think the authors do not really share. It is often the case that practitioners in an organisation, a region, a society are met in a situation of resignation and without hope. “Nothing has been changed for decades“, “nobody has ever asked us“, they say, if they speak at all. This attitude of resignation and hopelessness can only be changed in a time consuming process of learning to speak and to engage in one's own affairs, but it *can* be changed by a process of joint learning within a master/apprentice relationship.<sup>3</sup> It would be an error to conclude from the decade or century old culture of silence that people are unwilling or unable to participate.

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<sup>3</sup> This has been proved in our AR project in the late 1970s (see Fricke 2011).

So, if you in an action research project encounter people who are “alienated“ (which again is, by the way, something different from being “unwilling or unable“ to participate) it is not impossible to have dialogue with them: not at once, not from the very beginning, but certainly after a process between master and apprentice, in which “everybody’s prejudices are on trial all the time, through a searching and inquiring dialogue, as Plato’s Socrates: a master, if anyone is, pointed out a long time ago“ (Eikeland 2006: 224).

To practice such dialogic participation and learning processes is not easy, probably even impossible under the conditions of nowadays’ modern work organisation. But this is, to my opinion, not sufficient to limit the concept of democratic participation to an “espoused value” and confront it with what is called reality, namely “the influence of power relations on what people think, hear and do ...“ (p. 375). This concept of reality is too narrow, as Ernst Bloch has shown. Lost alternatives (opportunities, hopes, perspectives) from history form the minds and expectations of people living in a present situation (Gegenwart) as well as perspectives, hopes, interests for the future (future alternatives). Present reality is not one dimensional, it contains past experiences, lost opportunities as well as future (possible) alternatives to the present situation.

Likewise dialogic participation is not a formal principle of “partaking in any kind of activity or community, where the purpose is decided by somebody else, or to join researchers’ projects ...“ (p. 376); it is in the contrary a concept based on democratic values, equally coined by past experiences as well as by future perspectives.

By the end of their paper the authors ask whether „the concept of participation (has) been usurped by repressive tolerance“ (p. 376). This is an expression originating from the 1968 student movement and the socio-philosophical literature of that time (Marcuse et al). What has happened to “participation“ recently is something different: Modern management is trying to use “participation“ as an instrument to increase efficiency of work organisation by misusing employees’ engagement in their work, their interest in autonomy and self-determination. I would not call this participation; to avoid misunderstandings I speak of democratic participation, instead of just participation, to make clear that participation

- is based on democratic values and perspectives,
- must allow people to decide on their interests (purposes) themselves,
- is dialogic (Eikeland: no othering business),
- enhances joint learning, i.e. open, revolving, liberated master/apprentice relationships (Eikeland 2006),
- or it is not participation.

I think, the authors' paper might improve by making this difference clear. Regarding their broad experience with dialogic action research, with dissensus sensibility, caring container, EDIT, midwifery their present paper seems to me too defensive, too pessimistic, too much influenced by what they call reality and, to repeat, as "enactment of power in dialogic organisational action research processes" or even more radical, "we developed a new understanding of *participation as enactment of power*" (p. 373).

At the end of their paper the authors revise their understanding of participation once more: There they "understand participation as enactment of power in a field of tension between empowerment and constraint" (p. 375) instead of "enactment of power" in general (p. 373). The definition at the very end of the paper is a bit more adequate, because it admits at least that participation has *also* to do with empowerment, not just with constraints, alienated people etc.

If the paper were more offensive, it could make clear, that there are such dangers as masking the influence of power relations, not including co-determination, imposing participatory methods upon partners who are unwilling or unable ... (see p. 372-376), but that all this has nothing to do with participation in action research dealing with values such as democracy, emancipation, joint learning, dialogue.

Finally a minor remark:

The very last paragraph raises the question, whether the "ambition about society relevant research and social change (might) end up in 'consultancy' at the cost of theory development and philosophical reflections?" Conflicts between society and theory have always been existing, attempts of social actors to misuse science/social science in their interests, to dominate research

and science are ubiquitous in time and space, but again I think we need to differentiate and acknowledge that research, which surrenders to such interests is not action research because it has its own values. In other words: This problem should be subject to more differentiated discussion in IJAR than just naming the risk of “the participatory turn“ for “the brilliant ideals of participation“. The authors have made so many convincing experiences with enhancing dialogic participation in their research life that they need not and should not be that pessimistic or even ironic about the “brilliant ideals of participation“. What we need is a thorough and of course realistic analysis of the (often difficult or even detrimental) conditions to enhance democratic participation, instead of throwing out the baby with the bathwater (das Kind mit dem Bade ausschütten).

## Conclusion

I suggest to continue the discussion on participation and power in dialogic action research in a more differentiated way along the lines of my arguments (and probably others). *International Journal of Action Research* provides an excellent floor to “enact“ this and other discussions.

## References

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