Discussion Forum

Participation as Enactment of Power in Dialogic Organizational Action Research – Response to Werner Fricke

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Dear Werner,

Thank you for your comments on our draft for an article to IJAR. They are really valuable, as usual! We have followed your comments except for items we, apparently, view differently. We have structured our comments according to some key concepts:

Enactment:

We are sorry about the confusion we have made by using this concept. In this paper, we are not interested in who possesses power, i.e. in looking at power from an agent perspective like, e.g., charisma, eloquence etc., or in how power is expressed in societal structures, i.e. in looking at power from a structural perspective like, e.g., class or social structures. We want to focus on how power unfolds. For this reason, we have chosen the concept of 'enactment'. It means unfolding, i.e., how (in this case) power is carried out/performed in constantly changing positions between participants and between them and us. We do not think this is a static or general situation. It is a concrete process in which everybody involved changes positions in concrete contexts.

Power:

We are inspired by Giddens (1981, 1984) and Foucault (2000). Both of them think power is a central component of social practice (Giddens) or social relations (Foucault). They are both interested in how power works or is enacted in concrete situations. Inspired by them, we think power is a universal concept, denoting whatever produces empowerment or constraint in social practice. As such it is always present in participative and dialogic processes. We do not think we can transcend it or dismiss it through negotiations. At most, we can try to make it transparent and to make space for participants or ourselves as action researchers. We did not intend power to be conceptualised as a static position but as concrete ongoing processes of shifting positions and interests where participants and we sometimes 'fight' about defining reality. We apologise that we have not managed to make this clear in the version you read. We want to add that we are in a process of defining our concept of power and only deal with one aspect.

Participation:

The important point for us is to problematise the concept of participation as a taken for granted positive value in itself. It seems to us that many participatory efforts, including our own, are messy processes unfolding not only as empowerment but as constraint, too.

    We are sorry that our draft might be read as if participation meant to participate. We agree that this is far too general and too formal. We want to stress that participation means co-determination as a means and as a goal. In practice, this means that participatory processes become ongoing power struggles/negotiations with no fixed positions. We agree that participation is an often misused concept (whether it is an expression of repressive tolerance and/or a managerial tool). We should have made this clearer.

Alienation:

In the text of the young Marx, alienation denotes that the object (i.e., what is basically man-made, e.g., God, the state, money, the work product) becomes

the subject in relation to which man becomes the object. This transposition-ing goes for the other (working class, participants), but not for the researcher or philosopher. As such, the concept of alienation is in our opinion a limited, un-democratic or elitist concept. Here is an example from 'Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie':

> *"*Wie die Philosophie im Proletariat ihre *materiellen*, so findet das Prole-tariat in der Philosophie seine *geistigen* Waffen, und sobald der Blitz des Gedankens gründlich in diesen naiven Volksboden eingeschlagen ist, wird sich die Emanzipation der *Deutschen* zu *Menschen* vollziehen*"* (p. 223).

We think 'this upper-lower-mechanism' is identical with some problems inherent in action science which we tried to describe in the example of George. Accordingly, we think every action research or participatory research founded on Marx and/or on critical theory is elitist. Here, it seems participa-tion is based on constraint. Apparently, the un-alienated or liberated re-searcher's definition of reality is what counts.

Master–apprentice:

The teacher-learner-relation is in our opinion not in itself an upper-lower-relation. It can be enacted as such, if based on the understanding/reduction of the learner as/to an alienated person. Alienation does not only mean that somebody knows more but that somebody (the researcher/philosopher) knows better. That's why we consider it an elitist concept.

We prefer the terms professional-professional indicating that we can learn from our partners, that they can learn from us, and that we can learn jointly. The concept 'professionals' denotes that we (researchers, managers, and employees) are equally knowledgeable persons knowing differently. This means that we can be each others' teachers. All of us know more (not better) in different areas.

Co-operating, e.g., with engineers at Danfoss Solar Inverters, we did not understand ourselves as engineer-apprentices; and we did not understand them as researcher-apprentices (as opposed to Arieli et al. 2009). As such, we find Eikeland's metaphor insufficient (Eikeland 2006). In this way, we are not subscribing to the participatory dilemma of Arieli et al. To us, it is a gift

if the other professionals act as researchers. However, we expect they act as co-learners (as we do, too).

Democratic participation:

We really like your concept. Like our concept of the caring container it might be considered a pleonasm because every kind of containment is/ought to be caring, just as every kind of participation is/ought to be democratic. We define participation as co-determination, i.e. as a means in the action research process as well as goal (enlarged employee co-determination if they ask for it). "Democratic" seems to us to indicate a societal effort of transcending the workplace looking at the other professionals as citizens and not just as employees. We do not think private or public organisations are democratic, because employees do not, e.g., elect or fire their managers. In our projects we try to make them a bit more participatory. We are not sure if our projects in organisations have an effect in terms of transcending work place/ organisation. Therefore, we stick to participation. We would very much like to have a dialogue with you on this topic.

In our own work it has been a learning process to combine a 'realistic' view of possibilities in organisations with hope to avoid pessimism and romanticism.

References

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