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Introduction

A participatory turn?

In the last three decades, a trend has been observable in many areas, both in Denmark and internationally. It seems to be more and more widely accepted that citizens, users, customers, employees etc. should not simply be told what to do, what is to happen to them or what is best for them. They should be involved to a greater extent. They should be asked, have co-influence or be outright participants in decisions. It is not just a matter of dignity, of people having as much influence as possible over their own lives. It is also a matter of the most durable results being those achievable through dialogue. Perhaps this trend is a new paradigm—a new fundamental understanding, in other words? The terms most frequently used to denote this trend include participation, involvement, democratization and co-generation.

We are not blind to the fact that there are many examples of the opposite (Zuboff, 2019), but the involvement of users, citizens, customers, patients, employees, pupils, local communities and population groups in third-world countries has come onto the agenda (Carpentier, 2011; Cornwall, 2011; Wilkinson, Gollan, Marchington & Lewin, 2010). One speaks of public or participatory governance (Fischer, 2009; Gaventa, 2001; Osmani, 2001) or of citizen assemblies (OECD, 2020). This can encompass citizens' influence on the local or regional economy (participatory budgeting) (Streck, 2014; Waglé & Shah, 2003). It can mean participatory urban planning (Society for Participatory Research in Asia, 2012), participation in environmental issues (Coenen, 2010) or co-production of welfare services, particularly in the social field (Agger & Tortzen, 2015; Carr, 2007; Durose, Justice & Skelcher, 2013; Tortzen, 2017). Public-private partnerships are being set up concerning collaboration between public institutions and private companies (Bovaird, 2004). There also seems to be a greater tendency for people to be involved as customers, creating products and services jointly with companies. This is often described as co-creation (Gouillart, 2014).

People are also increasingly becoming involved as users—of information technology (participatory design programming) (Sanoff, 2000), for example, or of the health service (Jønsson, Nyborg, Pedersen, Pedersen, Wandel, & Freil, 2013; Lindell, 2017); as users or co-creators of theatrical performances

(participatory theatre) (Boon & Plastow, 2004), museum visits (Bradbourne, 1998) and much more.

In international development work, involvement of local stakeholders has been going on since the 1990s (Chambers, 1995; Cornwall, 2014; Hickey & Mohan, 2004). This can be seen, for example, in the work of the World Bank (Mosse, 2001).

In research, there is a growing trend in many areas for the people whose situation is being researched to participate in the research process. One speaks of participatory action research (Whyte, 1991), participatory learning and action (Pretty, Guijt, Thompson, & Scoones, 1995), participatory evaluation (Estrella & Gaventa, 1998) etc.

Participation has become a buzzword for any research that ventures out of the ivory tower (Chambers, 1995; Phillips, 2011; Thorpe, 2010). Mode II research, with its striving for involvement and practical results, now seems to have become a real complement to the more traditional and distanced Mode I research (Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons, 2001). There seems to be an effort to conduct research ‘with’ rather than ‘on’—and not just among researchers (Heron & Reason, 2001, 2008; Phillips, Kristiansen, Vehviläinen & Gunnarsson, 2013), but also in political quarters (European Research Advisory Board, 2007; Ministry of Science, Technology and Development, 2003). The participatory trend thus seems also to have spread to research policy (Cohen, McAuley & Duberley, 2001; Jørgensen, 2008). This development has been termed the ‘collaborative’ (Gershon, 2009) or ‘participatory’ (Jasanoff, 2003) turn.

The trend seems to have become so widespread that some are sounding an outright warning, speaking of the danger of a participatory tyranny or nightmare (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Miessen, 2011).

What is participation in organizational change processes?

We hope this book can be an inspiration to anyone working with change processes who wants to take the plunge into increased involvement, both practically and theoretically. The book therefore examines what participation in change processes means and how it is practised. The book illuminates this question via a historical investigation of organizational action research processes in the twentieth century. It focuses on participation in both the practical and the theoretical dimension of the processes. ‘Organizational’ means that the change processes examined in the book are taking place at workplaces.

‘Action research’ in organizations means, ideally, that employees, managers, researchers and other stakeholders together organize certain change processes and seek to bring about the desired practical improvements in the organization and thereby a better theoretical understanding as well. Action research, then, is ideally a special kind of science. It is not about explaining or interpreting, not about speaking, thinking and writing about reality, not about running courses for practitioners or disseminating research results, but about helping to bring about changes. Kurt Lewin is often said to be the father of action research. He emphasizes that one gains knowledge about an organization when one starts to change it. Action research is thus an integrated change and research process.

How does participation take place in such an action research process? The book presents a number of different understandings. Participation can mean:

1. that the researchers move their laboratories out into the field, i.e. into the organizations, and apply predetermined theories and methods in the experiments they conduct with their new partners;
2. that employees and managers bring about changes that the researchers follow and seek to understand;
3. that the researchers act as experts, advising employees and managers how to organize their work;
4. that the researchers act as facilitators for a number of organizational processes that managers and employees choose to initiate in their organizations;
5. that managers, employees and researchers co-produce/co-generate a number of practical and theoretical results on the basis of their different knowledge and interests.

The first conception could be seen as an example of applied research in which the researchers test theories and methods they have developed beforehand, e.g. the theory that changes in the direction of increased participation reduce sickness absence and staff turnover. The second conception could be seen as an example of ‘accompanying research’ in which the researchers study the changes being undertaken by the employees themselves. The third conception, too, could be seen as an example of applied research in which the researchers give advice on the others’ work organization—that participation means they must introduce self-managing groups, for example. The fourth could be seen as a more processual understanding in which participation entails employees and

managers deciding together what is best for the organization, while the researchers take a more distant/facilitating role. The fifth conception could be seen as an understanding of participation as co-production/co-generation of new practical and theoretical knowledge with employees and managers taking part as co-researchers.

The book presents these five understandings particularly, but it is not intended as advocating any one of them over the others. Our own projects have included elements of all the understandings to varying degrees, both from one project to another, but also within the individual project. At the same time, we want, here at the outset, to spell out our own conception of participation in action research, as it will inevitably affect our ongoing analysis of others' conceptions. We want to emphasize that this is our ideal understanding, as practice is complex and always seems to entail participatory dilemmas and paradoxes.

What is action research in organizations?

The point of departure for our ideal understanding of action research is Habermas's (1968) distinction between three scientific knowledge interests. The natural science knowledge interest is technical-rational in the sense that it aims to produce explanations of the type 'if x, then y'. In the humanities, the knowledge interest is hermeneutic-practical in that it seeks to produce interpretations of the meanings of people's actions and texts. Critical social science seeks to produce emancipation or changes; that is, to improve our insight into the fact that what we perhaps take for granted is merely human-made and serves particular interests. History is rarely nature.

For us, action research is a critical social science. This means that action research is distinct from accompanying research. Accompanying research, in an organizational context, means that the employees and managers in one entity or another decide on some changes and bring them about while the researchers look on. Accompanying research thus has an explanatory or interpretive character. It is research *on* managers and employees (Heron & Reason, 2001). On the other hand, as we will show in Chapter 4, accompanying research can be a part of action research.

Nor, ideally, is action research in our view merely applied research, where researchers bring with them an already-developed theory and method which they apply in practice. Action research is an ongoing dialogue between practice

and theory that should preferably develop both. As we will show in Chapter 5, however, applied research may be a part of action research.

We understand action research as research with managers and employees in organizations. The research process does not proceed alongside the change process. The two processes are integrated. Employees, managers and researchers each contribute skills and interests. They work together to see whether they can manage to create a better practice in the organization—a practice that they have all, to one extent or another, been involved in determining and co-producing. This is the practical dimension of the action research process.

There should ideally emerge a better theoretical understanding, one that all parties have been involved in determining and co-producing. This is the theoretical dimension of action research.

The crucial question raised in the book is what participation in the practical and theoretical dimensions of the action research process comprises. As we shall see in the chapters to follow, there are many answers to this, depending on the historical setting and the complex contexts in which different change and research processes play out.

Employees, managers and researchers are not equal. Employees and managers know more about their workplace than we as outside researchers do; we, on the other hand, usually know more about research than they do. We are not co-engineers, in the case of a technical organization, nor do we regard them as co-researchers. We once asked permission to see the test laboratory at a high-technology company we were collaborating with. We hoped to learn a bit more about their work. When we entered the lab, which was developed by highly qualified software engineers, we were unable to get our bearings and understood absolutely nothing. A similar thing happened with regard to passport and driving licence staff in a municipality, where we were all at sea with their ruleset. We collaborate as professionals, each with our different skills. We add this as the book's sixth view of participation.

Across the six conceptions, there seems to be an agreement that action research in organizations, or organizational action research, ideally means two things. Managers, employees, researchers and other stakeholders (if any) together decide to initiate a change and research process in the organization(s). Together, they continually evaluate results and study the conditions for bringing about the desired changes or improvements. Ideally, then, organizational action research is the antithesis of organizational changes brought in over the

heads of the employees, and perhaps of local management too, with no research involved.

An increasing number of managers and employees are conducting action research in their own organizations (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). This book is concerned only with action research with outside researchers.

Participation, involvement, co-generation or co-creation?

In a variety of contexts, though, one might ask whether critics have a point when they assert that participation is just a kind of democratic milking-parlour music to accompany change processes, because in reality those processes follow the principle of ‘I manage, you participate’ (Saxena, 2011). In the book, we argue that it is more complex than that.

We choose ‘participation’ as our basic term not only because it is the predominant term in action research, but also because the term can be said to span the gamut of meanings from taking part in something planned by others to having co-determination (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2016).

‘Participation’ denotes some people doing something in relation to others. There are some people who are involving others. This reflects one of our points about organizational action research: it is usually actors such as an employers’ association, a trade union, local management and/or researchers who involve the employees. We have therefore decided against ‘co-creation’ and ‘co-production’, as these could connote a joint initiative. Moreover, ‘co-production’ as a term is historically associated in Denmark with the public sector, especially the production of welfare services (Agger & Lund, 2017; Tortzen, 2017). Similarly, ‘co-creation’ is associated with the company-customer relationship.

‘Participation’, then, entails some people taking the initiative for the change process by involving others. However, it does not necessarily mean that the process proceeds only on the first party’s terms or that it leads only to results that benefit that party. Saxena’s critique could be interpreted like this. As we will show in the book, action research processes tread a fine line between efficiency improvement and humanization, between the different parties’ divergent and coincident interests.

This is also why we have rejected ‘involvement’ as our basic term, since in action research it seems primarily to be understood as a management tool, in the same way as ‘empowerment’ is (Greenwood & Levin, 1998).

How can we understand participation in the history of organizational action research?

We have arrived at seven fundamental perspectives on participation. They arose in an interplay between practice and theory in organizational action research projects before and during the writing of this book. We understand them as an outline for a theory of involvement in change processes generally, based on a study of participation in action research in organizations. Some of these perspectives have been published previously (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017a, 2017b).

1. Historically, participation has meant anything from simply taking part to co-determination and self-determination by local employees and managers. There has been more co-determination in some projects than others.
2. Participation is an emergent process, not a once-and-for-all template. It cannot be set out in advance. Participation changes during individual projects.
3. Participation is always pre-integrated into complex contexts or systems that interact with individual projects in unpredictable ways.
4. Participation is the exercising of power in tensions between parties with different interests and knowledge. There are no power-free zones or safe spaces in organizational action research.
5. Participation unfolds in the tension field between a collaborative process and a researcher- and management-led one.
6. Participation unfolds in the tension field between consensus and dissensus, between development through a focus on similarities and agreement and/or a focus on differences and disagreements.
7. Participation unfolds in the tension field between efficiency improvement, humanization and democratization, i.e. between economics, psychology, ethics and politics.

It is our hypothesis that these perspectives apply to participation or involvement in all types of change process, not only to participation in organizational action research. We are indebted to many theorists, organizational action researchers and colleagues who have contributed directly or indirectly to the formulation of the seven perspectives. We shall return to some of them in the course of the book, but for now we want to mention in particular: Lewin

(1947a, 1947b), for his social psychology-based view that employees' reactions can be understood in relation to environmental factors such as pressure of work and management (not necessarily on the basis of the employee as a person); Trist (Trist & Murray, 1990; Fox, 1990), for his intuitive understanding of the importance of self-managing groups; Thorsrud (Thorsrud & Emery, 1970a), for his frank description of the pitfalls of participation; Freire (1970), for his distinction between processes conducted on people's behalf and those that they conduct themselves; Heron and Reason (2001), for their corresponding distinction between 'research on' and 'research with'; Cornwall (2011) for her distinction between 'voice' and 'choice', between having a voice and taking part in decisions; Greenwood and Levin (1998) for their distinction between empowerment (aiming for economic efficiency) and participation (aiming for democratization); Fricke for his distinction between instrumental and democratic participation (2013); Marx (1968) for his thesis that the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, whereas the point is to change it; Habermas (1968) for his distinction between explanation, interpretation and emancipation as three scientific knowledge interests; and Foucault (2000) for his theory of the presence of power in all relations.

How can we write about history?

This book shows that involvement and participation are not a new phenomenon. It investigates how involvement and participation are done in organizational action research in five countries—the USA, the UK, Norway, Sweden and Spain—in the second half of the twentieth century, plus one project in Denmark around 2010. Can action researchers and others working with change processes today learn something by taking a detour and studying the history of that time? We can at least see that it is not the first time that dilemmas, tensions and paradoxes have been on the agenda where participation is concerned.

The action research approaches and projects discussed in Part II take place between 1940 and 2000. We have chosen to write about particular action research approaches and projects for several reasons. These are approaches that have been significant in the history of theory and that have been discussed internationally among action researchers. The projects are internationally known. We therefore see them as representative of the approaches developed in organizational action research in the twentieth century.

Along the way, we considered how we as action researchers study and write about colleagues who were developing organizational action research in the second half of the twentieth century. The fact is that participation is not only about others. It is also about how we as authors contribute to shaping a particular understanding of the organizational action research of that time. It implies questions about power (Bryld, 2017). What, and who, is included or excluded? What empirical documentation underpins our interpretations? How is the interplay between past and present to be understood? And so on. Below, we present two methodological considerations.

An empathetic-critical approach

The first consideration concerns our view of history. We have sought to tread a line between a historical view and a critical, present-day view of participation in organizational action research. On the one hand, we seek to interpret experiments, theories and methods developed in five different countries in relation to their times and the context in which they arose. On the other, we ask critical questions about the underlying assumptions in the different approaches and our own way of understanding them. We therefore describe the methodology of the book as an empathetic-critical approach. The aim of this approach is to get closer to an understanding of the complexity of the participatory experiments and processes we describe in the individual chapters.

Our understanding of interpretation is inspired by Gadamer's (1960) philosophical hermeneutics, which is concerned with the relationship between the interpreter and the historical context in the field between familiarity and otherness. Unlike Gadamer, we use the concept of empathy. We understand empathy as inhabiting the other(s) on the basis of their own perspectives and the age that shaped them, while we, as readers of history, stay in our own, present-day shoes. Empathy is therefore not about identification, but about inhabiting the other(s) 'as if' we were them, while well aware that we never will be. Our conception is inspired by Carl Rogers (1957, 1962). He developed his understanding in a therapeutic context through a humanistic approach based on the psychology of the individual. In contrast to Rogers, we use empathy to understand participation in organizational action research in relation to the contemporary historical context in organizations and societies.

Critique is about maintaining a distance from history and continually asking fundamental questions. Critique does not mean that we apply a predetermined critical theory rooted in the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, 1937).

Critique means that we systematically question underlying assumptions—others' and our own—such as: what was the extent of employees' participation in the experiments? Could they refuse to participate? Could employees have an influence on, and make decisions in, the research processes? Who decided who was to be included in the research process or excluded from it? How did the projects practise relations between researchers and collaborative partners?

We are writing about the work of other action researchers, about some of the challenges they grappled with and that later became ours, too. However, we have not just taken on their challenges. From a history of ideas point of view, the concepts, methods and theories developed in that period have also had a history of effect (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) in our own work. Thus, we share Gadamer's (1960) hypothesis that the fusion of horizons is also about understanding being in some sense recognition. At the same time, we believe that, through this, we can learn from history. It becomes possible, for example, to relativize current, apparently new participatory concepts and approaches, because they appear in some sense as repetitions when viewed within a larger historical context. It also becomes possible to see something that our colleagues were not themselves aware of, perhaps because they lived at a different point in history.

Conversely, it means that the empathetic-critical approach becomes a balancing act. In particular, it has required us to transcend our own self-referentiality and not to judge or interpret the past by modern standards (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2004). We therefore decided not to write a book pointing out contradictions between what our predecessors said and what they did. Nor would we write a prescriptive book pointing out what they 'ought to have done' or 'should have done'. In this way, we have endeavoured to prevent our critique from becoming negatively judgemental and fault-finding in nature. This was not always easy, partly because we came up against our own inner judges.

What sources are available?

The second consideration concerns the sources available. All the chapters in the book describe a number of experiments in order to examine how participation and change processes are done in practice. Rather than simply recount or describe the experiments, then, the book would ideally also show them and document them. This proved difficult, because only to a very limited extent did organizational action research in the twentieth century document how par-

ticipation in the experiments was carried out. This applies to both practical and theoretical processes.

The book therefore settles on a methodological compromise. We first attempt to describe experiments, methods and theories in our colleagues' own words. On that basis, we ask some basic questions and make a number of interpretations which, had it been possible, we would have liked to anchor even more deeply in concrete empirical analyses of processes. In methodological terms, we have striven to make the presentation of the others, and our interpretation of them, transparent.

How the book is structured

The book is structured chronologically. It describes a journey through the history of twentieth-century organizational action research, from its early beginnings in the USA of the 1940s to a more recent project in Spain around 1990. All chapters describe projects in the USA and Europe. All focus on participation in the practical and theoretical dimensions of action research processes. Thus, we have chosen to omit projects outside Europe and the USA. Nor does the book address special areas such as schools or the health service, or special perspectives such as gender or ethnicity.

The focus of the book is thus relatively narrow, but also more general. Over the chapters, it describes how different historical approaches understand action research and do participation in practice and in theory. The individual chapters thus address recurrent questions such as: how is the relationship between action, research and participation understood? How is participation practised? How do researchers and partners collaborate? What overall understanding of action research emerges? Taken together, the chapters show action researchers, working across national boundaries and through networks, developing the view of action research in organizations, from social psychology via systems theory to theories of communication and co-production.

Part and chapter overview

The book is in two parts. Part I (Chapters 1–2) is about employee participation now and in the past. Part II (Chapters 3–7) provides an empathetic-critical view of participation in organizational action research in the twentieth century. The chapters are written so that they can be read separately. This means

that there will be some repetitions if one chooses to read them all. There is a summary of the differences and similarities between the various approaches in Chapter 8.

Chapter 1 provides ‘An example of tensions and dilemmas in organizational action research’. It describes a collaboration we undertook with Team Product Support at Danfoss Solar Inverters (DSI) in Sønderborg, Denmark from 2008 to 2010. The chapter is subtitled ‘On the infinitely large in the infinitely small’, because it links the little story in the team with the big story in the contexts that impinged on the project along the way. This happened in the organization when the management introduced crisis management; in society when the financial crisis hit and DSI struggled to survive; and in global relationships when Chinese sub-suppliers contributed to a temporary slowdown in production. By linking the large and small stories, the chapter presents the book’s seven perspectives on participation.

Chapter 2 sets out ‘A historical view of employee participation’. It describes the development of the ‘employee participation’ concept in Europe and shows that participation is also topical in organization theory.

Chapter 3, ‘Change-oriented social science’, concerns what are known as the Harwood experiments (1939–1947) at a textile factory in Virginia, USA. The experiments show that present-day questions about participation and efficiency are not new. They have been on the agenda since Lewin and colleagues began investigating whether it was possible to raise efficiency at Harwood by experimenting with participatory and democratic management and partially self-managing groups.

Chapter 4, ‘The origin of socio-technical systems thinking’, looks at the way socio-technical systems (STS) thinking was developed in connection with studies of British coal mines carried out from the late 1940s to the late 1950s by Trist and other researchers from the Tavistock Institute in London. STS combines the miners’ re-creation of partially self-managing groups with accompanying research on their organization. Participation is thus primarily about the practical dimension, the miners’ co-determination in day-to-day production. STS continues Lewin’s socio-psychological research on self-managing groups in organizations, and extends it with a technical perspective. It focuses on the interplay between the socio-psychological and technological systems.

Chapter 5, ‘Industrial democracy: Experiments in Norway’, deals with a national organizational development project focusing on the development of industrial democracy in Norway in the 1960s. It was created through collabo-

ration between the Norwegian Government, the Norwegian employers' association, the Norwegian labour organization and researchers affiliated to the newly established Work Research Institute (WRI) in Oslo, directed by Einar Thorsrud. The project, the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project (NIDP), was inspired by the socio-technical analysis developed by Tavistock researchers, who also took part in the project. Across projects, the NIDP practised action research as applied research on the basis of predetermined hypotheses about the connection between increased influence, positivity and democracy.

Chapter 6, 'Democratic dialogues: Dialogue conferences in Norway and Sweden', examines national organizational development projects in Norway and Sweden from the early 1980s. These were carried out especially by researchers associated with the WRI and Swedish universities—researchers such as Bjørn Gustavsen, who was also associated with the Centre for Working Life (Arbetslivscentrum) in Stockholm. Industrial democracy was no longer understood to mean introducing a new organization of work in the form of partially self-managing groups. Industrial democracy came to mean that the employees took part in a special change process that essentially consisted of democratic dialogues in which they themselves would help to define problems, goals and actions in the development of their organization. Democratic dialogues thus adopted, not a structural, but a processual communication perspective. Democratic dialogues initially built on Habermas's understanding of dialogue. The chapter discusses whether such an understanding is applicable in an organizational context and what level of participation is available to employees and local managers in the practical and theoretical dimensions of action research.

Chapter 7, 'Pragmatic action research', presents an approach developed by Greenwood and Levin. In contrast to STS, action research is not seen as a combination of action and research, i.e. of practical changes and theoretical innovations, but as a combination of action, research and participation. Employees, managers and action researchers create the research process and its results together on the basis of their different interests and knowledge, and they contribute to the solution of complex problems—both practically and theoretically. The approach is therefore known as co-generative research. The chapter examines and discusses the meaning of the prefix 'co-'. What is involved in wanting to co-generate a new practice in a democratic way and at the same time to generate valid theoretical knowledge? How do managers and employees become co-researchers? The particular case examined is a project in cooperatives in northern Spain in the late 1980s.

Chapter 8, 'Participation, past and future', summarizes the book's conclusions about participation in organizational action research in the twentieth century. Among other things, it deals with tensions between efficiency improvement and humanization, between consensus and dissensus, between democratization and management—and researcher-driven projects. The chapter presents a number of practical and theoretical challenges that one may notice when seeking to generate changes through participation.

The structure of the individual chapters

All chapters of the book attempt to follow this structure:

First, we provide an overview of what the chapter is about. This is followed by some current examples showing why the chapter is relevant today.

Next come the aims of the chapter and its overall perspectives on the approach that it examines. An example of an organizational action research project within the approach in question is then described.

We then discuss how participation is done in practice and in theory. What part do employees and researchers play in this process? Who, for example, has voice and choice?

This is followed by a discussion in philosophy of science terms of how action research is understood within the individual approaches. Are we dealing with more traditional qualitative research, with applied research, with participation—or something else?

The following section concludes the whole chapter.

The last section is about our reflections. Here, we question our own interpretations, methods and reading. Do they hold water? Why/why not?

At the end of the book is a list of references to the literature cited, but also to other important literature about the approach not cited in the chapters but to which we wish to draw attention.