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Caring Action Research: Lessons learned from performing research with(in) care

Britta Møller

Abstract: This paper bridges care ethics (Tronto, Noddings) with action research (AR), introducing *Caring Action Research* (CAR) as a framework for understanding AR as a caring practice. Based on a study conducted with a Danish elderly care department and a vocational college for care workers, the research employs design-based trials to facilitate shared inquiry into challenging situations in care work and education. The analysis reveals key dynamics: participants' mutual recognition; the negotiation of power relations; and the collaborative development of design-based trials. CAR emerges as a valuable approach to addressing professional and educational challenges, rooted in caring ethics.

Keywords: care ethics, care, caring action research, action research, co-creative inquiry

Investigación-acción sobre el cuidado: Lecciones aprendidas al realizar investigaciones (dentro del) cuidado

Resumen: Este artículo conecta la ética del cuidado (Tronto, Noddings) con la investigación-acción (IA), proponiendo la *Caring Action Research* (CAR) como un marco para entender la IA como una práctica de cuidado. Basada en un estudio realizado con un departamento danés de atención a personas mayores y una escuela vocacional para asistentes sociales, la investigación emplea ensayos basados en diseño para facilitar la investigación compartida sobre los desafíos en el trabajo y la educación de cuidado. El análisis revela dinámicas clave: el reconocimiento mutuo de los participantes; la negociación de las relaciones de poder; y el desarrollo colaborativo de los ensayos basados en diseño. La IAC emerge como un enfoque valioso para abordar los desafíos profesionales y educativos asociados a la ética del cuidado.

Palabras clave: ética del cuidado, cuidado, investigación-acción del cuidado, investigación-acción, indagación cocreativa

1. Introduction

Action research is widely recognised as a deeply relational and ethical practice, characterised by embodied actions, participatory engagements, and moral responsibilities (Brannelly, 2018; Brydon-Miller, 2008; Eikeland, 2006; Fouché & Chubb, 2017; Zeni, 2009). These qualities make it uniquely suited to addressing the complex challenges of professional and societal life,

especially under conditions of uncertainty and vulnerability. However, such collaborative engagements often expose gaps in traditional ethical frameworks, which fail to account for the dynamic, participatory, and context-sensitive nature of action research (Banks et al., 2013; Fouché & Chubb, 2017). Addressing these gaps requires ethical approaches that foreground relational responsibility and attentiveness to evolving needs of participants, communities, and society.

This paper proposes *Caring Action Research (CAR)* as a framework that integrates care ethics into action research, emphasising relationality, responsibility, and attentiveness. Rooted in care ethics, CAR extends beyond procedural ethics – such as privacy, informed consent, and confidentiality (Locke et al., 2013; Zeni, 2009) – to address broader, normative questions: *What should we pursue, protect, and care for; and why?* (Eikeland, 2006). By emphasising care as a relational and ethical framework, CAR challenges researchers to navigate the openness, vulnerability, and mutuality inherent in participatory inquiry while fostering meaningful collaborations and impacts.

The ethics of care, as theorised by Tronto (1993; 2013) and Noddings (1984; 2012), provide a foundation for this approach. These scholars frame care as an action-oriented, relational practice that maintains, repairs, and sustains our world (Tronto, 1993). Care ethics highlight the interconnectedness and vulnerability of human existence, underscoring the importance of fostering equitable and empathetic relationships (Miller, 2020). This perspective is particularly relevant in professional and organisational contexts, where uncertainty and interdependence are central. By drawing on care ethics, CAR reshapes the ethical landscape of action research, offering tools to address challenges such as power dynamics, inclusion, and vulnerability inherent in collaborative processes.

This study situates CAR within the context of elderly care work and education – a field that exemplifies the undervaluation of care in society despite its critical importance. In the Nordic welfare state, elderly care is predominantly a public responsibility delivered by trained professionals, yet it faces systemic challenges such as staff shortages, underfunding, and complex healthcare needs (Dahl & Hansen, 2021; Wrede et al., 2008). These challenges are often framed as a ‘care crisis,’ reflecting deeper societal neglect of care as both a labour and ethical imperative (Tronto, 1993; Wrede et al., 2008). As Miller (2020, p. 650) aptly notes: “A bird’s-eye view of the current state of humanity clearly shows that some human lives are at risk more often than others.” This reality compels researchers to adopt a “participatory worldview” (Reason, 2014) and act with care in research design, collaboration, and outcomes. Against this backdrop, this paper explores how care ethics can inform action research to foster collaborative learning, shared responsibility, and socially sustainable practices.

Empirical insights are drawn from an action research project in elderly care work and education, illustrating how inquiry as a care practice enables researchers and participants to navigate uncertainty collaboratively. The analysis highlights how engaging with care ethics reshapes ethical considerations in participatory research and offers a framework for responding to relational and moral complexities. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How does an ethics of care reshape the ethical landscape of action research?
2. What are the implications of this framework for researchers and participants actively engaged in collaborative inquiry?

Working the insider–outsider hyphen in action research for sustainability: tensions in citizen-led multi-stakeholder forest dialogues

Eeva Houtbeckers

Abstract: Socio-ecological crises such as global warming and biodiversity loss have resulted in calls for action research for sustainability. This article provides an account of one action research for sustainability to expand the understanding of how such processes can address the cultural dualisms and hierarchies identified in ecofeminism. The need to both protect and use forests has resulted in heated debates in which citizens are underrepresented. I as a scholar was involved in a working group that established and managed a citizen-led, multi-stakeholder forest movement that organised 15 forest dialogues between 2018 and 2022. This article describes what happened when the Our Forests citizen movement entered the heated Finnish forest policy debates. More particularly, I explore my movement as a scholar and that of the Our Forests working group in the insider–outsider hyphen. While Our Forests managed to attract key forest stakeholders to dialogues to enrich participants’ understandings and learn from each other, mistrust and looping forest debates undermined further consensus. To enable societal transformation, paying more attention to hyphen-spaces along which participants move can reveal what is shared – and what is not – between participants in action research for sustainability and form new alliances.

Keywords: action research for sustainability, forest, dialogue, hyphen-spaces, positionality, ecofeminism.

Trabajando la relación entre lo interno y lo externo en la investigación-acción para la sostenibilidad: tensiones en los diálogos ciudadanos de múltiples partes interesadas en los bosques

Resumen: Las crisis socioecológicas, como el calentamiento global y la pérdida de biodiversidad, han dado lugar a llamamientos a la investigación-acción en pro de la sostenibilidad. Este artículo ofrece un relato de una investigación-acción en pro de la sostenibilidad para ampliar la comprensión de cómo estos procesos pueden abordar los dualismos y jerarquías culturales identificados en el ecofeminismo. La necesidad de proteger y utilizar los bosques ha dado lugar a acalorados debates en los que la ciudadanía está subrepresentada. Junto con un grupo de trabajo, yo, como investigadora, establecí y gestioné un movimiento forestal liderado por la ciudadanía y con múltiples partes interesadas que organizó 15 diálogos forestales entre 2018 y 2022. Este artículo describe lo que sucedió cuando el movimiento ciudadano Nuestros Bosques entró en los acalorados debates sobre políticas forestales finlandesas. Más concretamente, exploro mi movimiento como investigadora y el del grupo de trabajo Nuestros Bosques en la línea divisoria entre personas de dentro y de fuera. Si bien Nuestros Bosques logró atraer a las principales partes interesadas forestales a los diálogos para enriquecer la comprensión de las personas participantes y aprender unas de otras, la de-

sconfianza y la repetición de los debates forestales socavaron aún más el consenso. Para posibilitar la transformación social, prestar más atención a los espacios de interrelación en los que se mueven las personas participantes puede revelar lo que comparten (y lo que no) en la investigación-acción para la sostenibilidad y formar nuevas alianzas.

Palabras clave: investigación-acción para la sostenibilidad, bosque, diálogo, espacios de interrelación, posicionalidad, ecofeminismo

1. Introduction

This paper contributes to the field of action research for sustainability by exploring my role as a researcher-activist in a citizen-led, multi-stakeholder forest movement that organised forest dialogues. Various unsustainable developments, such as global warming and biodiversity loss, have resulted in calls for action research for sustainability (Bradbury et al., 2019; Egmore et al., 2022; Keahey, 2021; Wittmayer et al., 2014). Action research for sustainability that draws from ecofeminist thinking aims at eco-social transformations (Bradbury et al., 2019; Egmore et al., 2022). Egmore et al. (2022) call for action research for sustainability to observe existing eco-social relations, enrich social imagination, enable learning through practising, and support societal transformation.

This paper provides an account of one example of action research for sustainability to expand the understanding of how such processes can be developed to address the cultural dualisms and hierarchies identified in ecofeminism, where researchers have pointed out that not everyone is responsible for socio-ecological crises. Ecofeminist thinking and action brings together environmental justice and feminist traditions (Warren, 2000), and ecofeminists identify dualisms in thinking, such as culture–nature or man–woman, that tend to result in hierarchical thinking and the oppression of “lower” beings on the other side of the binary (Warren, 2000). Ecofeminist thinkers show how “the many systems of oppression are mutually reinforcing” (Gaard, 1997, p. 114). Humans and other species suffer from dualist and hierarchical mindsets perpetuating institutional exploitation of, for example, women, ethnic minorities, more-than-human actors, and nature itself (Warren, 2000).

It is important to consider the processes of action research for sustainability and the role that researchers play in them (Wittmayer & Schöpke, 2014), especially considering the ecofeminist roots that emphasise the need to challenge dualisms and hierarchies. While existing action research for sustainability on the researcher role is scarce – but see Wittmayer and Schöpke (2014) and Kitagawa (2023) – there is a longer tradition of action research scholars reflecting on their positionality in other topics, such as self-organising groups in trade unions (Humphrey, 2007). In particular, reflecting insider–outsider positions and the movement between them has provided useful insights into the role of scholars in action research and thus the broader cultural dynamics in that context (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013; Humphrey, 2007; Kitagawa, 2023). Analysing the movement between these two positions makes it possible to provide rich accounts of the interaction between researchers and research participants.

In the present study, I explore the movement between insider–outsider positions over time to observe existing eco-social relations in Finnish forest policy and practice. The shift between

A neo-complexity orientation to action research: perspectives on unpredictability and ethics

Karina Solsø, Emma Crewe, Kiran Chauhan

Abstract: The influence of complexity theory on action research scholarship and practice has been kaleidoscopic. Further integrating ideas derived from the complexity sciences could enrich this research tradition, but there are choices to be made about what to prioritise. We distinguish complexity-informed approaches that privilege control from those adopting radical open-endedness. The former often aligns with managerialist assumptions, which tend to deny the messiness and moral dimensions of living and working. In contrast, ‘neo-complexity’ aims to reemphasise the most intellectually, politically, and emotionally radical implications of complexity science: embracing unpredictability, plurality, and practice-based ethics. An example of an action research coalition of Ethiopia, Mursi and UK researchers allows us to describe what this means in practice.

Keywords: complexity, unpredictability, agro-pastoralists, research methods

Una orientación neocomplejista hacia la investigación-acción: Perspectivas sobre la imprevisibilidad y la ética

Resumen: La influencia de la teoría de la complejidad en la investigación-acción académica y la práctica ha sido caleidoscópica. Una mayor integración de las ideas derivadas de las ciencias de la complejidad podría enriquecer esta tradición de investigación, pero es necesario tomar decisiones sobre qué priorizar. Distinguimos los enfoques basados en la complejidad que priorizan el control, de aquellos que adoptan una perspectiva radicalmente abierta. Los primeros a menudo se alinean con los supuestos gerencialistas, que tienden a negar el desorden y las dimensiones morales de la vida y el trabajo. En contraste, la “neocomplejidad” busca volver a enfatizar los elementos más radicales intelectual, política y emocionalmente de la ciencia de la complejidad: la adopción de la imprevisibilidad, la pluralidad y la ética práctica. Un ejemplo de una coalición de investigación-acción de investigadores de Etiopía, Mursi y el Reino Unido nos permite describir lo que esto significa en la práctica.

Palabras clave: complejidad, imprevisibilidad, agropastoralismo, métodos de investigación

1. Introduction

In this paper, we investigate how we cope with the problems and possibilities of complexity as action researchers. The idea of ‘neo-complexity’ has arisen from our concern about a pervasive forgetting within research institutions in Europe and the US about the radical implications of unpredictability and the consequences of our lives being entangled with others. Arguably reflecting the mood of our time – characterised by an aggressive, exploitative and

instrumental mode of relating to the world (Rosa, 2020) – complexity is often reified (Mowles, 2021) as something to embrace, analyse, harness, manage or rise above. We introduce the perspective of neo-complexity action research to illuminate alternatives to trying to control an uncontrollable world. As we face an increasing number of eco-social and political crises in organisations and society, this becomes ever more urgent.

We start by exploring specific patterns in how ideas from the complexity sciences have been taken up in action research, and in management and leadership studies more generally (Allen et al., 2011; Rosenhead, Franco, Grint & Fridland, 2019). We distinguish between *instrumentalising* and *non-instrumentalising* orientations to complexity: the former construe complexity as something to manage and put to work in service of other aims; the latter emphasise the impossibility of knowing what will happen when we interact with others, however well we design and execute our plans. We argue that instrumentalising orientations align with the way planning is conceived of within the management of most international development projects but are problematic because their implicit “if...then...” or linear causality means they are caught out by the very concepts they are trying to put to work. However, this causes serious challenges for those engaging in research to bring about change. So the research questions that we address within this article are as follows. If complexity means that the outcomes of what we say and do cannot be known in advance, then how can we know what will happen if we try to manage complexity? Non-instrumentalising orientations may seem rather disabling: if we understand human interaction as fundamentally unpredictable, on what basis can we act? We must act all the time, so how might we do so in ways that are intentional, tentative, politically savvy, and ethical if aspiring towards public good?

Following Eikeland’s (2012) praxeological approach to action research, we advocate a dialogic orientation, where the unpredictable and emergent nature of lived reality is met with an attitude of open-ended inquiry and a willingness to become visible as a moral agent, while recognising the plurality of views. This paper explores the methodological and ethical implications of taking such a stance in action research, beginning with a fuller description of instrumentalising and non-instrumentalising orientations to complexity.

2. Instrumentalising and non-instrumentalising orientations to complexity

2.1 Management and leadership theory

During the last two decades, ‘complexity’ has become increasingly mainstream in management theory and discourses. While we do not have the space for a comprehensive survey, we provide three examples illustrating an ‘if...then...’ orientation, chosen for their ongoing currency and enthusiastic reception by managers. First, the VUCA framework (Taskan et al, 2022), introduced by US management scholars in the 1980s based on research into the military, asserts that managers face environments that are increasingly Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. This ‘new’ reality requires managers learn to embrace change, be open to uncertainty, and be ready to take a balanced approach to risk so that their organisations can adapt to a globally-connected, fast-paced business world. The instrumental logic of management thinking becomes evident in the associated behavioural leadership model,

Action Research for the Development of Welfare

Søren Frimann, Lone Hersted, Ottar Ness

Abstract: The Nordic welfare model, known for its universality and commitment to equality, has evolved over time to address the social needs of its citizens through benefits such as healthcare, education and social security. Despite its strengths, the model faces challenges, including increasing social inequality, demographic changes and increased immigration. These challenges call for new solutions that can sustain the welfare state in the adaptation to contemporary issues. As we see it, there is a need for civic engagement and co-creation based on dialogue to find sustainable solutions to our societal challenges. In this perspective, we propose action research as a powerful approach to addressing some of these challenges, particularly in promoting social sustainability in communities and organisations. By emphasising dialogue, collaboration and democratic participation, action research has the potential to empower different stakeholders and local communities to co-create solutions on complex social problems. It moves beyond traditional top-down governance, while facilitating dialogues and processes based on citizen and employee engagement. Illustrative examples from Norway and Denmark demonstrate the impact of action research in improving welfare, particularly through projects like the Citizens' Model and a project for co-developing organisational learning in a public institution specialised in hearing loss and deafblindness. These examples show how action research can foster social sustainability by empowering marginalised groups and a variety of voices, contributing to the improvement of welfare for present and future generations.

Keywords: Action Research, Nordic Welfare Model, Relational Welfare, Social Sustainability

Investigación-acción para el desarrollo del bienestar

Resumen: El modelo nórdico de bienestar, conocido por su universalidad y compromiso con la igualdad, ha evolucionado con el tiempo para abordar las necesidades sociales de sus ciudadanos a través de beneficios como la atención sanitaria, la educación y la seguridad social. A pesar de sus puntos fuertes, el modelo se enfrenta a desafíos, entre ellos la creciente desigualdad social, los cambios demográficos y el aumento de la inmigración. Estos desafíos exigen nuevas soluciones que puedan sostener el estado del bienestar en la adaptación a los problemas contemporáneos. En nuestra opinión, es necesario el compromiso cívico y la co-creación basados en el diálogo para encontrar soluciones sostenibles a nuestros desafíos sociales. Desde esta perspectiva, proponemos la investigación-acción como un enfoque poderoso para abordar algunos de estos desafíos, en particular para promover la sostenibilidad social en las comunidades y las organizaciones. Al enfatizar el diálogo, la colaboración y la participación democrática, la investigación-acción tiene el potencial de empoderar a diferentes partes interesadas y comunidades locales para co-crear soluciones a problemas sociales complejos. Va más allá de la gobernanza tradicional de arriba hacia abajo, al tiempo que facilita diálogos y procesos basados en la participación de los ciudadanos y los empleados.

Ejemplos ilustrativos de Noruega y Dinamarca demuestran el impacto de la investigación-acción en la mejora del bienestar, en particular a través de proyectos como el Modelo Ciudadano y un proyecto para el desarrollo conjunto del aprendizaje organizacional en una institución pública especializada en pérdida auditiva y sordoceguera. Estos ejemplos muestran cómo la investigación-acción puede fomentar la sostenibilidad social al empoderar a los grupos marginados y a una variedad de voces, contribuyendo a la mejora del bienestar de las generaciones presentes y futuras.

Palabras clave: Investigación-acción, Modelo Nórdico de Bienestar, Bienestar Relacional, Sostenibilidad Social

Introduction

The terms welfare state, welfare society and welfare model are often used synonymously without a clear definition. There is hardly *one single* model, but rather a set of ideas and initiatives based on the same way of thinking. The Nordic welfare society is built on the idea of providing people with social security from birth to death. The welfare state was in its origin about fulfilling the needs for social security in a modern society with roots going back to the latter part of the 19th century.

However, the welfare society first gained full momentum in the period after World War II. One of the most important themes behind the development of the welfare state was to secure democracy in the post-war period. The Nordic welfare model is characterised by the fact that the state contributes to ensure citizens a certain standard of living and a certain degree of equality through pension schemes and social benefits that aim to alleviate unemployment or illness (Bambra, 2007, 2022; Esping-Andersen, 1999). History had shown that neither the planned economy of state socialism nor capitalism on free market conditions had led to a reliable foundation for democracy. Instead, the vision was that by politically regulating the market economy and creating a foundation for welfare for all, the welfare society should lead to a new democratic third way (Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005). The welfare state should have a social policy with universal benefits based on equal individual case management. The focus in the Nordic model was on adjusting inequalities created by the capitalist market economy. Marshall (1966) outlined how to develop equal citizenship based on universal civil, political and social rights, despite the ever-increasing economic inequalities created by capitalism under free market conditions. For Esping-Andersen (1999), the goal of the Nordic model was to create a de-commodification. This means that citizens with low wages should not be treated less well in terms of social policy than the citizens with higher wages.

The period from World War II to the 1970s is often called the ‘golden age’ of the welfare state. Here, the traditional benefits for people in need were supplemented with benefits for families with children and benefits to cover housing costs. In addition, the unemployment benefit system was changed so that in the case of very high unemployment, the state financed most of the unemployment benefit. For instance, in Denmark in 1976, the Assistance Act (Bistandsloven) was introduced as a means of preventing social problems and inequalities. The goal was to support citizens in the event of a temporary loss of income and to assist with rehabilitation if necessary (Dalggaard et al., 1996). An important contribution to the creation of

Interview with Julie Borup Jensen Our Bodies in Action Research: Senses, experience, and aesthetic awareness

By Danilo Streck and Lone Hersted

Entrevista con Julie Borup Jensen

Nuestros Cuerpos en Investigación-Acción: Sentidos, experiencia y conciencia estética

Danilo and Lone:

Thanks, Julie, for participating in this interview in International Journal of Action Research (IJAR). Considering you have recently joined us in the group of editors at IJAR, it is exciting and inspiring for us to have the opportunity to make this interview with you and share it with the readers of IJAR.

As an introduction to the interview, could you give the reader a perspective of your journey?

Julie:

Thank you for your interest! I was born in 1968 and grew up in the early '70 s in a very small village in a rural area in the northern part of Denmark. My classmates in school were children of farmers, workmen, and the like, with their mothers being part of their fathers' businesses, working from and in their homes. It was a childhood defined by traditional gender roles, where none of us children went to institutions before we started school—all mothers and preschool children were home all day, so there were quite a few playmates in the vicinity. Looking back, I can hardly comprehend that this way of life existed in my lifetime and that I was part of it. It feels very distant, historic, and different from the life I am living now in the urban area of Aalborg.

Growing up in this rural area, I developed a close relationship with nature and outdoor life. In addition, my interests differed from those of most of my classmates. Instead of playing soccer, I started playing the violin when I was eight years old. My classmates never commented on this interest; I was simply known as "Julie with the violin." During high school, I continued to practice the violin. Eventually, I made my way to the Academy of Music in Aarhus, where I graduated in 1995 as an orchestra musician. After gaining work experience in Berlin and on a German cruise ship, I returned to a precarious career with one-year contracts in several symphony orchestras in Denmark. Growing tired of uncertain incomes—especially after the birth of my first child, a daughter—I enrolled in a nursing bachelor's program, which I completed in 2004.

From there, I continued along an academic pathway, earning a master's degree in learning and innovative change, followed in 2013 by a PhD in collaborative innovation in the public