INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACTION RESEARCH

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Legacy and future perspectives of action research

Miren Larrea

This is a sad editorial to write as Olav Eikeland, one of the members of our team of editors, died recently. These weeks we have tried to honour our colleague and moreover, to explore ways to share his work and make his legacy accessible. That is why this editorial is followed not only by an obituary, written by Hans Christian Garmann Johnsen and Richard Ennals, but also by an article that Olav Eikeland published in International Journal of Action Research (IJAR) in 2007, entitled "Why should mainstream social researchers be interested in AR". Davydd Greenwood writes an introduction to this article, which he describes as "an invitation, not to remember Olav and move on, but to engage or re-engage with his comprehensive critique of careless commonplaces often found in writing and practice in action research".

In this context the editors of IJAR have reflected on how a generation that inspired and supported the initiation and development of the journal is no longer part of this endeavour. This is happening all around the world, and a special mention was made about the legacy of Carlos Rodrigues Brandão in Latin America. He wanted to change the world to make it a more beautiful and dignified place and, together with Orlando Fals Borda and Paulo Freire, he inspired and promoted an approach to research that not only leaves scientific neutrality behind, but positions research with those whose knowledge-power is not recognised as legitimate, valid or relevant.

There is thus a generational change happening in action research in general and in IJAR too. We are challenged to take care of the legacy of those who developed action research before us, while giving the floor to young generations that will bring new perspectives and adapt action research to the challenges of the future. That is why, in this issue we interview a young action researcher who participated in the IJAR 2020 event while he was a PhD student and now, after finishing his PhD, publishes his results in the journal. Leon Staines is an example of how journals can be more than a means to publishing and can become communities where we can learn and evolve together.

The first original article of this issue connects with the reflection on the role of different generations in action research. Isabella Paoletti, Elisabet Cedersund and Kostantin Economou, in their paper "Moral awareness and different orders of relevance in participatory research with older people and professionals" address the involvement of older people in action research. The paper is interesting not only because we can learn about older people and their specific circumstances in action research processes, but also because the authors reflect about their own role and transformation, addressing how their moral awareness developed through the process. The article presents cases from Sweden, Italy and Portugal.

The second article complements the previous by focusing on youth as participants in action research. In this paper entitled "Engaging youth in the local environment. Promoting sustainability action competence in Danish high school teaching through citizen social sci-

ence" the authors Cathrine M. S. Winther and Michael Søgaard Jørgensen share their experience with high school student. The article is included in the thematic series on action research and citizen social science, based on the YouCount project. For an introduction to this series, I recommend reading the Guest Editorial by Patricia Canto and Reidun Norvoll in the previous issue of this journal. This paper specifically addresses, through rich graphic material, the experiences with a sustainability actionable approach in a Danish high school, and how it influenced young people's understanding of the local environment.

The third original article is written by Alexandra David, Judith Terstriep and Silke Steinberg and entitled "Action Research: A Participatory Approach to Improve Measures of Labour Market Integration of Refugees". It illustrates the contribution of action research to co-creating measures for the labour market integration of refugees. The action research process it shares took place in Germany, shortly after the so-called European "refugee crises" during 2015–2017. The authors conclude that action research is valuable for collaboratively developing measures to integrate refugees into the labour market, as it recognises refugees as active participants who take ownership and responsibility for improving their own circumstances. However, it also poses challenging questions like: as scholars, are we pushing certain views and actions because we think it is good for the refugees, or because the refugees think it is of importance for them?

Finally, in the fourth article entitled "Participatory Action Research for Urban Connectivity: Bridging Inequality in Metropolitan Monterrey" we see again a case where the community and the action researcher mutually transform. Leon Staines, whose interview is also part of this issue, has worked in the context of urban planning and has used action research to transform these processes by moving from government and expert-led methods to dialogic and inclusive ones. However, his main lessons learnt do not exclusively address the relevance of methods and instruments in the process. He shares his own transformation process by showing us how he evolved from having an extractive stance, towards a co-generative way that helped him to position himself *in place* and not just *looking at the place.*

With the book review of this issue, we go back to the idea of honouring the legacy of authors that have inspired us. We do so with a review by Telmo Adams of a book published by Alfonso Torres Carrillo where he writes about Orlando Fals Borda, Paulo Freire and Hugo Zemelman.

I hope that readers will enjoy our effort to connect past and future, young and old, community and self.

Obituary of Olav Eikeland

Hans Christian Garmann Johnsen and Richard Ennals

It is with great sadness that we received the news that Olav Eikeland, colleague, working life researcher, philosopher and professor, has passed away. He would soon have turned 68. Olav was born on 10 October 1955, died on Friday 1 September 2023. He lived all his life in Oslo, but his interest and influence went far beyond the city limits. With him Norway have lost one of its most knowledgeable and reflective social scientists.

Olav was educated in philosophy and sociology, and was employed at the Work Research Institute (AFI) from 1985 to 2008, as a researcher and later head of research. In 1993 he became Dr. philos. in Philosophy at the University of Oslo, with the thesis "Experience, Dialogics and Politics: a conceptual historical and philosophical contribution to the reconstruction of empirical social science". The work was inspired by the philosophy of Aristotle.

In 2008, he became a Professor at the then Akershus University College. At the time of his death, he was Professor of Pedagogy and Work Research at OsloMet. There he was connected to the Faculty of Teacher Education and International Studies, Department of Vocational Teacher Education. In that capacity, he was, among other things, involved in what the university describe as "the development of organizational theoretical, didactic models for cooperation between educational institutions and fields of practice". He was also a Visiting Professor for periods and giving lectures at other institutions, among others, NTNU and Aalborg University, as well as Sabanci University in Istanbul.

Olav's academic focus, even early on when he worked at AFI, implied a deep involvement in the relationship between theory and practice. This brought him to his engagement with Aristotle. His book "The Ways of Aristotle" from 2008 was a further development of his PhD work. Richard Ennals often used the phrase "Olav and his friend Aristotle". In fact, one could say that the relationship developed into a real friendship. Olav dwelled into *Corpus Aristotelicum.* He learned Old Greek in order to get closer to Aristotle, but more importantly, as a friend, Olav tried to see through the more superficially, predictable and stereotypical view of Aristotle, looking beyond Aristotle's mistakes and ignoring the mistaken ways in which Aristotle has been misunderstood, in order to get closer to what Aristotle wanted to say.

His latest book "På sporet av en syvende forfatning: Aristoteles og den norske samarbeidsmodellen – makt, dialog og organisasjonslæring" (On the trail of a seventh constitution; Aristotle and the Norwegian collaborative model – power, dialogue and organizational learning) was published in Norwegian in 2022 and summarised to a large extent the way Olav thought that Aristotle can still inspire us.

Olav was determined to reduce the gap between theory and practice. At the same time, Olav was uncompromising when it came to scientific quality. He wanted to overcome superficiality and the simple, partially misunderstood, use of concepts and theories. That led him into some dilemmas. Even though he wanted to have a dialogue with praxis, his approach became something that had to be expressed thoroughly. So, his latest book, where he expresses these thoughts, is, unsurprisingly, more than 500 closely spaced pages in length!

The problem is not that little happens in our everyday conversation with our fellow citizen, the problem is that too much happens in our everyday conversation with our fellow citizen, too much that we tend to ignore, and that Olav made us aware of. Furthermore, what goes on is essential for the further development of society.

Olav leaves a void for all who were close to him. He also leaves behind an insight and understanding of the basic social and knowledge conditions for our modern life in his books and articles. *Έργο τον Eikeland* will be a rich reservoir of thinking and reflections that will inspire future generations of scholars and practitioners.

A practitioner's journey of change: Interview with Leon Staines

León Staines-Díaz, Danilo Streck, Miren Larrea

Danilo and Miren:

Thank you, Leon, for this interview in International Journal of Action Research (IJAR). We met you in 2020, in the IJAR symposium. You were a PhD student struggling with action research in your dissertation. You have recently finished it successfully, congratulations!

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

Leon:

I graduated as an architect in 2007. After working for a couple of years, I decided to pursue a master's degree in the history of architecture at the University of Buenos Aires, where I lived for two years. Upon returning, I initially intended to focus on the historical aspect of architecture. However, having lived in a city with excellent public spaces and a good transportation system for two years, I became increasingly interested in the functional aspect of cities. I began delving deeper into these topics, and a year later, I decided to pursue a second master's degree in urban planning in Mexico. This was aimed at gaining more insights into how cities could be modified to create more human-centric environments with healthier atmospheres. I excelled in my master's program, and in the second semester, I took a class by the then Director of the Urban Planning Office of Monterrey, who invited me to join his team.

As an urban planner, I had the opportunity to work on projects related to traffic calming, sidewalk expansion, and overall improvement of public spaces. Professionally, it was a period of significant growth. However, I noticed that there was resistance from some segments of the population when future projects were announced. For a while, I could not understand why more trees and better public spaces could be met with objections. I realized that while the intentions behind these projects were good, there was a deep distrust of authorities and a lack of effective communication about the projects (and the processes involved). Residents did not see them as positive changes; instead, these initiatives were perceived as impositions.

This realization led me to focus on integrating citizen participation in decision-making processes. As a result, I decided to pursue a PhD at the University of Texas in Austin. My goal was not only to make cities more sustainable and inclusive but also to ensure that this transformation was guided by the collective imagination of the community.

Danilo and Miren:

You come from the field of architecture and urbanism. What is your experience of action research in this field?

Leon:

At first, delving into Action Research seemed counterintuitive, but as I became more familiar with the methodology, I began to see the vast array of possibilities it offered for conducting research. First and foremost, the focus is on the process rather than the final outcome. In other words, the design of the methodology and the quality of facilitation are what lend validity to the results. For me, this was a departure from how I used to work, where the outcome justified any process.

This approach to research has been immensely rewarding. Accustomed to the idea that the designer generates the results, it has been fascinating to witness how communities can arrive at complex outcomes by effectively dealing with contested topics. I have observed that projects based on the facilitation of Action Research processes, involving multiple participants with different perspectives, tend to be implemented more smoothly and with fewer obstacles. Furthermore, the community becomes more invested in the implementation of these projects because they were actively involved in the process.

Danilo and Miren:

How did you get to know about action research? And what exactly made you think it could be interesting for you?

Leon:

My advisor, Patricia Wilson, was the person who introduced me to the realm of Action Research. In a pre-doctoral interview I had with Patricia Wilson, I expressed my interest in generating collaborative projects in the field of urban planning. At that time, I had no idea which avenues could guide me in this endeavor. Patricia Wilson patiently listened to me, and at the end of our meeting, she recommended three papers, two of which directly addressed Action Research. Reading those papers felt like an organized response to everything that had been swirling in my mind. Paragraph by paragraph, it was as if my thoughts were aligning, and my curiosity about the topic was being nourished.

After witnessing failed urban-architectural projects due to the lack of community consent, after failing to understand how young people in an underprivileged community could destroy public infrastructure that could benefit them, I began to realize through the recommended readings and others that followed suit like a snowball effect that community projects must start bottom-up, not through imposition. I reflected on how often individuals with technical knowledge believe they have the solutions to social problems. Especially in architecture and urban planning, we tend to think that the solution always lies in tangible, visible projects. Action Research taught me that, while there may be a tangible component, the real project is about understanding communities. Moreover, it Is about empowering them to construct solutions to their problems using their own rhythms, resources, skills, and negotiation expertise.

If we know how to listen and facilitate a discussion, speaking only when we can add value, communities take ownership of the proposals and ensure their implementation.

Danilo and Miren:

When you participated in the IJAR 2020 symposium you came with Patricia Wilson. We guess she has been relevant in your decision to explore action research. What is her main influence in your trajectory? What other influences have been relevant?

Leon:

Patricia Wilson was not just my advisor; she was a tremendous mentor during my doctoral journey. Given that she had worked for a significant part of her career in Latin America and with Latino communities in the United States, she easily grasped the vulnerabilities and complexities of the context where my research was situated. This meant I always had close and precise guidance for what my research journey required at each stage. Her support extended beyond providing methodological support; she also helped strengthen my professional development. She frequently encouraged me to participate in conferences on Urban Planning, Latin America, and Action Research. Moreover, she generously invited me to assist in teaching and research roles, which allowed me to engage with advanced aspects of my own research from an early stage.

At the University of Texas in Austin, Action Research is not universally applied but rather an emphasis that students can choose when selecting their courses. This is where Bjorn Sletto, a mentor who guided my interests in urban planning, came into the picture. Simultaneously, Dr. Wilson helped me connect with Action Research scholars at conferences, and they became important guides in my own research process.

Danilo and Miren:

As we said in the introduction to this interview, you recently finished your PhD using action research. Could you give as an overview of your thesis? Why and how did you use action research?

Leon:

In simple terms, the hypothesis of my doctoral thesis is that urban planning can be improved by involving more stakeholders with non-technical approaches in the planning processes. In cities like Monterrey, as in many cities in Latin America and the Global South in general, there i's a strong reliance on a top-down approach in governance processes led by technocrats or specialists, including urban planning. However, this has led to significant epistemological challenges in neighborhoods that have experienced organic and unique growth, such as informal settlements.

My thesis narrates the research process aimed at finding common ground between formal planning conducted by professionals trained in municipal urban planning and planning processes carried out in a contested manner, based on the resources (of all kinds) available in informal settlements.

Since my research took place in an informal settlement, I turned to Action Research to generate a co-created outcome with the community and the formal sphere, which I was more familiar with due to my background as an urban planner in the city. Action Research helped me establish a deep connection with a portion of the community that continues to this day.

Danilo and Miren:

Let us follow that up. What are the main advantages and disadvantages of action research in a PhD? Would you encourage other PhD students to do action research in their dissertations? If so, are there special issues which they should consider?

Leon:
Action Research presents several challenges related to the lack of preparation for effective facilitation, particularly for those of us who have been educated within traditional learning systems. Action Research involves collaborative learning, which means it is not only important to communicate information effectively but also to unlearn preconceived notions and be open to new information, even when it conflicts with the norms of technocratic systems. Achieving authentic Action Research can be difficult because the educational system is designed to teach us how to produce and reproduce what already exists within systems recognize as legitimate by the mainstream sphere.

However, one of the primary advantages of this methodology is that it opens up a wide range of new possibilities. In a world characterized by deep divisions and significant polarization between those who think in one direction and those who think in the opposite direction, Action Research teaches us to build on points of agreement rather than deepening differences. It also encourages the discovery of new answers to age-old questions, and these answers always emerge from deep dialogue, understanding, and consensus.

I highly recommend using Action Research methodologies, especially when aiming to facilitate horizontal dialogue among stakeholders with opposing views. This methodology goes beyond criticism to transform reality effectively.

Danilo and Miren:
In this issue of IJAR you publish a paper based on your PhD action research experience, and you write about personal transformation. How has action research transformed you?

Leon:
Having been trained in a discipline that demands responses in the form of built space, such as architecture and urban design, stepping into a methodology like Action Research compelled me to set aside the pursuit of the creative genius and embrace the co-creation of participatory processes in constant evolution. Deliberately entering the world of Action Research is a transformative journey because it requires us to unlearn our conventional approaches to research.

Shifting from viewing the research subject as an "object" to seeing it as a "subject" fundamentally alters the way we engage with it on a horizontal level, and this shift undoubtedly impacts the outcomes. Ultimately, it is about recognizing that the process is the guiding axis of the project and having confidence that the results emerge as a consequence of it.

Danilo and Miren:
We know that, after your PhD, you now have a position at university. Could you tell us what you are doing now? Is there a place for action research in what you do? What is your experience with action research in university environments? As far as you know, how is action research accepted and/or valued in academic research?

Leon:
Since my return to Monterrey, I've resumed teaching at the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, specifically in the field of architecture. While I have been able to incorporate certain practices related to Action Research into undergraduate classes, there is still much to be

changed within the discipline of architecture itself to make these changes more tangible. However, where I have encountered significant resonance and interest in the topic of Action Research is in the graduate-level classes. In my urban inequalities course, there is a substantial emphasis on research methods based on Action Research. In Northern Mexico, Action Research is not commonly explored, so students perceive it as a novel and suitable method for addressing the profound social issues our region faces. Additionally, citizen participation has been on the rise in government contexts over the past five years, leading to discussions about inclusion in decision-making processes. As a result, I believe that Action Research will increasingly establish itself as an appropriate method in the near future.

Something that makes me think that new spaces will open up for the practice of Action Research in the field of architecture and urbanism is that recently my doctoral thesis was awarded at the Nuevo León Architecture Biennial in the Research and Dissemination category, which represents a significant incentive as well as a turning point in my career. Despite the fact that the thesis is critical of the way architects and urban planners work with communities, it was awarded by a jury mainly composed of architects and urban planners. This is generating a buzz in the discussion of traditional architectural and urban planning education that I hope can be leveraged in favor of techniques that involve non-traditional knowledge and wisdom. Recently, I started working as a teacher at the Tecnológico de Monterrey, where I am confident that there will be a fertile ground for more horizontal work with communities.

Danilo and Miren:
You are a young researcher with a long trajectory ahead in times of multifaceted crisis (economic, political, cultural, environmental, among others). Do you think action research has a special role to face these crises? How can action research become (more) relevant?

Leon:
I believe that, especially in times of growing political, economic, cultural, environmental, and social crises, an approach that comprehends and integrates a multisystemic perspective is particularly relevant. In environments where highly hierarchical decision-making is the norm, with technocratic thinking being valued above other forms of knowledge, it is important to be aware that many of the problems our society faces have been primarily created by those entrusted with decision-making.

Opting for an open approach that embraces differences is what needs to take the forefront to achieve results that value and integrate diverse forms of knowledge within a given context. While governments often emphasize the importance of multi and transdisciplinarity, the practical implementation of these concepts remains a challenge. I believe Action Research can fill this gap in public policies.

On the other hand, academics should advocate for and promote the advantages of this family of methodologies. We should also take on the responsibility of educating a new generation of scholars and practitioners who can incorporate these methodologies into their toolkit.

Danilo and Miren:
Let us talk about IJAR now. As we said, we met in a series of special sessions for PhD students that the editors of this journal organized in our IJAR 2020 symposium. What do you remember of those sessions?

Leon:

Participating in IJAR (International Journal of Action Research) was an introduction to a wealth of experiences and resources that allowed me to navigate and find answers to questions and uncertainties related to my own research. What stands out in my memory is our mentorship sessions during the IJAR conference, where we had the opportunity to hear from other researchers who were grappling with similar issues to those I was facing in my research. Hearing that other respected authors had gone through similar situations and, most importantly, learning how they overcame research challenges was a valuable learning process.

Additionally, establishing collaborative relationships with peers who shared similar interests and feeling like a part of an international network spanning various disciplines was highly significant.

Danilo and Miren:

We want to encourage young researchers to use action research in their PhDs and, coherently, we want to help them find opportunities to publish their research. How do you think journals like IJAR can help with this?

Leon:

Although Action Research has been around for over eight decades, it is still contested by those who have more faith in traditional research methods. For this reason, having dedicated spaces for publishing focused on Action Research methodologies is of paramount importance for researchers who are embracing this approach. This is crucial for two reasons:

Firstly, having spaces where editors, readers, and reviewers are well-versed in Action Research ensures a prejudice-free environment for submitting a paper. It provides a platform where your work can be evaluated based on the merits of the methodology and research quality.

Secondly, for young researchers, it can be challenging to find specialized articles and bibliographic sources where Action Research is the primary method employed. Knowing that there is a Journal that encompasses various perspectives and topics related to Action Research is incredibly valuable for those embarking on this path. It provides a valuable resource and a sense of community for researchers just starting their journey in this methodology.

Danilo and Miren:

To close the interview, we always ask interviewees what they see as the distinctive role of IJAR. Do you want to add anything to what you already said about our role to help PhD students?

Leon:

In one word: Mentors. The generosity, availability, and openness of IJAR stand out from any other association I have been a part of. The support provided to students underscores the association's genuine interest in nurturing new contributors who can make an impact in their respective domains. I believe that you have a crucial role in educating, connecting, and promoting Action Research.

Danilo and Miren:
Thanks very much, Leon, for the time you have dedicated to this interview and the readers of IJAR.

Action Research as Understood and Practiced by Olav Eikeland: An Appreciation

Davydd J. Greenwood

Re-publishing this essay by Olav Eikeland is an invitation, not to remember him and move on, but to engage or re-engage with his comprehensive critique of careless commonplaces often found in writing and practice in action research.

Olav′s combination of world-class philosophical expertise with particular emphasis on Aristotle, combined with his decades of practice in action research in multiple organizations, and his extensive critical corpus aimed at both setting higher conceptual standards for action research was motivated by his lifelong aims for action research: "Mainstreaming action research needs more and more adequate distinctions. What I have presented, are some suggestions to think through."

Olav′s vision of action research is, as it should be, demanding and it is easy to shy away from his emphasis on making clear conceptual distinctions, anchoring them in competent histories of ideas and practices, and banishing loose commonplaces about action research and change. By mainstreaming action research, he meant achieving both intellectual and practical clarity, leaving commonplaces aside, and engaging action research as the central practice of a genuine "social science". This ambitious agenda was central to his entire corpus and is, in fact, as any good set of philosophical and practical critiques, quite challenging to current action research practice, including my own.

Among other things, this means an encounter with Olav′s work requires willingness to engage complex conceptual distinctions, critique and self-critique of many current action research practices, and using his writing to strengthen our own work and that of action research in general.

From personal experience I can say that many of the things I have written about action research would have been better and more thoughtful had I encountered Olav′s work earlier. For example, my over-reliance on a Baconian justification for action research, as will be seen in his essay, was far too simple to carry the weight I put on it. But, as Olav and I shared a commitment to the development of action research, I took this as a way of improving my work. Most of us will find multiple stimuli to improve our concepts and practices in his extensive body of work. (see his extensive entries in ResearchGate and Academia.edu where many of his essays are available for download (https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Olav-Eikeland and https://independent.academia.edu/EikelandO).

Robert Redfield, a famous mid-twentieth century anthropologist and Dean of the Social Sciences at the University of Chicago is reputed to have said "Anthropology does not solve problems. It merely abandons them." This is a risk with the work of Olav Eikeland but it is a risk we cannot afford to take. In the face of the global climate crisis, massive global and national inequality, a continuing migration and refugee crisis, declining health indicators in

various wealthy countries, and more, we need more and better action research. We cannot afford to ignore Olav′s call to deepen and broaden our work. Few legacies offer us so much wise counsel going forward.

From the following article, I call particular attention to these lines:

> *Action research itself challenges most taken-for-granted prejudices concerning both research and learning/ teaching. Novices in action research tend to start thinking uncritically from such prejudices unexamined, however, as do other conventionalists not prone to critical reflection "outside given frames".*

> *I do not agree that action research necessarily must change whatever is studied, neither to deserve the title "action research" nor to produce interesting and important learning and knowledge.*

> *I have used most of my career and energy on doing action research, and on trying to understand the relationships between theory and practice or theory and experience, not only in action research but more generally in understanding and researching human beings, culture, and society (cf. Eikeland 1997; 2008).*

> *What does this mean, then? Apparently, these are arguments strongly in favour of involvement and participation in the practices studied. There are no arguments for abstention or disengagement of a modern kind in Aristotle, neither concerning the study of nature nor the study of human beings. On the other hand, there are clear arguments against intervention and against reducing ethics and politics, including organisational studies, to a tekhnê or craft as depicted by Francis Bacon.*

> *Mainstreaming action research needs more and more adequate distinctions. What I have presented, are some suggestions to think through.*

Read on and accept Olav Eikeland′s constructive challenges. We will all be the better for doing this.

Why Should Mainstream Social Researchers Be Interested in Action Research?[1]

Olav Eikeland

Abstract: The essay tries to argue why conventional researchers are obliged as researchers to be interested in certain forms of action research. The 60 years of ignorance have been illegitimate. The essay starts by listing two commonly encountered arguments paraphrasing Karl Marx and Francis Bacon via Kurt Lewin. It tries to show why a certain simplified reading of Marx cannot provide the necessary arguments. It then presents different variants of action research in order to single out approaches that according to this author require attention from mainstream social researchers. The action research approach emerging as central, by demonstrating its presence and effectiveness within mainstream research as well, is immanent critique. The method of research methodology is immanent critique. Immanent critique has to be demystified, however. When it is brought down to earth, immanent critique is really the kind of dialogical and experiential learning approach associated with apprenticeship learning and with organisational learning. This conclusion, making self-reflective practitioner-research the "hard-core" of action research, even internal to mainstream research, also requires a revision of the experimentalist-as-interventionist credo of action research.

Keywords: action research, counter-public spheres, immanent critique, method of methodology, practitioner research, research methods

The purpose of this essay is to answer one question: Why should conventional social researchers be interested in action research? My general background for trying to provide an answer is 1) being a philosopher with a special interest in the relations of ancient Greek philosophy of dialogue to modern social research and action research (cf. e. g. Eikeland 2007a, 2007b), and 2) having worked practically as an action researcher in projects in Norwegian work life, mostly municipalities, almost continuously since the mid-1980 s, and with similar projects for several years before that.

There are many reasons why conventional social researchers *should* be interested in action research, but only limited space is available here. Hence, I will try to focus on my arguments searching for reasons, writing as if reasoning actually *could* direct the interests of anyone. Trying to let the arguments speak for themselves, references will be kept to an absolute minimum in what follows[2]. As another consequence of the space limitations, none of the arguments can be elaborated extensively, of course. They will all have to be in outline, only.

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2 Further arguments and references to other authors and research literature indicating what I try to argue here are to be found in e. g. Eikeland (1985, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d, 2007a, 2007b). Interested readers will also find my reasons for thinking that answers to almost all the challenges raised in this text can be developed by taking seriously into account the more than 2000 years old works of Aristotle, among many others, of course.

But there are many different variants of action research as well, requiring some kind of selection. All of them are not equally defensible, neither to the same degree nor in the same ways. Conventional social researchers are hardly obliged to show an equal interest in all forms. But I think they are obliged in relation to some, that is, if they take their own research business seriously. In a way, I will be experimenting my way ahead openly and argumentatively in what follows, having a kind of textual dialogue with myself and with the reader. I will try to select, by way of gradual elimination, what I think are the most promising action research approaches to defend. In real life, many of the approaches are combined, of course. But this makes it even more important to keep them analytically apart when arguing.

On the way through this text, then, many secondary and subsidiary arguments supporting some forms of action research will be examined and passed by, which I am sure will weigh heavily for some. But such arguments are not the *main* reasons why conventional researchers should be interested in action research. I consider them subsidiary arguments because they appeal to researchers *qua* human beings, *qua* socially or politically responsible individuals, *qua* commercially interested actors, etc. but not *qua* researchers. This means, in other words, that subsidiary arguments appeal to all human beings, all socially and politically responsible individuals, etc. but not to researchers in particular. But secondary and subsidiary arguments still carry considerable weight. I will end up with what I think are some quite strong reasons, seen from the perspective of research in general, for some quite promising variants of action research.

Two arguments

The starting point for raising the question to be answered at all is the fact that action research has been carried on by dedicated researcher-practitioners at least since the 1940 s. During the same period of time, and in spite of its origin in "hardcore" social science, action research has been almost completely ignored and neglected by what might be called "mainstream" currents of social research. It still is. But the challenge in this essay is not to explain why 60 years have passed by in this way. It is to provide arguments justifying why this situation should not be allowed to continue. So, why should mainstream social researchers be interested in action research?

Let me start by saying generally and imprecisely that action research is research, somehow concerned with practice and with some kind of social and personal change. Why should mainstream researchers be interested in anything like that? One argument often encountered sounds somewhat like this: (I) Mainstream researchers should be interested because they ought to change the world, instead of just interpreting or explaining it, like Karl Marx pointed out in his famous Feuerbach theses.

A second argument often found is (II) that researchers should be interested because we simply have to change things in order to understand them, as Francis Bacon argued in promoting experimentalism in natural science 400 years ago, and action researchers often quote Kurt Lewin for paraphrasing. Personally, I think the second argument (II) provides the best starting point for a discussion. It strikes researchers more in particular, while the first one (I) strikes everyone equally.

Don't just interpret the world, change it!

But the first argument (I) still needs to be dismissed properly as part of my justification strategy here. So, let me state the following before leaving it behind: The first argument uses Marx in a somewhat moralistic tapping. It really tells people to drop whatever they're doing and go do something else instead. But why should anyone go do something else, e. g. change things? Of course, with the earth's climate altering dramatically, there are mandatory arguments urging us all to make changes if we want to survive. Global climate changes actually challenge us *qua* biological beings. Also, in large parts of the world, social and economic injustice is so grave and intolerable it seems to demand some change efforts from us *qua* human beings. *Qua* biological beings or *qua* human beings with a moral conscience, researchers should use their expertise in order to contribute to the solution of challenges like these. Indeed, *everyone* should use whatever expertise they dispose of in order to solve challenges like these. But are any dramatic challenges like these facing mainstream researchers *qua* researchers, requiring them to change not only the extrinsic purposes, for which research is done, but the very way they do research?

Basically, the first argument says nothing in particular to researchers e. g. about changing research methods, i. e. about doing what they do in different ways. At best it tells researchers to do what they do but for different purposes; in order to serve other causes. But *qua* researchers, mainstream researchers are normally not into changing things, neither external nor internal to their research activity. Their job *is* to describe, analyse, interpret, explain, and understand. Should researchers simply stop doing that, but still continue to call themselves "researchers"? Hardly! According to conventional wisdom, their ways of doing research do not imply changing things. According to conventional wisdom, the opposite is required in order to eliminate biased and illegitimate researcher influences on their "findings", i. e. in order to secure general validity. If action research is merely a method for creating change, mainstreamers might ask in return why anyone should call an activity like that "research" at all. The question under discussion is: What arguments will convince mainstream researchers *qua* researchers about the merits of action research? Shaking moralistic fingers at them will probably not do it.

Unqualified, then, the first argument tends to confirm prevalent prejudices among mainstream researchers against action research. Some of the caricatures and prejudices against action research are that it is sloppy research, politically prejudiced research, anti-theoretical or theoretically uninformed research, just short-sighted problem solving and hardly research at all, mere "activism" and "moralism" using insufficient methods, etc. Allegations like these may, of course, be true against some action-researchers. They are undoubtedly pertinent against some other kinds of researchers too. But a serious discussion about action research (and any other kinds) needs to elevate itself above merely discussing poor or good performers singularly. Poor performance by one or another practitioner does not necessarily indicate that poor general standards of measurement are involved just as a novice or amateur performance of a violin concerto does not prove that the concerto itself is no good. Insufficient performance does not necessarily indicate that these poor performers are pursuing the wrong ends.

But the question to be answered is *not:* Why should mainstream researchers be interested in any one (or more) action researcher(s) in particular? The question concerns action research as such, if any "as such" of action research can be distilled. Also, in order to understand and evaluate either good or bad performance in the singular we need to understand what general

standards of excellence or performance and what basic principles are involved and at stake in the singular cases. We need to understand what the performers are trying to achieve. If any one in particular is interesting, it is because s/he is doing something of general interest, i. e. relevant for what others are doing. Hence, the question would be: How is action or changing things relevant not only as a subject of extraneous study, but for the performance of the practice of research itself?

But, furthermore, are there general reasons for suspecting an action research mainly interested in changing things of sloppy research? Unfortunately, I think there are. If the research efforts are actually *subordinated* to the change efforts, the implications are that we should or could only do research to the extent, as exactly as, and as well as necessary for our practical purposes. Working under the exigencies of getting certain things done within certain time limits, we do not need to and hardly ever have the opportunity to do as much research as possible as well as possible in order to delve deeper into the studied subject. For practical purposes, reaching the practical aims set within certain time limits is decisive, and (at best) we take what knowledge we need from wherever it is available to us. For practical purposes, promoting a particular change and acting under time pressure and other exigencies, a part of the truth or some approximate truth often has to suffice. In addition, a lot of different means, apparently having nothing at all to do with truth or knowledge, may be quite expedient for creating all sorts of social changes, of course. Of course, for most practical purposes, the *best* would be to have the necessary knowledge already, i. e. that no extra research was necessary. As perfected professional practitioners, we could then concentrate on performance, applying practically and in the best possible way, the knowledge and competence we already have.

But it would be rather naïve to think that having research as such – i. e. for the sake of theory, understanding the studied subject increasingly better – as an independent and superior aim, could not easily come into conflict with practical aims like this. In a way, it is elementary research ethics that it could and easily will. There are common precautions circulating to prevent it. I would be quite surprised if many action researchers have not experienced situations like I have, where they would have liked to pursue better knowledge and understanding but were prevented because of the "practical requirements" of the project(s) they're in.

Unfortunately for the first argument (I), I think history also has shown many times how settings like these result in half-hearted research, and a halfhearted commitment to truth and knowledge in order to promote (or restrain) social or personal change sufficiently whole-heartedly. I continue to presume that the primary interest of researchers is to do research whole-heartedly even if and when it might be critical of certain practical change (or restraint) efforts. So, once more, if what we primarily want to do is to promote (or restrain) changes in the world in directions pre-specified by ideology, theory, tradition, or whatever, why not drop the somewhat pretentious research bit and concentrate on action? In most countries, there are still many legitimate ways of doing this openly and politically, democratically (or privately, for that matter). Where there aren't, the arguments take us outside what can be pursued in this essay.

Of course, the real insufficiency of the first argument (I) is that the challenge hardly allows an either (action) – or (research) solution. The meaning, even of Marx, is hardly: Change the world (in whatever way) *instead of* interpreting and explaining it! Neither could it be simply: *Stop* interpreting and explaining the world! Not only researchers but all of us inevitably interpret and explain the world somehow. Hence, the questions to everyone have to

be: *How* do we interpret the world, *how* do we know our interpretation or explanation is any good, and what has changing the world got to do with that? In deed, if our understanding isn't any good, how could we possibly act appropriately in order to achieve the wanted changes? With an erroneous or insufficient interpretation and explanation we will probably end up with results quite different from (and actually subversive of) those we started out with wanting (and with many casualties on the way). I believe the experiences from a number of socio-political revolutions, small and big, bear witness to this. Of course, this also shows why good practitioners need adequate knowledge. The question is, then: how can they get that?

But then again, maybe action research should be construed as the *application* of existing research results – theories and data – in order to promote e. g. development, democracy, and social justice? Maybe so, provided that extant knowledge is sufficient and adequate, but will this convince mainstream researchers? They're into *doing* research, not into applying its results. Is the mere application of theories and research-results the same as doing research? Hardly! Making action research into the mere application of existing knowledge may easily just confirm the existing division of labour between knowledge producers and knowledge appliers. In a way, this answer begs the whole question since it raises new questions about how the applied knowledge is produced, tested, and validated. As I return to below, the division of labour between knowledge producers and appliers is part of the problem but hardly of the solution.

But assuming, for the argument's sake, that existing knowledge (theories and data), or knowledge produced by conventional research methods, is all we need. We have the knowledge. All we need is to apply it. One of the challenges is that the knowledge is produced and provided by people different from those supposed to use or apply it. This produces transaction costs of interpretation and misunderstandings at every joint. Currently, attempts at making research knowledge relevant as "actionable" or "workable" are high on the agenda, but quite often without asking questions about what *kind* of knowledge is attempted conveyed, i. e. without asking any questions about *how*, by *whom* and for *what* the knowledge is *generated* in the first place; about the relationship between application, mediation, learning, research, and knowledge generation in general. But this is decisive. All kinds of existing knowledge generated in any ways whatsoever, are neither available, nor applicable, nor actionable in the same way or to the same degree by just anyone.

But the quality of the application-answer also depends, of course, on *how* existing knowledge is applied. The application could be done 1) *technically*, treating people as objects to be manipulated. It could be done 2) *didactically*, treating people as "containers" of verbalised knowledge or as listening students supposed to apply their thus acquired learning for themselves. Or, it could be done 3) *deliberatively*, through some form of conversation or dialogue, trying to convey and adjust insights from conventional research, philosophy, or whatever, to practitioners and to practical problem solution, searching together deliberatively for the best action alternatives. It could also be done 4) *manipulatively* of course, persuading or seducing people into "buying" solutions offered by research. To the extent that application is part of their business at all, most action researchers would undoubtedly subscribe explicitly to the third way no matter what their tacit practices were. It adjusts better to where practitioners are, taking that as its starting point.

Many of the activities called action research are clearly conceived as collaborative efforts where researchers and practitioners cooperate in practical efforts to change and develop organisations or communities, bringing in their different perspectives and background

knowledge to complement each other mutually. The researchers do not necessarily do research within this kind of collaboration, however. Frequently, they work as advisors or consultants based on their mostly theoretical, pre-existing knowledge. Engineers, shop stewards, directors, board members, and researchers could all meet as peer participants in project work contributing their share to the project. But none of these collaborators necessarily perform *as* engineers, *as* shop stewards, *as* directors, *as* researchers, etc. during their project work. Doing this and that kind of specialist work is where each one comes from, and from whence his or her practical advice springs. It is also what s/he returns to after and outside the collaborative project work.

For many working with participatory methods in development and change, this is an end in itself, as a way of broadening democratic practices. But although participation and democracy are important ends, mere participation or democratic procedures cannot guarantee the quality of the knowledge produced, nor can it guarantee the quality of the participation itself. In general, development projects often have practical ends, making knowledge generation and the quality of such generative processes into a secondary and subordinated concern. For conventional researchers who still want to actually do research, not consultancy, teaching, therapy, democracy promotion, or something else, this is hardly convincing.

Various ways of doing action research

But still, many questions remain: How was the applied or conveyed knowledge produced and tested in the first place? What *kind* of knowledge is applied? General rules or statements taken from textbooks? Competence acquired through practical experience? A little of both this and that? How is practical and experiential knowledge and competence developed? Most action researchers would *not* agree that they simply apply theories and data produced by *other kinds* of research. In addition, hardly any action researchers would admit that they are simply applying already *existing* research results. So, if knowledge and competence is applied at all, where does it come from? How has it been validated? If pre-existing knowledge is not simply applied, how, when, and where is necessary and relevant knowledge produced?

What kind of knowledge and competence are we talking about?

Change efforts are at least sometimes open ended or oriented towards vaguely formulated ends or "visions". They are not always pre-specified, aiming for given ends, simply following predefined precepts and patterns, implementing recipes. In the production of advanced technical solutions, this may be the only way to attain anything, of course. But, in deed, social and personal changes rarely proceed or achieve anything like this, even if they were planned that way. Social and personal change and development is not algorithmic, nor can they rely on unambiguous connections between efficient causes and effects. Far from everything involved in changing social relations or organisations can be fully known in advance. Local conditions and individual starting points vary. They require adjustments. More open-ended change projects also require different approaches from merely promoting ideologically or theoretically defined changes. It means, of course, that new knowledge of some kind must somehow be produced as part of the change effort itself and actually be used formatively to develop the project and its aims as well. Knowledge generation and application would then have to be

included as a running concern within the change effort itself. If local conditions serve as the starting point for improvements and adjustments, as they necessarily must, knowledge generation and change efforts have to be integrated.

Providing the lacking knowledge or supplementing insufficient knowledge could reasonably be called action learning or research. Of course, since the mid-1960 s, with the decline of the first wave of action research from the 1940 s and 1950 s, similar efforts have often been labelled "evaluation research" as well. But introducing such integrated and open-ended change*cum*-research as iterative and formative cycles of knowledge generation into development projects – as cycles of action research or action learning – is probably what most existing action researchers would agree on in principle as identifying their work. So, *how* do action researchers produce, test, and validate knowledge?

On this question, the really existing action research approaches and researchers differ much. As far as I can see, the divisions in the following table capture the most important differences. For reasons of space and in order to avoid discussing singular approaches, I will not fill in the numbered blank squares.

Table 1

	C. Applying conventional research techniques	D. Radical self-reflection
A. Collaborative action research	1	2
B. Practitioner action research	3	4

Many confessed action researchers in category A define action research as an essentially collaborative effort between a) professional researchers located at specialised academic research and educational institutions and b) practitioners (non-researching or co-researching) in different parts of work life. Others, in category B, think of action research primarily as the practitioners doing the research themselves. Within both of these categories (A and B) there are many (C) who think of action research primarily as the application of conventional research techniques like gathering and analysing the results from i) posing questions in different ways, from ii) observing in different ways, or from iii) experimenting. Others (D) within both categories (A and B) think of action research as basically something different or something more than applying conventional research techniques, i. e. as some form of radical self-reflection.

Collaboration between researchers and practitioners in category A may attract researchers for many reasons, of course, not the least pecuniary. In the current social climate where international competition is apparently forcing politicians everywhere to become increasingly business oriented and overtly utilitarian, more public money is channelled to finance research that seems useful for business innovation and commercialisation, less to free and independent research. But money is very persuasive, independently from personal convictions and from any intrinsic qualities of the money-conveyors. So is power and force, of course. If persuasive arguments like these count, then, this will certainly persuade many conventional researchers into something that could somehow pass as action research. But they are probably persuaded because of the money, the influence, and the personal opportunities they open up, not because of any intrinsic research qualities of action research. People mainly persuaded by money and

similar media will of course accept or discard anything depending on its money-generating qualities. Within commissioned research, the persuasiveness of means like these is becoming great due to increased and enforced market exposure among other things. If something called action research is in demand by money and power, it will attract people. If conventional research is in demand, so will it. Hence, this – might we call it research "opportunism" – is hardly an argument for action research as such. It is an argument for anything in demand by people able to demand.

The question is whether research approaches combining A-C or B-C in the table will convince conventional researchers. The A-C combination is the mentioned collaborative approach between established research institutions and "non- or co-research" practitioners in work life. The B-C combination also implies something already happening. This is the current transfer of conventional research competence and activity from protected and insulated research "academies" to "normal" work life organisations. In our late modern, ICT-dominated era, normal work places and normal jobs increasingly include the application of research methods more or less advanced and more or less professionally applied (using statistics, interviews, laboratory testing, field work, etc.). This social transfer and redistribution of research competence and practices challenges the institutionalised social division of labour between producers and appliers of knowledge, of course.

Although both of these (A-C / B-C) too may be called applied research, this is a different application from the one mentioned above. There, it concerned the application of existing theories and research results used as a general background for collaborating on a par with others in practical projects, i.e. without necessarily doing research in the projects. Here, it concerns specific research *methods* used to serve objectives set by others in collaboration or by the practitioners themselves. For researchers who want to use their methodological research expertise in order to promote certain commercial, ethical, or political ends, I am sure the A-C combination will be attractive as long as the researchers are given specific research tasks within a collaborative project. But this is still something motivated by relations external to the research activity itself. Hardly anything needs to change regarding research methods. Researchers only have to use their identical methods for slightly different purposes, serving some business project or some political cause or movement as servants of power, as servants of the people, or in some other servant position. Anyhow, research is subservient.

Within scenarios like these, opportunities will obviously also come up for researchers to work as teachers or tutors for practitioners who want to increase their proficiency in conventional research methods. Many historical variants of action research have certainly worked within an applied horizon like this, not unreasonably ascribed to Max Weber as its originator. But since it merely applies conventional research methods, the term "action research" may seem superfluous and even confusing. For many researchers, whose main wish is to do research, doing research in the conventional way within well established research institutions will be more attractive, if the preconditions for doing it well are provided. Doing research well is the clue, and the A-D / B-D combinations in the table remain to be discussed.

Improving research methods

Basically, the kind of arguments that will really convince conventional researchers mainly interested in doing research of the merits of action research must be research-intrinsic arguments that concern the quality of their research activity as such. For intrinsically motivated researchers, research intrinsic arguments bite the most. All researchers are not obliged, *qua* researchers, to let their research serve specific external causes. They may be *qua* human beings, perhaps, but not *qua* researchers. But in a way, *all* researchers are professionally obliged to heed research intrinsic arguments, unless they want to be charged with doing "sloppy research". Researchers have to do research in the best possible ways available, adjusted to the subjects studied in the best possible way, studying real challenges at some frontier of knowledge. Whenever research is subordinated to some other purpose, this is threatened. "I'm only in it for the money", or, "I'm only doing this because it serves this or that political cause", is hardly a convincing research justification. Demanding whole-hearted, top-quality research from researchers *qua* researchers is both reasonable and necessary (if politicians provide the preconditions). Hence, in a way, such arguments are the only ones that *ought* to convince researchers if our general confidence in research is to be preserved. But does anything reminiscent of action research have any such arguments in its favour? I think it does.

Arguments about using all kinds of research techniques in order to promote all sorts of good ethical, political, or commercial causes may, of course, mobilise many researchers. Probably they will not only receive but actually deserve true praise for taking social and economic responsibility too. But such arguments will not mobilise them for research-intrinsic reasons. Such research *use* could easily be incorporated into mainstream activities simply as ways of applying the existing research resources. They hardly need a controversial term like "action research" in order to do that.

As indicated already, the A-D and B-D combinations in the table have not been discussed yet. In a sense, they presuppose that there are some important forms of knowledge generating activity still not integrated into normal research procedures. Seen from the perspective of conventional research, people in both the D categories seem to be doing something "completely different". But are not all social research activities just various ways of observing, questioning, or experimenting – including reading, thinking, etc. already implied in observing, etc? I think the best way to illustrate is by showing how such non-integrated but still essential activities are internal, like a Trojan horse, to normal ways of doing research "in spite of themselves".

Normal research methodology recommends variants and combinations of the approaches just mentioned for empirical research. But there is an important field not covered by these: the methods of methodology itself. Methodology as a discipline is not primarily based on questioning, observing, or experimenting on other researchers in any conventional senses. Anyone trying to base methodology on things like this would, of course, have to learn to do research properly *first*, since these are research methods. But from whom, if we need to *know* how before *learning* how? They say methodology is normative. And so it is, but I would claim it is still empirical.

Making a long story short, my contention is that, basically, methodology is built on the self-reflections of the research community, founded on the community members' long-term,

practically acquired experience from doing research, i. e. as research practitioners. Over time, this practical selfconsciousness is produced by an enduring learning process that gives identity to the research profession. Methodology, then, is knowledge developed "inside-out", "bottom-up" by practitioners within a certain community of practice by sifting and sorting similarities and differences in their own acquired *habitus* and experience. Methodological knowledge is "actionable", practical knowledge produced as such by practitioners, not "translated" or conveyed back to practitioners after having first been produced by spectators, visitors, or manipulators as non-actionable knowledge. Any "translation" within the community of practitioners is between peers alternating as masters and apprentices whose practice is either closer to or further away from common standards of reference in "perfect" performance. The saying that those wearing the shoes know best where they squeeze and gnaw becomes even truer through procedures like these. Simultaneously, this method of methodology is not subordinating research to any practice. It is putting the research practice at the very centre of attention and at the very centre of every practice.

Strangely enough, although clearly empirical (if empirical still has anything at all to do with its roots in experience), this is not normally included among the recommended empirical methods of mainstream empirical research. This strangeness is increased by the fact that methodology is not an incidental or peripheral discipline. It is actually what gives public legitimacy to the whole business of professional research. But still, this crucially important and powerful discipline is not recommended for other professions who are required to make their professional practices so-called "research-based" in order to increase their legitimacy. Research is a practice among other practices. But the profession of the social research practitioners is hardly research based in the required sense. Hence, the question is: Why cannot other professions do as the research professions; justify their professionalism through systematic and collective self-reflection based on native or practitioner experience and analysis?

Implicitly or explicitly, this is the question raised by the A-D and B-D combinations in the table above. At least, this kind of self-reflective activity is what characterizes these approaches. There is something crucial not included in the methods of normal empirical research, then. This kind of selfreflection is missing. And this, I claim, is also the "hard core" of action research. The methods of mainstream research methodology are action research methods as good as any. As long as mainstreamers and action researchers of these kinds do not realize that they have the methods of methodology in common, the A-D and B-D combination appear to be "cut off" from the normal business of empirical research, i. e. from the externally recommended methods of empirical research. They're apparently simply not doing the same sort of things, and action research appears to be out of touch with ordinary research. But this is hardly true.

The method of methodology is hardly "cut off" or "out of touch" in this sense, although what it does is quite different from ordinary empirical research. But it coincides with action research. The method of methodology – i. e. hard core action research – is the heart and brain of all research. Action research of the B-D combination is developing the methods of research methodology from within the methodologies of other professions or activities, that's all. They're doing what the research profession has been doing for themselves all along: analysing their own activity experientially and as natives from within in order to improve it, i. e. practical, actionable knowledge produced directly from practice by practitioners.

Taken comprehensively over time the discipline of methodology has even been doing it "paradigmatically" or in exemplary ways from which all action researchers could and should even learn. To the extent that specialised action researchers of the A-D combination are doing similar things, they either work openly as facilitators in the self-reflective processes of others, or they are refining their so-called "intervention methods" more clandestinely through internal self-reflection in narrower circles for their own benefit or for that of novices in their profession. But the most essential and "hard core" part of action research is not based on intervention by outsiders into the lives and practices of others. Intervention cannot rid itself of a manipulative taint. Hard core action research is not intervention but collective self-reflection. Anyhow and ultimately, then, the action research in both the D categories is both totally different and cut off from mainstream research, and still, at heart, common and exactly the same. Mainstreamers are not always as meticulous as they should be in their own discipline of methodology, however, to say nothing about their accuracy in the *methods* of methodology.

Inherent mainstream insufficiencies

In general, the approaches mentioned – observing, questioning, experimenting – are recommended as empirical by the discipline of research methodology. But most conventional social research within major disciplines like sociology, political science, and anthropology no longer really count the experiment within their methodological repertoire (if they ever did?). Some psychologists still do. But the disciplines mentioned mostly stick to questions and observations as empirical methods. But are these methods the best available? The necessary self-reflection presupposed even by mainstream research – the method of methodology – indicates they may not be. Also, this is where a consideration of the second argument (II) supporting action research above, becomes particularly relevant.

At least since Francis Bacon, 400 years ago, experimentation has generally been seen as the most basic and reliable method of research. Bacon's famous idols (*idola tribus, idola specus, idola fori, idola theatri*) were invalidating distortions bothering mere receptive and inactive observation from afar through the senses in particular. Bacon knew quite well that everything taken in perceptually through the senses is thoroughly interpreted and saturated by particular prejudiced perspectives – the idols – a condition generalised today into a kind of post-modernistic stalemated absolution and simultaneous suspension of all perspectives indifferently.

If we distinguish in the conventional way between 1) what we use in order to explain and interpret "something" as the *explanans* or *interpretans*, from 2) the "something" itself in need of explanation or interpretation as the *explanandum* or *interpretandum*, the 1) *explanans* or *interpretans* always has to be something we already understand. Since we don't understand the *explanandum* itself, we make sense of it by seeing it as if it was similar to something we already understand. This goes for observations, and for the answers to questions posed, as well. We necessarily explain and interpret, i.e. understand at all, by means of whatever knowledge and understanding we already have. The opposite would be absurd, i.e. explaining something obscure by something even more obscure, although this has been common for

centuries, receiving its designation – *obscurum per obscurius* – by the medieval scholastics referring to a passage in Aristotle's *Physics* warning about this possibility. For some, the necessities of explanation seem to make the universe thoroughly metaphorical. Everything seems to be understood by means of something else transferred, ending up in an endless regression.

But quite basically, our understanding of any explanation or interpretation is ultimately referred back to and founded in our acquired and accumulated experience (*Erfahrung* not *Erlebnis*). This experience is not simply something else transferred from somewhere else. It is basically formed and generated over a certain time and somewhere specifically, repeating things over and over. This does not produce another *explanandum* needing explanation. It produces new basic understanding, i.e. a new *explanans* that can be used to understand or interpret new observations. Hence, equally basically, experimenting with nature, or more generally with whatever subject is studied, deliberately intervening and changing it in controllable ways, was and is an attempt at moving beyond the "idolatry" of arbitrary spectator interpretations by non-participants from afar. Experimentation – trying things out again and again – is gaining new experience first-hand with whatever our knowledge, interpretation, or explanation is about.

The insufficiencies of conventional social research methods – mainly variants of questions and observations – are also indicated more specifically by a number of objections well-known within methodology and the philosophy of science. I will mention some without delving deeply into them. There are two sets of arguments, one concerning the quality of data or relevant experience, another one concerning the quality of explanations or interpretations.

General data insufficiencies and weaknesses

It is a fact well-known and often repeated in post-positivism that data collected depend on theories in at least two different ways. Such theories do not have to be explicitly formulated, of course. More often, they are implicit basic assumptions. Data collections are selections of data. What are considered relevant data to collect depends on some implicit or explicit theory about relevance. Explaining or interpreting social conduct, most social researchers ignore the positions of the planets and stars as irrelevant data. For astrologers these are the most relevant data, however. The point here is not who is right. The point is that their theories of relevance differ widely.

But the selection of data is not only theory dependent. The data are also theory-impregnated or saturated. Sticking to the examples mentioned, hardly anyone considers stars and planets holy or divine in any sense anymore. 2000 year ago, many even among the most educated, definitely did. They were not stupid. Many of these understood logic and basic principles of knowledge much better than most modern social researchers. Generally, the point about the thoroughly interpreted nature of all observations is emphasized. All observations are interpreted relatively to what we as interpreters bring along. There is no rock bottom made of un-interpreted data the way the logical positivists presupposed. Data are not given. The question is *how* we interpret and how some interpretations may be said to be more

adequate than others. Merely "unbiased" sense-perception from any distant position is insufficient, and so are interpretive positions arbitrarily chosen, of course.

Another difficulty bothering conventional data collection is the reactivity of the collection procedures themselves. Not only are data "non-given" and thoroughly interpreted, i. e. hardly data at all. The way they are collected is a socially defined activity in itself. Different social contexts influence people in different ways. There are hardly any "neutral" contexts, since eliminating everything social is impossible and at least not at all neutral. The very consciousness that something called data-collection is going on will, of course, influence those involved, either as collectors or as providers. But what is sought for are not data influenced and contaminated by the abnormal activity of data-collection. The researchers want to know how things are when they are *not* present and influencing, i. e. "naturally" or normally. Different selfobliterating ways of eliminating research effects have been suggested, like "unobtrusive measures", etc. But conventional research stumbles in its own feet, since it is literally standing in its own way. Since researchers are hard to eliminate from the research processes, different ways of utilising the interactive effects as relevant information instead of trying to eliminate them have been suggested. Since these involve self-reflection, they move conventional research closer to hard-core action research as this was depicted above.

Finally, concerning data and the realities studied by social research, there is the challenge of what might be called indicator-research. The trouble is that hardly anything studied by social research can be observed perceptually the way e. g. stars, rocks, plants, and animals can. Neither "a state", "an organisation", "the soul", nor "power", etc. can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched. Instead, we have to agree on what is to count as signs indicating activities of the state, organisation, soul, or power. The emergent current orthodoxy sees this as indicating how almost everything is constructed and "unreal". That organisations, states, etc. are unreal is, of course, totally absurd for practitioners who have to observe the rules and regulations of these very real powers *practically*, every minute of their lives. For researching but non-participating observers or visitors these things may seem unreal, although they observe practically other rules and regulations that seem equally invisible and quite incomprehensible for those visited or observed. The point is, of course, not that any of this is unreal but that you have to participate fully as a native in order to experience their reality. "Going native" is not a distortion, it is a precondition. If you really are a "native" employee in a specific company or public bureaucracy the things you do and how you have to do them are as real and influential as the rules of research are for those insiders "native" to the research processes who really try to do research. In either case the basic rule is: Drop the rules and you are out of the game. *You* become unreal.

Problems of explanations and interpretations

In addition to problems like those above concerning data or experience, there are problems concerning explanations and interpretations. I will mention a few. The first may be called the challenge of theory pluralism. For the last 2000 years this has been known as the explanatory principle of "saving the phenomena". For ancient astronomers saving the phenomena was what mattered by means of any logically consistent model able to predict the movements of

the light spots on the heavens. Theory realism was out before Gallileo. Theory instrumentalism was in. Inspired by Akiro Kurosawa, it has entered social anthropology as the Rashomon syndrome: The same phenomenon can be described and interpreted in totally different ways. It is really the challenge of Bacons idols. Any given set of data can be explained in logically valid ways by an unlimited number of true and false premises, i. e. theories, if you like. In logic, it is well known that true conclusions – e. g. true descriptions – can follow from utterly false premises. If all "fishes" are warmblooded (false premise), and all whales are "fishes" (false premise), it follows logically that all whales are warm-blooded (true conclusion). Exchange fishes with Xs, and you have your logical proof of theory pluralism. Any X will explain that whales are warm-blooded, and any Y will explain anything, provided the right changes are made in the model.

So-called "abduction" has been suggested as a solution for developing good explanations, inspired by Charles S. Peirce. But abduction works by means of confirming the consequent in logical inferences, i. e. by confirming observables like "all whales are warm-blooded" or "the sun always rises in the east and sets in the west". But confirming consequents like these says absolutely nothing about what the antecedents look like, i. e. it says nothing about whether e. g. geocentric or heliocentric theories are best for explaining the observed movements of the sun. In addition, it says absolutely nothing about whether the sun is divine or not, etc. Theories are radically underdetermined by the data has been another way of putting it by W. v. O. Quine. There are other similar challenges, impossible to delve into here, confronting all models of explanation and interpretation based on a radical separation between the knowers and the known.

Experimenting on the others, or experimenting together?

The question, then, is: Why have only the mentioned approaches – observation, questioning, and a certain kind of experimentation – counted as empirical in social research? One important reason is that the tacit presupposition for modern social research has always been that we – the researchers – have to study the others. The "field" is always where the others are. "Othering" is at the root of the trouble, in allocating performance or execution on the one hand and reflection or interpretation on the other to widely different kinds of people, not sharing experience. This, then, has to be radically changed. Conventional empirical research is part of this institutionalised division of labour.

Although action research is not anti-scientific, in its dominant present form, conventional research is part of the problem, not part of the solution. In order to improve research methods, conventional social research has to change.

So, why have most conventional social research disciplines abandoned or never even considered experimentation before getting lost in the labyrinths and quagmires of postmodernism? If experimentation is simply transferred from how natural scientists experiment with objects in nature, i. e. modelled on a division of labour between experimenters and those experimented on, there are some obvious reasons and a few less obvious. The purely practical difficulties in arranging these kinds of experiments in real life social settings involving large numbers of people are, of course, striking. In addition, of course, many people simply do not want to try out different social arrangements openly in order to learn and improve, for ideological or religious reasons or for fear of exposing illegitimate power structures and

positions. The ethical scruples about subjecting people to interventions in their lives that they may be completely ignorant of and neither understand nor control, are salient too. Segregated and protected laboratory experimentation has the same shortcomings in addition to the difficulties of external validity, i. e. of transferring results from artificial laboratory conditions to real life settings. Finally, I would add that normal concepts of efficient causality, mostly overlooking how the interpretations of the actors involved intervene between causes and effects, are much too simple. Similar efficient causes, or even one identical cause, necessarily have a multitude of widely different effects depending on the experience, maturity, cultural background, gender, age, psychic condition, available space for autonomous action, etc. of those affected.

In spite of scruples like these, action research sprang from researchers and philosophers like Kurt Lewin and John Dewey, committed to experimentation. Both men favoured the repositioning of experimentation moving out from insulated laboratories to enter every local community, work place, school, and even family. How, then, did the offspring of experimental social research – the spearhead of science – end up discredited in a research orphanage charged with "sloppy research"? Even action researchers and many variants of action research have denied their relationship with experimentation, appropriating the derogatory definition of them by mainstream research instead as "extremely applied research". The major difference, emerging from the initiatives of both Dewey and Lewin, was that the division of labour between researchers and research subjects – treated as objects – began to disintegrate. This was anathema to established research. Heedless of what they thought they were doing, what the action research initiative started was a movement where ordinary people, workers, managers, teachers, families, etc. would start to experiment together, openly, sharing their interpretations critically in order to improve their own practices, just like researchers through their discipline of methodology. This was and is a sore and sensitive blind spot for conventional research.

Action research soon stopped being an attempt to administer manipulative and clandestine treatment to others in order to observe how they reacted to stimuli. Quasi-experimental research, springing from the same sources, continues in this vein. But in transferring the experimental attitude and practice from laboratories to real life settings, it was also transformed into action research, placing experience-forming experimentation into the practical settings of practitioners as open action learning and action research cycles of repetition, trying things out, evaluating the old and adjusting the new attempts at achieving improvement and perfection in whatever practices were central to them.

Do we really have to change things in order to understand them?

As these stories illustrate, there are many research-intrinsic reasons why conventional social researchers should be interested in action research. The examples taken from conventional research methodology are examples of immanent critique. This is, in fact, an action research method starting out from within *any* existing practice. It does not have to be a research practice. Immanent critique is nothing separate or extraneous to these practices. It is only making explicit tacit knowledge, and inner tensions and contradictions in such communities of practice or discourse formations provoking and promoting the development, the explication, and the actualization of inherent potentials in the practices. The examples from conventional research

practices are just that: illustrative examples. Although immanent critique springs from critical theory, from Marx and Hegel, and ultimately from Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, as a practice – or as a "meta-practice" if you like – it has, of course, absolutely nothing to do with the hypertrophied household economies misnamed "communism" during the 20th Century.

The practice of immanent critique is fundamentally dialogical. It is a learning process of improving practices through open examination and criticism comparing ends and means and how they agree or disagree, making everything explicit that needs to be explicit in order to reach the ends. Immanent critique changes things but not as external things, technically. The point is not to change things technically (tékhnê / poíêsis). It is to think through practically formed concepts (= summarizing grasps), i. e. practically acquired experience (empeiría = *Erfahrung* not *Erlebnis*). Thinking through this is reflective thinking as dialogical thinking. The practice of immanent critique, critically examining any practice from the inside for inconsistencies of any kind in order to improve it, is nothing other than the basic principle of apprenticeship learning. Apprenticeship learning is a process of formation and perfection of a practice. It is a praxis, as this was understood by Aristotle. The meta-practice of masters and apprentices in a community of practice, inquiry, and learning is, of course, dialogical immanent critique enacting the method of methodology.

Since Socrates' practical turn to the practice of the crafts – and learning from the practice of ancient medicine – in order to understand what knowledge was, instead of speculating and "metaphorizing" about what moved the stars and outer nature, this has been the common wisdom of all critics of similar research practices. As I have tried to show in other places (see endnote 1), this Socratic, immanently critical, apprenticeship learning is also intrinsically connected to a concept of, not a general public sphere where rhetoric dominates, but a counter-public sphere or a leisured free space (skholê) for dialogical reflection among practitioners. All of this, again, provides the tools for a form of organisational learning as action research or practitioner research approximating the method of methodology, alternating systematically between performance and reflection. Organisations are communities of practice in need of becoming communities of inquiry and learning as well. Collaboration between existing research institutions and work life organisations should promote, support, and cultivate this internal transformation of existing communities of practice.

The important thing, then, is not to intervene in the lives of others, changing them as some external objects in order to understand them. This may be the only way to learn experimentally and experientially about dead external materials with which we cannot communicate or share any practices and experiences. In order to influence dead matter, we have to manipulate it. When it comes to social realities, however, the important thing (in order to understand) is to go native on the right levels, to participate fully, trying to improve whatever we are involved in doing, changing and improving ourselves individually and collectively, just like the community of researchers have been doing for decades through their discipline of methodology. This goes for everyone. The motto from experimentalism has to be modified. You do not have to change *them* in order to understand *them*. In order to understand anything, you have to practice. You have to go native, or realize that we are all always immersed as natives into some practices already, and provide the conditions for qualified participation by the natives in generating the necessary knowledge. That's where we have to start, in our own "nativeness", whether we want to or not, and whether we know it or not.

This, then, is a form of action research that whole-hearted conventional researchers are obliged to be interested in for their own sake (as "natives" to the research processes), for the

sake of the quality of research as such, for the sake of the quality of organisational life, for the sake of their collegial relations, for the sake of participatory citizenship, and for other reasons I have tried to present in the foregoing text. This form of action research is also a form that will satisfy the subsidiary arguments provided on the way even better than the variants motivated by research extrinsic reasons. It is the method of methodology, i. e. a self-reflective practitioner-research.

But everything implied and involved in an approach like this cannot be dealt with here. Its full range cannot be described. There may, of course, also be limitations to what can be studied through methods like these. But for the practical purpose of writing this text, this will have to suffice. Further research will have to wait for other opportunities with even more leisure, relieved from the constant exigencies of practice. That's how it is in the socalled "real life".

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Moral awareness and different orders of relevance in participatory research with older people and professionals

Isabella Paoletti, Elisabet Cedersund, Konstantin Economou

Abstract: Limitations are described in the literature in relation to the actual involvement of older people in action research activities. Empirical social research involving any form of data collection has an impact on the people and the setting studied. Researchers should strive to be morally aware of such an impact. The article describes case studies of participatory research in Sweden, Italy and Portugal. It highlights moral issues confronted by researchers. Moreover actual examples of different order of priorities among researchers and participants are provided. The study shows possible spaces for collaboration, while recognizing the difference of interests and priorities among researchers and participants.

Keywords: older people, participatory research, action research, moral issues, data collection, social dimension of research activities

Conciencia moral y diferentes órdenes de relevancia en la investigación participative con personas mayores y profesionales

Resumen: En la literatura se describen las limitaciones en relación con la participación real de las personas mayores en las actividades de investigación-acción. La investigación social empírica que involucra cualquier forma de recopilación de datos tiene un impacto en las personas y el entorno estudiado. Las personas investigadoras deben esforzarse por ser moralmente conscientes de tal impacto. El artículo describe estudios de casos de investigación participativa en Suecia, Italia y Portugal. Destaca los problemas morales que enfrentan las personas investigadoras. Además, se proporcionan ejemplos reales de diferente orden de prioridades entre personas investigadoras y participantes. El estudio muestra posibles espacios de colaboración, al tiempo que reconoce la diferencia de intereses y prioridades entre personas investigadoras y participantes.

Palabras clave: personas mayores, investigación participativa, investigación acción, cuestiones morales, recopilación de datos, dimensión social de las actividades de investigación.

1.   Introduction

At present, there is a general move toward participatory approaches involving service users and in particular older people, in evaluating and improving service delivery, for example „patient and public involvement in research" (Baldwin et al., 2018) or „participatory design in gerotechnology" (Grigorovich et al., 2021, p. 6), „addressing the needs and preferences of older adults in the development of technologies for their use". Participatory video design (Von Faber et al., 2020) is involving older people in defining the age-friendliness of their neig-

hborhood. Visual participatory research (Quinton et al., 2022) involves older people in research using visual materials: videos, Internet-based images etc. The term „participatory research" refers to a broad research area including: action research (Baur & Abma, 2012; Buffel, 2018; Dick & Greenwood, 2015; Glassman et al., 2013); participatory research (Martins Corrêa da Silva et al., 2018); participatory action research (Bendien et al., 2020; Blair & Minkler, 2009; Corrado et al., 2020); community-based participatory research (Cargo and Mercer, 2008; Dabelko-Schoeny et al., 2020; Hall & Tandon, 2017); „co-production" approaches in community-based research (Buffel, 2018). These are research approaches engaging older people and other community members as co-researchers and involving them in personal, social and institutional changes. The research explores problems that matter to them and their communities. In this research approach, older people are generally conceived as involved in all phases of the research, from selecting the research topic and conducting data collection, to data analysis and dissemination of results; but this is not always possible to implement in all parts.

1.1. Limitations in the involvement of older people in research

Many researchers (Baldwin et al., 2018; Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Corrado et al., 2020; Grigorovich et al., 2021) describe, in fact, limitations in older people's involvement in research. Buffel (2018) points out: „The most common forms of involvement are skewed toward a 'tokenistic approach' in which older people have little influence over the research process." For example, Corrado et al. (2020) point out in their review of literature of participatory action research (PAR) that older people are often not involved in shaping the research questions. Moreover, learning opportunities to familiarize with research skills are seldom offered to older people, according to the research projects examined by Corrado et al. (2020). They also acknowledge that researchers' priorities, such as the pressure to publish, could pose limits on older people's involvement. They highlight the need to critically consider older people's involvement: „It is important to critically reflect on how assumptions about older adults' capabilities, interests, and motivation may set boundaries on if and how academic researchers involve them in PAR research" (Corrado et al., 2020, p. 423). They encourage researchers to challenge ageist beliefs and consider how older people can meaningfully contribute to all phases of research.

Buffel's (2018) very useful article describes in detail procedures for the effective involvement of older people in research, in particular recruiting, training and data collection. The co-researchers selected are all older educated people, mostly with university degrees. Forster et al. (2021, 6) point out a similar limitation for their study: „Volunteers over-represent white, English-speaking retired professionals: none of our team were from ethnic minorities or spoke English as a second language." In fact, Buffel (2018, p. 59) expresses caution in this respect: „Seeking to democratize knowledge production and fostering opportunities for those involved, projects such as the one described nevertheless run the risk of creating a further divide between an already more „privileged" group of older people and their more disadvantaged peers". In relation to the analytical phase of the research, older people participated actively in the coding process. There were codes predetermined on the basis of the theoretical framework, but emerging codes were collectively discussed and decided. Older people also participated in

some publications: „The group also co-produced a brochure presenting key findings from the research." The academic articles were written by researchers.

Buffel's (2018) research project was a great experience for older people to be involved in. They learned a lot. But it also shows some limitations of participatory research, its patronizing side: Older people can participate, but only to a certain extent. Many authors point out the limited participation of older people in research, in particular in data collection and analysis (Baldwin et al., 2018; Blair & Minkler, 2009; Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Corrado et al., 2020; Grigorovich et al., 2021) How could it be different? Why should they be interested, unless older people are or become researchers themselves? Participatory research needs a different perspective from which to look at older people participating in research.

The aim of this article is to critically reflect on the risks, limits and opportunities of older people's involvement in participatory action research and to present a different perspective that can be relevant to social research in general. We start from considering the social dimension of research activities and their moral dimension. Then we elaborate on our perspective on participatory research, reflecting on the different orders of priority among older people and researchers. We will then discuss these issues on the basis of the relevant literature, providing various examples from our research practices.

1.2.   Moral awareness of the social dimension of research activities

Any kind of data collection in social sciences, such as interviewing, focus groups, observing ordinary activities and/or audio-video recording them, is achieved through actual social interaction among researchers and participants in social encounters, within the setting studied. Issues of face (Goffman, 1967), practical management of sense making (Heritage & Watson 1980), appropriateness (Nikander, 2000), politeness (Hutchby, 2008), to name but a few, are necessarily implied in such interactions, as well as identity construction issues (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Paoletti, 1998) and moral issues (Jayyusi, 1984); above all, research relationship „demand[s] emotional engagement and ethical responsibility"(Sasser, 2014, p. 6), as with any other human encounter. The social dimension of research activities furthermore implies unavoidable effects on the settings and the people studied. An example is provided by the observer paradox described by Labov (1972, p. 209): „The aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation." The objective of the sociolinguistic research was describing daily vernacular, but Labov noticed that informants were likely to adopt a formal register when they were interviewed. If we consider the social dimension of interviews, they can usually be described as encounters between strangers (Gallagher, 2016), therefore a formal register may generally appear appropriate. Research interviews have also characteristics that are present in institutional talk. More recently in the ethnomethodological tradition, Speer and Hutchby (2003) conceptualize social research activities as part of the setting studied. Research activities have an influence on research participants, and they contribute to producing an image of the social setting studied.

Action research (Blair and Minkler, 2009) and in general, participatory research (Bendien et al., 2020) are approaches using the unavoidably transformative character of social research. The research process may become the instrument of participants' personal development and

empowerment, community transformation and enactment of changes. In fact, participatory research could be an approach helping researchers to manage the effects of research activities on research participants and the setting, making sure they are mainly positive effects. But a different perspective is needed to conceptualize the relationship among older people and researchers, that is, to acknowledge their different orders of priority and concern.

1.3.   Researchers' and older people's different orders of relevance

Researchers are pressured by their institutions to publish. In order to publish they need to do massive amounts of reading; moreover, they are generally interested in theoretical problems that are outside the scope and interest of the general public. Such problems are mostly relevant only to researchers, but theoretical aspects of research are also those that can at times produce the more useful outcomes in practical terms (McCain, 2016). Corrado et al. (2020, p. 423) mentioned the pressure of rapid publication of results most researchers are confronted with and the consequent lack of time that hinders the actual involvement of older people.

The pressure to publish makes it difficult for academic researchers to integrate the time and processes required to ensure that the research priorities chosen matter to the community, to involve older adults throughout the various research phases, and to involve older adults when implementing the findings in a way that encourages tangible change in the community.

Baldwin et al. (2018, p. 806) point out the lack of research skills of co-researchers, while Blair and Minkler (2009, p. 653) highlight the limited participation of older people in data collection and analysis. At times carers and not older people are involved in participatory research (Klaassens & Meijering, 2015).

Bendien et al. (2020) describe the difficulties in involving older people in the actual analysis of data: „data analysis, specifically content analysis, turned out to be too theoretical for the co-researchers, who preferred to concentrate on more practical matters." Could there be real involvement of older people in this aspect of research? Would older people be interested in theoretical aspects of research and massive reading? Why should they? Do researchers have to give up their theoretical interests? They certainly cannot give up publishing.

An illustration can outline a different perspective on participatory research and the relation among older people's and researchers' different orders of relevance:

Figure 1. Order of relevance perceived by older people and researchers: an overview of similarities and differences in relation to participatory research.

Older people's order of relevance.   Researchers' order of relevance
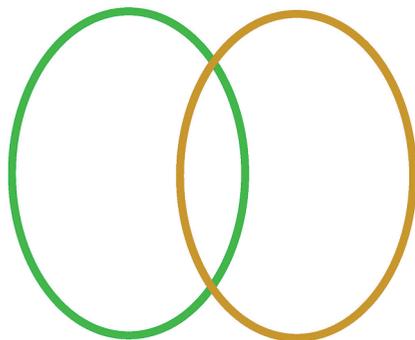
The intersection: Participatory research

Source: authors' own work

The intersection between older people's and researchers' orders of relevance is the space for participatory research. The position of the two ovals can vary; they could almost correspond, but they will not coincide, that is, the forms taken by participatory research are multifold, but should not have the claim of total identification, or role switching. Cooperation between older people and researchers should be between human beings that deserve the same respect for their life experiences and purpose and with the determination to find common ground. You can then do participatory research with the homeless, to name among the least privileged older people. It is a matter of finding the space for actual shared interests, and space in research for older people's orders of priority, maintaining our order of relevance as researchers. We can find ways to involve older people in actual research activities, but, as researchers, we can also use some of the research activities to make space for older people's aims and purposes; the social changes initiated in the process could continue after the end of the research, as reported, for example, by Blair and Minkler (2009, p. 658), that is, community initiatives which grew out of the initial research.

For example, Buffel's research actually involved older people in practically all phases of research. But she acknowledges that she could only have privileged older people as co-researchers and, in the analysis and publication their contribution was minimal. It is not a criticism of Buffel's work; it could not have been different. It is a criticism of a perspective on participatory research in which researchers are doomed to be wrong. In most cases, older people's participation can only be limited. As social researchers, if we acknowledge that we cannot avoid having influence on the people and the settings we decide to study, we can start to make space for participants' interests, aims, questions, preoccupations and so on, respecting older people as human beings who have the same values as any researcher. It thus becomes a matter of moral responsibility for researchers to embrace it. Participatory research becomes a form that this moral sensitivity can take, and participatory research could then take many forms. The focus would still be on participant involvement and empowering, and the pro-

motion of social and institutional change, but also acknowledging the different orders of priority and concern between older people and researchers.

The article is aimed at describing a theoretical approach to participatory research that can combine the different orders of relevance between participants and researchers, maintaining moral awareness of research participants' well-being, integrity and safety in relation to a research activity. What should a researcher do when confronted with the research participant's suffering triggered by research questions? Who decides the topic of research in participatory research? Can we make space in research activities for actual research on participants' needs and interests? These are some of the questions we will address in the article. In the following section, we will illustrate in detail various experiences of involvement of participants in research that takes into account the social dimension of research activities and their moral dimension, starting from ongoing research conducted in Sweden.

2.   Moral issues in action research with older people

2.1.   Example 1. Sweden: The Media project: soliciting sad memories

Working with interviews and readings of older people's media environment in their homes we[1] aimed at creating co-produced content based on remembering, oral histories and selected objects in the home to be able to use these as meaningful selections for people's own use, for their relatives and/or staff at the care home where the study was conducted (Economou & Cedersund, 2020). Its main (moral) issue would thus be to designate a role of storyteller, one of agency and value as the „owner" and „producer" of content for participants; and further-more, to make this content available to others, in their home but also, potentially for a larger audience at an exhibition.

In this project we aimed to talk about memories of media, both public media like the cinema, or family produced, like photo-albums. We wanted both to analyze older persons media and cultural environments but also to use their stories as examples of personal de-scriptions that could be important for relatives and care staff, as well as in the public exhibition we created from this content. This view is inspired by studies in communication and re-membering seen as situated memory work that takes place in the present, rather than as triggering cognitive storage (see Middleton & Brown, 2005). Thus we wanted to construct the participants as active co-creators alongside us: also from a theoretical perspective on the position of the storyteller as valuable agent for knowledge, rather than the passive recipient of media (or of care for that matter); investing in this notional theoretical point that the role of producer of knowledge, stories and remembering is a role that can return agency and recognition in later life where the common-sense notions are the opposite; of loss of capacity and importance.

In this project we have worked within a frame of wanting to formulate an „invitation" to create, to co-produce content of remembering for our participants. This can be seen as an invitation for older persons to „give", to tell us researchers something they themselves em-body, or own, but that we do not. Thus, an important storyteller position is created as one of a

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1   „We" in Example 1 refers to two of the authors of the present article (Economou and Cedersund) who conducted the study described in the first example (Economou & Cedersund, 2020).

knowledgeable person, possessing agency to tell and to select what is worthy of telling, as expert in their own story while the researchers take on the role of listeners. The interviews have been thought of as conversations facilitating the sharing of selected, relevant and viable content, rather than being centered on reports of people's living or medical conditions, feelings or current situation. Not only do we aspire to see participants as active, we also claim that our relationship develops into a co-productive relationship in that we not only aim at „extracting" facts or data, but jointly become involved in a social process of creating content that we want to share with a larger audience, in this case a collection of older persons' stories and an exhibition at the community leisure center which we were curating. Of course, the somewhat idealistic notion behind this is one of equality or taking the informant seriously as someone who could actually take the position of co-producer, or who would even actually want to do so at all. In this sense we adhere to an idea of creating an arena of participation in which older people are the providers of knowledge directed toward other listeners or spectators. This, we hope, gives older persons a turned around position of „owners" or experts of what is told *by* them, not *about* them. This perspective is in line with participatory research as presented by Buffel (2018, p 52), who discusses co-research that is „conducted *'with'* or *'by'* older adults rather than *'to'*, *'about'* or *'for'* them as research subjects".

In excerpt 1.1 below, our: the researchers' –‚various concerns might be converging, or maybe the will to include more concerns might create a problem. Why would the participant (who is an informant, but also a giver of content, also a „host" to inquisitive researcher/producers, and, as well, a co-producer) consent, adhere, or even recognize these different possible roles? Does co-production give rise to a more difficult problem of „simultaneity" despite the goodwill of equality and empowerment?

In the excerpt[2] that was taken from one of our interviews (or maybe we should call it a conversation) to investigate possible common content for research and public display, the conversation with Agnes, an informant/co-producer, a woman in her 90 s becomes divided into several topics. It starts with the focus on media as a storage medium and a family technology that could be reflected upon, to the actual remembering of the situation of watching photos and what this act can give rise to:

Excerpt 1
From a conversation between *researcher Q* and *Mrs. Agnes*, 92 years old, who is visiting a local meeting point for older persons which is taking part in our project.
Researcher Q: … did you have photos as well? Photographs?
Agnes (A): Yees.
Q: With Instamatic, or? Something other, like instant photos you get directly … in your hand?
A: No, I don't know if we have any …
Q: they are developed then
… had ordinary cameras, but you know, these old, old kind of photo albums!
A: Yes.
A: Yes!
Q: Do you ever look in them?

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2   The original transcripts are in Swedish; see Moerman (1988) and Nikander (2008) for the complex issues involved in using translated transcripts.

A: Yes sometimes … when the grandkids were smaller … it was their favorite, the best they knew … that we should look in them … but I have, we have them recorded, or put into the computer, but that's the more older ones … but I can't watch them.
Q: …they have taken pictures?
A: I can't, I can't.
Q: Ehh, why not?
A: I cry.
Q: Why is that?
A: Well, our cottage, our beautiful cottage, and we had all the beautiful flowers and all that … and I haven't been out to our cottage … it was sold immediately when my husband died, and I said; thank God he didn't have to see that …
Q: And you feel emotional?
A: Yes emotional, I can't make it … I can't take it.
Q: Yes and we have to respect that …
A: It's so difficult for me … we said we should drive out there (to the cottage) to see, what it looks like now, see if they've ruined much … but I don't know I can make it.

In the excerpt above, the conversation starts with the topic of media storage and what might be kept in her possession, and of general media knowledge and use, something we as researchers were interested in as both ethnographic data, and as possible content for our project′s production, and the researchers become more involved in asking about the media. The question about using the photo albums though: *Do you ever look in them?* becomes geared toward the social and situated interaction of showing photos to the grandchildren: centering more on the frame of „showing to" others something of importance to oneself, making her the owner and purveyor of content. However, instead of continuing a more technical issue of media use, or the family viewing situation, the topic then becomes embedded in the feeling of loss of the actual depicted phenomenon that the photos trigger. The loss of the summer cottage that old age forced her family to sell.

The researcher's notion of giving voice to: and „looking for meaningful stories" (showing the grandchildren, formulating Swedish history of the early holidays, the possibility of acquiring a small holiday cottage, a modernist dream for the ordinary working class that this story contained) becomes overtaken by the strong personal feeling the conversation has triggered.

Our point here would be to reflect on the awareness of the researchers purporting to work with the participant and offer inclusion and co-production: a moral awareness of how the older person shifts, in this short example, between three different concerns. First, how is remembering accessed in various media, where are they kept and „stored". Second, how do they become situated and given use, as in the interest of the grandchildren, but third, what emotions can the content of the medium actually evoke? In studies of the use of family photographs, Marianne Hirsch (1997) has extensively discussed the use of images as memory work, formulating the term of „post-memory" to delineate the dilemmas of remembering difficult and painful events and feelings; situating them in a present, of oneself as well as others, be they relatives of different generations, or in our case, working with old people′s stories to possibly create media and exhibition content with public address. A moral dilemma that can be deduced from this example then becomes that our „offer" of co-production, authorship and agency in our research and the media production process can result in remembering, leading

up to a feeling of loss and of the impossibility of making good: the cottage is not available anymore. Also, we have triggered this feeling in a situation we would want to be empowering, but have got a result of remembering that our co-producer/informant already had a strategy of avoidance: by having chosen to avoid watching the photos in the first place.

So, showing the importance of a sensitivity that extends beyond merely one concern: as in a more clear-cut relationship between researcher and informant, our project has made us realize that co-production is more complex than idealistic. We need to take into account more sensibility of what we „offer" when we set up collaborative situations with older persons, as well as what we want to get out of it. In the next instance a very dramatic example of the suffering that an interview may trigger will be presented in relation to a project on older workers conducted in Italy.

2.2.   Example 2. Italy: The older workers' project: Deciding to stop data collection because of the suffering of interviewees

The older workers assignment was an action research project (Paoletti, 2008) aimed at raising public awareness of the condition of unemployed people 40 plus. It was conducted in 2008 at the Social Research and Intervention Centre in Perugia, Italy, in collaboration with older workers' association ATDAL (a national grass-roots organization for the protection of older workers) and the Older Women Network Europe. The action project was aimed at rising public awareness on the condition of older unemployed people. Data collection initially comprised conducting audio recorded semi-structured in-depth interviews with unemployed 40 plus, unemployed grass roots organizations' leaders and union representatives.

Personal sufferance

When studying the issue of unemployment in middle age and age discrimination at work, the suffering that these conditions imply, becomes immediately evident (Harris et al., 2018). It is not just a matter of financial problems that in many cases are dramatic, but the personal suffering is stunning. Older unemployed people, who lost their jobs in delocalization and restructuring processes, are victims, but they are the ones feeling ashamed and guilty. Isolation (Rözer et al., 2020) is the direct consequence of this type of feeling, but also depression (Whooley et al., 2002), drugs (Azagba et al., 2021), alcohol abuse (Popovici and French, 2013) and suicide (Cunningham et al., 2021).

While carrying out the interviews, the perception of suffering was evident even in people who were very reactive and capable of dealing with the situation and who managed to find a job after a while. Dario is one of them; he had lost his job because the small firm in which he was working closed. Describing his situation he says[3]:

Excerpt 2

At a psychological level it is not easy, you always really feel a failure with all the people who are around you, a shit, at a certain point even rationalizing everything, you also start saying to yourself „it is impossible that I was unable to come out of this situation", then you doubt about yourself, even if you can give yourself all possible reassurances and rationalizations.

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3   The original transcripts are in Italian.

Dario appears able to reassure himself, to rationalize, but to a certain extent and at certain times he cannot avoid doubting himself. In all the data collected, the expression of suffering was very often present, in fact, in many cases the personal impact of unemployment was quite severe. Lucio, for example, arrived at a point where he had to find professional help to overcome depression because of being unemployed:

Excerpt 3

I felt guilty with myself, and I doubted my ability in everything. In my family I thought that my children and my wife believed I was a failure. I didn't speak about it with anybody, I would act in such a way that nobody knew of the situation apart from my family. My ex-colleagues did not exist.

Many times I thought about disappearing, running away from home, leaving no trace behind, at times about killing myself. To overcome these moments … I started psychoanalysis.

Secrecy, self-imposed isolation and depression are very frequent among older unemployed workers and have an effect also at a political level. The president of ATDAL declared that it was very difficult to organize a rally or political activities; not many in the association were prepared to make themselves visible as unemployed; he used the expression: „to show their face".

After a few interviews it was decided to stop interviewing older workers because of the acute suffering that questions about unemployment had been triggering in interviewees. The project was modified. Awareness of the social dimension of research activities and their impact on research participants goes beyond ethical procedures (Paoletti et al., 2013; Paoletti, 2013). It is a matter of moral responsibility and ethical sensitivity in carrying out one's own work, taking decisions accordingly. The need to protect participants during data collection cannot often be foreseen at the ethics review phase; ethical problems can arise unexpectedly during data collection or at any other research phase (Sabar & Naama Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2017). Ethical problems are „difficult to predict" as Swauger (2011) points out. Researchers cannot be spared from taking moral decisions: „The craft of field research rests, first, in keeping oneself open to these vital contingencies and, second, in responding to them skillfully with innovative methodological and ethical solutions" (Liberman, 1999, p. 62). Similar attention is necessary to detect and include participants' interests, priorities and concerns in participatory research. In the next section some examples of participatory research conducted in Sweden and in Portugal illustrate the issue of recognizing different orders of priority between service researchers and participants, but also between professionals and service users in participatory approaches to service delivery priorities.

3.   Priority issues in participatory research with older people

3.1.   Example 3. Sweden: The power imbalance and the different orders of priority between service users and professionals

Participatory approaches are not only widespread in research, but also in service provision (Cowdell et al., 2020). Service users are at times encouraged to become active participants in services provision. This third example is focused on participatory service provision carried out in Sweden (Kvarnström, Hedberg & Cedersund, 2012). This example draws a parallel among these two dimensions of participatory approach: research and service implementation. It illustrates the difficulties involved in participatory approaches to service provision. In particular it tries to explore the power imbalance between professionals and service users. A similar power imbalance may also exist between research participants and researchers.

The referenced study is focused on how professionals perceive the concept of user participation. In this case too, awareness of different orders of relevance among professionals and service users could be useful: users' needs and preferences in relation to the service; professional awareness of the institutional dimension of the service, that is, the limits in relation to cost, personnel availability, time frame, etc. of delivery of the service. Negotiation among professionals and service users could be effective, clearly acknowledging these different orders of priority.

This study has provided in-depth knowledge of how professionals approach and reflect on the phenomenon of user participation. These ways to think and act may also have an impact on how professionals understand and develop their view of users' participation in different care situations. Professionals develop a way of understanding users and their view of participation; it may imply that in their professional activities they can meet the wishes and expectations of users in a more developed way. But it can also include control of what users can request in the meeting with professionals.

Some quotes from the interviews are given below in order to illustrate variation in the descriptive categories, and the dimensions found in data. For example, some professionals perceive participation as self-determination and freedom of choice, highlighting the meaning perceived as a *right to self-determination:* „the rights of service users to decline the offered service (…) the right to turn down activities and interventions" (Kvarnström, Hedberg &Cedersund,. 2012, p. 296). Personal responsibility through insight was stressed by some professionals who put an emphasis on the service user's *insight and change:* „Through the relationship with professionals, service users reflect, learn, and develop insight and understanding" (Kvarnström, Hedberg & Cedersund,. 2012, p. 299). The interprofessional dimension of user participation was perceived by some professionals as the user's increased opportunities for involvement. It could also make it easier for the user to understand what was going on and to absorb guidance provided by a group of many different professionals.

Results from the study (Example 3) show that recipients' responses contain dimensions that also indicate that perceptions of participation among users are associated with different orders of relevance (Figure 1). Effective negotiation can be carried out if these different priorities among professionals and service users are perceived and acknowledged, in particular by the group that holds more power: professionals. At times they may decide that some service users' needs and preferences must come first, despite institutional limits.

In the following paragraph, a study from Portugal will illustrate further the concept of balancing different orders of priority. In this case the researcher makes space for research participants' order of relevance in organizing the final workshop of the research project.

3.2.   Example 4. Portugal: The APSE Project: Making a space for participants' interests

The APSE project (2009–14) (Paoletti, 2014; 2017; Paoletti & Gomes, 2014; Paoletti & Gonzalves, 2017) involved an interdisciplinary team of researchers, professionals and older people in documenting innovative social services contributing to paths out of poverty and social exclusion for the aging population in Lisbon. The project was designed to identify effective intervention for older people, in particular, services promoting their active role in the community and full participation in social life. Many activities aimed at the social inclusion of older people in Lisbon were based on the consideration of poverty not only as lack of resources, but also as a lack of access[4] (Paoletti, 2014). With practically no financial support, incredible creativity and the ability to –mobilize a vast network of institutional agencies: not only health and social services, but museums, theaters, cinemas, libraries, universities and grass roots organizations, these professionals and activists managed very effectively to include older people, and particularly older women, as protagonists in a variety of cultural events (conferences, performances, tourist tours, etc.), gaining access to prestigious sites in Lisbon (Paoletti, 2014).

Friendship and gratitude toward these professionals were very natural, having included the research group for over three years. The desire to give them something back was sincere, something relevant to them as practitioners (see Gupta and Kelly, 2014; Sasser, 2014). producing an event that professionals could find useful in relation to their specific order of relevance. Toward the end of the project in 2013, a workshop was organized for professionals: „Inter-institutional intervention with older people: communication practices and intervention with older people living with dementia", with the same spirit: with no financial support, creativity and networking. The professionals had identified dementia as the topic, one of the most difficult areas of intervention.

A colleague from Scotland, an expert in dementia, accepted an invitation to come as speaker and discussant at her own organization's expense. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation paid for the interpreting services and offered to host the workshop in their premises, one of the most prestigious cultural sites in Lisbon. At the workshop, various groups of professionals from different districts in Lisbon presented their experiences of intervention with older people living with dementia. Then the expert in dementia started her presentation and commented on their experiences. The workshop helped the professional and their organization to gain visibility, moreover it was a useful occasion for reflection and critical appraisal of their work. The seminar was a relevant part of the research outcomes of the APSE project. In this case the research order of priority, focusing the seminar on research results, had made space for participants' order of priority: presenting to the public their valuable working experiences and learning about dementia from a researcher working at close contact with professionals.

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4   „The meaning of inclusion for these professionals is accessibility, that is, granting access not only to basic means of subsistence, but to culture, leisure and political participation" (Paoletti, 2014).

The main point here is that during the research process we can make genuine space for participants' interests; and within the limits of our expertise and resources, we can produce actions that may be beneficial for our participants.

4. Discussion

4.1. Ethical dilemmas

As described in this article, ethical dilemmas might be more difficult to recognize, and more complexly reflected in the micro-interactions of interviews and encounters than in the preordained statements and agreements signed and established within our ethical guidelines in academia. The concerns of researchers when consent to participate is needed could be directed toward ascertaining that people are comfortable with their presence at the interview, establishing this more intimate relationship, and in the room where we meet. Rarely would we claim to see the informant as co-author though, at least in traditional research. What then with our intersecting in, and claims of transcending, these roles? We argue that a more subtle sensibility needs to be developed as we extend the role of informant to become a co-participant in ways we would ideally want. Sensibilities for ethical dilemmas enable us and force us to act as participants in the actual meeting of persons, regardless of our roles as designated „co-producers" or owners. In these meetings we have seen something emerge that makes us halt and pause; to be able to stop the interview, to reframe the conversation to better understand that a seemingly innocent question has triggered a deep feeling of loss, or of shame: sometimes openly expressed by people in spite of it not being a preferred topic in the conversation, sometimes not so openly expressed but felt as unease or maybe as having triggered an imbalance in the interaction which breaks up the (notion of) equality of the relationship. This sensibility on the part of the researcher is what we argue is an important key in being able to retain and develop a co-producing relationship: to be able to let go of our second concern of obtaining material for research and act on our first: to retain a relationship with participants, and be prepared to listen and understand their point of view.

4.2. Co-production and later life

Maybe the notion of co-production can be more important in the study of later life: the prevalent societal outside view of older persons as vulnerable can help us develop a counter position of them as knowledgeable actors with ability to take on the role of co-creators or producers just by establishing this as a viable joint concern. In the Swedish media project (Example 1) we cast the participants in the role of storytellers: i.e., the ones who are in the know, and have the ability to tell others, a role that counters the one of just being the recipient, and furthermore frames the individual as someone who is important as a giver, or „publisher" of content, but with what knowledge or willingness from them to take that role? But what we attempted in the media project (Example 1) is to see together the material we produce as content that would be of interest to others in order to produce an exhibition[5] for older people

5   The exhibition took place in March 2020 in Norrköping, Sweden.

themselves, their relatives, carers or even a general public. That arguably turns the position from repository of data to producer of noteworthy stories of more general importance. By combining research questions and analysis with older persons' own stories as „telling something about" the world, the times, the issues that they choose to remember, they become active owners of knowledge, perspective and formulation as well as addressors, or broadcasters of that content. The difference, simply put, is that they are telling us something important that they know of and we do not, rather than being told something about themselves produced by us. But, again, a co-producer's relationship that could achieve this role-shift must be based both on sensibility and sensitivity toward the participants, and be aware that the researchers' purpose or concerns might not coincide with those of older participants. As researchers we might be forward looking toward the contribution to new scientific knowledge (or the meritocracy of publishing) and participants might be looking back at their experiences and contributing to the larger story of life for their generation. Our method of co-production becomes sensitive to, and able to see data not only as signs from „experiences" or memories, but rather as possible communicative events of relevance not only to persons themselves and their immediate surroundings, but moreover as „signs" and statements of their generational common narratives, and as such important in a public discourse. Also, in this larger sense our fieldwork method invites participants to a more important „producer" role of representing their generation, time and place.

In the Italian unemployment project (Example 2) the role for interviewees becomes the role of embodying loss of a different kind: of self-value that has suffered and of self-doubt that has ensued, but the interview puts them in a position of representing not only their personal loss but also the larger issue of unemployment as a societal outcome, and so encompassing both the individual′s story as well as the structural issue. The participants had not asked for it, and the prize of trying to elicit political change is for them to agree to be broadcast as victims. Thus, the decision to stop the interview becomes an action of mercy, necessary for preserving moral responsibility toward participants. As Hand et al. (2019, p. 518) point out: „There is a need to build flexibility into initial project objectives and design to enable the project to evolve and new questions to form beyond the bounded project." This move, even if it means stopping the data gathering, might be a relevant consideration in research. Importantly, we should develop a sensitivity in participatory research, which could include the possibility of stopping or shutting down the interaction when we discover that participants' reactions might be negative or damaging. This sensitivity needs to be part of the methodology, not only because negative feelings or experiences might be triggered in interactions with participants, but also because they might be part of the research issues themselves.

4.3.   Participants' interests and concerns

It is possible to make space in the actual conduct of the research and among the research activities for the participants' interests and concerns in relation to social and institutional transformation. This is probably the gist of participatory research. In the fourth example, the Portuguese project, a public event that could have been used by researchers for presenting the research outcomes, is transformed into both a training opportunity in relation to dementia for the professionals, and into a showroom for the professionals' presentation to the public of their excellent inclusive initiatives toward older people. This workshop was not just a public event,

it was included in the official research outcomes of the project. As in the Swedish project, research participants were offered an opportunity to tell their own story.

So, it is important to assess the order of relevance between participants and researchers (see Figure 1) which could foster a proper and better participatory interaction and relationship, including as a theoretical as well as methodological tool. It is important to realize the importance of having space between the circles that can contract or expand both in how the research projects, and the roles between the researcher and participant are defined in the research design. This is as well as in the actual micro interactions that take place, for example in the course of interviews. Furthermore, one could perhaps say that the lines of the circles themselves can sometimes be blurred in the center, or intersected by factors that were not considered beforehand: as in Example 1 with the photo album that triggered sadness and loss, or the unemployment theme that triggered feelings of low self-esteem and identity loss. These can be dealt with by developing precisely the sensitivity that we want to emphasize: to see the other in what s/he expresses with caution and consideration can be built into our methodologies: and could be employed by listening carefully to what people have to say – and adjusting accordingly.

5.   Conclusion

In this article we focus on some moral and methodological issues in relation to participatory research with older people. As practitioners of action research, we have been reflecting and theorizing about our specific field experiences, highlighting inconsistencies, incongruities, contingencies of our field work and proposing theoretical reflections for their understanding and management.

Focusing on the social dimension of data collection research activities, we pointed out the importance of researchers' moral alertness at all phases of the research. Negative emotional reaction may occur during data collection, as was illustrated in both the first Swedish example and in Example 2, the Italian project with older unemployed. In both cases research questioning was causing pain to the interviewees. As a researcher, listening to your own emotional reactions can be important, for example, when interviewing older unemployed persons, the noticeable pain expressed by interviewees caused pain and uneasiness also to the interviewer. When participants have these negative reactions, researchers too may be affected. In the first Swedish example, with the photo album and pictures of the lost summer cottage, we realized that we nearly missed the older person's reaction due to our focus on her media use rather than the memory and emotion it gave rise to. This not only gave us the feeling of having instigated an awkward moment in an otherwise friendly and informative conversation, risking re-framing the situation of the interview, but also of a feeling of shame that has partly remained. We could not assess the possible pain in remembering loss in an important life event, and we did not foresee it but of course, the lingering feeling of uneasiness made us rethink the situation and learn from it. These insights may signal relevant ethical issues that have to be dealt with, and at times research has to be revised and changed (Hand et al. 2019). Particular attention should be given to older people participating in research. In our experiences as researchers, we very often noticed a spontaneous willingness to contribute to research

among older people. You need to be especially observant, that is, close attention should be taken toward older people, verifying that they are really intending to participate, and that participation has no negative effects for them. In fact, in this article, we pointed out that participation is not always positive; it can also have some negative aspects and consequences.

Participatory action research for older people and participatory approaches to service delivery are more fairly managed when keeping in mind the differing orders of priority between researchers and participants. According to Example 3, the Swedish study on participatory approaches in service delivery, users' self-determination and freedom of choice is contrasted with the need to acknowledge the institutional limits in service provision. Participants' priorities and concerns should be identified and acknowledged. After this, fair negotiation could begin. In some cases, genuine space could be made to research participants' interests and concerns, as was exemplified in Example 4, the Portuguese project, in particular it illustrates how both researchers and professionals can be morally alert and fair in their respective activities.

Our intention is that through this article we can point to the richness and social potential of contemporary action research (Gunnarsson et al., 2016) in that this research approach may been shown to contain the possibility of renewal both of society's welfare institutions and in working life in general. Through our analyzes of the four examples that formed the basis of the empirical parts of this article, we have the intention to make use of the development that has taken place within action research during the past decade, as well as the development of a democratic society that is at the center of this research approach. Our article highlights not only the strength of participatory approaches in research and service delivery but also some of their negative aspects, and how these may be overcome. Above all this article aims to open up a debate on various aspects of action research that are often left in the background, in particular the relation between researchers and research participants. Keeping a reflective attitude towards our field research practices should become a constant preoccupation, a working style, a topic of theoretical reflection. This sensibility towards participants in the field, their needs, wishes, feelings can contribute not only to action research development, but to the improvement of field research in general.

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Engaging youth in the local environment

Promoting sustainability action competence in Danish high school teaching through citizen social science.

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Abstract: Many young individuals experience a sense of disconnection from their immediate environment, which adversely affects their engagement in civic activities. This article outlines experiences with a sustainability actionable approach in a Danish high school, and how it influenced young people's understanding of the local environment. The study entails a three-month collaboration with a teacher and 17 high school students in Copenhagen who were being trained as citizen social scientists. They investigated and proposed youth-friendly sustainable changes in the neighbourhood, which enhanced their sustainability action competence. The article discusses how an action-oriented framework may inspire high school teachers to incorporate citizen social science in planning education for sustainable development that supports youth civic engagement.

Keywords: Citizen social science, youth civic engagement, sustainability action competence

Desarrollando el compromiso de las personas jóvenes en el entorno local.

Promoviendo competencias para la acción orientada a la sostenibilidad en la educación secundaria danesa a través de la ciencia social ciudadana

Resumen: Muchas personas jóvenes experimentan una sensación de desconexión de su entorno inmediato, lo que afecta negativamente su participación en actividades cívicas. Este artículo describe experiencias desarrolladas con un enfoque accionable de sostenibilidad en una escuela secundaria danesa y señala cómo influyó esta experiencia en la comprensión que las personas jóvenes tenían sobre el entorno local. El estudio se desarrolló a través de una colaboración de tres meses con una profesora y 17 estudiantes de secundaria en Copenhague, que se formaron en las ciencias sociales ciudadanas. Investigaron y propusieron cambios sostenibles que favorecían a las personas jóvenes de un vecindario, lo que mejoró su competencia en acciones para la sostenibilidad. El artículo analiza cómo un marco orientado a la acción puede inspirar al profesorado de secundaria a incorporar las ciencias sociales ciudadanas en la planificación de una educación para el desarrollo sostenible que apoye la participación cívica de las personas jóvenes.

Palabras clave: Ciencia social ciudadana, compromiso cívico de las personas jóvenes, competencias para la acción orientada a la sostenibilidad

1. Introduction

16 % of the global population are young people aged 15–24 years. By 2030, the number is projected to increase by 7 % to nearly 1.3 billion youths (Nations, n.d.). In recent years, dissatisfaction among youth has received attention, prompting a move to empower them as equal citizens (UN Press, n.d.). In 2022, Danish researchers found that the root of this dissatisfaction lies in societal pressures, including an accelerated education system and heightened expectations (Katznelson et al., 2021). According to Hartmut Rosa (2021), the constant acceleration of society is affecting our lives and can alienate us from our surroundings. He asserts that dissatisfaction is not due to a fragile psyche, but because youths are becoming aware that something is wrong with the way society is constructed (Politiken, n.d.). However, these pressures often leave youths with little time for local engagement, which has a negative effect on their sense of citizenship, belonging and recognition (Iwasaki, 2015; Simmons & Harding, 2011). At the same time, climate change is threatening human and non-human identities, and the latest IPCC report calls for urgent action (Langsdorf et al., 2022). Transitioning to a sustainable society requires, among others, engaging the youth and enabling them to take control of their future. Though young people have participated in activism against governments, many still feel powerless and resort to denial-like strategies to cope with climate change (Ojala, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to investigate new methods for engaging the youth in sustainable development and their local environment.

This article explores how the educational system can serve as a platform to connect youth with their local environment, bolstering sustainability action competence and encouraging engagement. We define sustainability action competence, inspired by Jensen & Jørgensen (2002) and Mogensen & Schnack (2010), as a set of action-oriented and participatory components that foster an interconnected and motivating understanding of sustainability challenges and ability to act. We emphasise that sustainable development requires an understanding of environmental, social and economic perspectives.

Schools are considered essential for building skills and values related to sustainability (Bosevska & Kriewaldt, 2020; Wamsler, 2020), and since the Agenda 21 Report in 1992, suggested linking sustainable development to education, researchers have argued that using educational institutions to promote sustainable development is effective (UNESCO, n.d.). Particularly in high school (when students are aged 16–21 years in Denmark), young people are moulded into individuals and absorb a substantial amount of knowledge, which enables them to think critically (UBU, 2022). However, many young people lack knowledge about their local community. Therefore, active engagement in their neighbourhood can provide valuable insights, which they can reflect on (Gabrielsen & Korsager, 2018).

Educational institutions educate future citizens, giving them knowledge about how to behave in society. Though this is an essential skill, there is a lack of concrete action-oriented approaches in Danish high schools (Christensen et al., 2022). One way of creating action-oriented education is through action research. Conducting action research in educational settings is not new, but it can still be challenging for teachers to include it as an active part of the curriculum. Kemmis (2009) argue that action research can create collective self-transformation, i.e., the transformation of our practices, how we understand them and the conditions that enable or constrain them. Furthermore, engaging students in action research can empower them to influence their social conditions. This approach creates close connections

between understanding and changing the world, where knowledge develops through creative processes and practice cycles (criticism, investigation, reflection, action) (Stoecker, 1999). The inclusion of citizens in research and decision-making processes, in particular, is valuable in action research to create more democratic research. Citizen science (CS) offers a framework that combines research and community engagement. CS has shown potential for transforming participants from data collectors into builders of community knowledge by applying action research methods (Evans-Agnew & Eberhardt, 2019). We argue that the framework of CS can help teachers develop students' sustainability action competence through a framework that engages young people in their local surroundings. Increasing local awareness allows critical questions to be asked, which is essential for developing action competence (Mogensen & Schnack, 2010).

Our collaboration with a Danish high school experimented with an action-oriented didactic approach. However, the rigid Danish education system and time constraints pose challenges to changing teaching methods. Therefore, it is also relevant to investigate the potential of developing new teaching programs and curricula.

The article is organised as follows: Section 2 and 3 review the literature and concepts upon which the study is based. Section 2 discusses the challenges and opportunities in planning teaching for sustainable development. Section 3 explores the feasibility of using the citizen science framework, including citizen social science, to develop sustainability action competence. In section 4 we present the empirical background and describe the case study's methods and data. Section 5 analyses the development of youths' sustainability action competence and their relationship to the neighbourhood. Section 6 discusses the key considerations for supporting citizen social science as a means of developing sustainability action competence. Finally, section 7 presents some concluding remarks.

2. Planning education for sustainable development: Challenges and opportunities

When exploring the role teaching sustainability plays in fostering youth civic engagement, it is crucial to examine the key factors in planning education for sustainable development (ESD) and the associated challenges. When outlining the study, we draw inspiration from several models and studies that have guided our research process. In this section, we describe the importance of understanding sustainability as an interconnected whole, activating practice-oriented methods and action competence and integrating the local environment when planning ESD.

2.1 Fostering interconnected and practice-oriented sustainability understanding

In educational settings, there has been a tendency to primarily emphasise the environmental aspects of sustainability and overlook the social and economic dimensions. To address this limitation, the UN (UNESCO) introduced the ESD-approach, which advocates a comprehensive exploration of all three dimensions of sustainability (environmental, social, eco-

nomic) through the sustainable development goals in teaching. This approach facilitates interconnected learning, emphasising practical action and skill development (UNESCO, 2020). Particularly in Nordic countries, educators tend to adopt an environmental perspective, centering sustainability teaching around the climate and the environment. However, they assert the importance of students gaining a critical, systemic and action-oriented understanding of the world through all facets of sustainability (UBU, 2022). In our study, we applied qualitative methods to enable students to reflect on the interconnectedness of sustainability in a nature geography class.

Given the complexity of sustainability, teachers are uncertain about how to teach sustainable development in practice (Gabrielsen & Korsager, 2018). Usually, teachers have specific topics they need to cover, but teaching sustainable development requires equipping students with certain tools. Garbrielsen & Korsager (2018) analysed teachers' experiences with handling the complexity of sustainable development and found that teaching unfamiliar subjects was challenging. Although the UN developed ESD to ease the educational transition, studies have shown that the approach needs to be more tangible. Christensen et al. (2022) discovered that teachers not only struggle to explain the complexity of sustainability but also face challenges relating climate issues to the students' daily lives. Teaching sustainable development necessitates the adoption of new practice-oriented teaching methods. Furthermore, changes to the curriculum are imperative in order to incorporate a pedagogical approach that promotes hope, action skills and critical thinking (UBU, 2022). To address these challenges, we co-designed a course with a teacher using a structured framework and conducted reflection meetings throughout the collaboration.

2.2   The action competence approach: Motivating sustainability investigations

Mogensen & Schnack (2010) explored the action competence approach as a means of supporting ESD and promoting youths' motivation to address sustainability challenges. Though they have an environmental focus, they discovered that adopting a problem-oriented perspective enhanced teaching, learning and reflection, which was crucial for fostering students' capacity and enthusiasm for action. Central to developing action competence is the promotion of critical thinking. High school students, in particular, should acquire fundamental knowledge that enables them to take a stance on sustainability challenges (UBU, 2022). The ability to ask critical questions aligns with the elements of empowerment outlined by the Brazilian philosopher, Paulo Freire, who emphasises the importance of developing a critical awareness of social, political, and financial contradictions to combat oppression (Freire, 2017). Christensen et al. (2022) argue for the need for tools that encourage reflection and dialogue on sustainability challenges and potential solutions. By nurturing critical curiosity, young individuals can develop the competence required to address sustainability challenges and engage with the local environment.

Jensen & Jørgensen (2002) formulated a framework that elaborates the concept of nature and environmental competence. They highlight four essential components of environmental action competence: 1) Knowledge and insight; 2) visionary and critical thinking; 3) engagement, will, and courage and 4) the ability to interact. Knowledge and insight are vital for understanding the environmental and societal impacts of our actions, their causes, strategies for change and potential solutions (Jensen & Jørgensen, 2002). The second component,

visionary and critical thinking, enables the creation of novel solutions to problems. Engagement, will and courage are essential for building motivation and instilling belief in the potential impact of one's action. The fourth component, the ability to interact, is integral for creating future visions through debate, feedback and the formation of social communities. Consequently, strengthening youths' capacity to interact is crucial for developing action competence. In our research, we have drawn inspiration from the four components of nature and environmental competence, combining them with citizen social science and action research methods to provide a more concrete framework.

2.3   Leveraging the local environment for hands-on learning

Effective sustainability education often requires tangible hands-on experiences as some skills cannot be acquired through lecture-based methods alone (Wiek et al., 2014). One effective approach is to incorporate the local environment as an educational resource. Gabrielsen & Korsager (2018) explored the benefits of integrating the local environment into sustainability education, and found that it fostered a stronger connection to the community and facilitated authentic first-hand knowledge acquisition. However, using the local environment for sustainability teaching demands a deep connection to the area, particularly when addressing societal and environmental challenges (Gabrielsen & Korsager, 2018). A study in an American school that implemented a problem-based teaching approach in sustainability education revealed that students were very appreciative of collaborative experiences. Such experiences motivated them to participate and made sustainability a more concrete and relevant subject (Wiek et al., 2014). Therefore, it is interesting to further investigate the impact of collaboration in this context. Despite its long-standing tradition in natural science education, empirical studies on the local environment as a learning arena remain scarce (Gabrielsen & Korsager, 2018). Due to its relevance and positive influence on youths' understanding of the local environment, we explore how local field studies can foster civic youth engagement and develop sustainability action competence.

3.   Citizen social science: Fostering sustainability action competence

As mentioned earlier, CS has the potential to yield valuable insights into the local environment, thereby enhancing participants' local awareness. When combined with action research methods, CS can empower participants to become active contributors to community knowledge (Evans-Agnew & Eberhardt, 2019). According to Kasperowski & Kullenberg (2019), CS is often associated with Alan Irwin's book from 1995 *"Citizen Science: a study of People, Expertise and Sustainable Development"*. In the book, Irwin analyses different forms of deliberative governance in which people who are affected by the consequences of science and technology demand a say in decision-making. Building on Irwin's ideas, actively engaging citizens in scientific processes can offer valuable knowledge.

Because the natural sciences are traditionally emphasised in CS, there is a tendency to overlook social phenomena. This gap led social science researchers to develop citizen social science (CSS) (Albert et al., 2021), which is a relatively new concept that has not been studied

extensively, particularly in educational settings. Perelló (2022) argues that CSS enriches CS by focusing research on social aspects of groups, communities and individuals. In CS, traditionally, citizens have only been included in some stages of the research processes (such as data collection) and not all of them, and there is a pressure on the concept to move past the narrow passive application and involve citizens throughout the scientific process (Cavalier & Kennedy, 2016).

Directly involving high school students in several research processes as co-researchers offers hands-on experience, thereby fostering critical thinking, engagement, reflection and interaction with local actors. Our research delves into how CSS can be applied within educational settings for sustainable development to promote an interconnected and practice-oriented understanding of sustainability challenges, which activates action competence and uses the local environment as discussed in section 2. Furthermore, we draw inspiration from action research methods to enable the students to enter the project as co-researchers.

4. Methodology: Engaging Danish high school students as citizen social scientists

As a part of the EU-funded YouCount project, nine European countries explored hands-on strategies for involving youths (14–30 years) as co-researchers to improve social inclusion through CSS (YouCount, 2020). The Danish case takes place in Sydhavn (South Harbour), Copenhagen. Sydhavn is an old industrial area roughly divided into an old and a new part. The old part of Sydhavn is considered one of Copenhagen's six vulnerable urban areas as it faces challenges in terms of low education and unemployment (YouCount, 2020). In our study, we collaborated with a nature geography teacher, where 17 high school students (aged 18–21) engaged as citizen social scientists. Their task was to investigate the potential of local sustainable community activities to foster youth civic engagement. The collaboration consisted of 17 class modules, which ran from February 2022 to May 2022 and ended with a dissemination activity at a local festival in June 2022.

4.1 Method description

The modules were co-designed with the teacher and drew inspiration from the double diamond design process representation (Design Council, n.d.). We strategically chose this model as a framework for the co-design to provide straightforward and tangible planning steps. The modules were divided into four phases: Discover (questioning challenges and identifying needs), Define (making sense of findings), Develop (creating, testing and refining potential solutions) and Deliver (selecting a single solution and preparing it for launch) (Framework for Innovation – Design Council, n.d.) (see figure 1). These phases align with the practice cycles (criticism, investigation, reflection, action) of action research, as presented by Stoecker (1999).

Figure 1: An overview of the collaboration, categorising it into the phases of the Double Diamond model, the action research practice cycle, and the the components inspired by environmental action competence inspired by Jensen & Jørgensen (2002).

	Phases in the collaboration	Amount of modules
Knowledge and insight	**Discover / Critisism** Bring knowledge about why developing youth-friendly sustainable cities is essential. Provide an insight into the sustainability concept, how it is used, and how the students can investigate it locally. We provide tools and methods for fieldwork and analyse findings to provide insight into the local environment, its actors, and local challenges.	6
Vision and critical thinking	**Define /investigation** Provide tools for defining a problem statement. Communicate the defined challenge to the other research teams and explain why it is relevant for sustainable development in the local area. This phase should increase awareness of the different challenges in the area and create diverse visions for the youths to discuss and reflect on.	4
Engagement, will and courage	**Develop / reflection** Provide knowledge that supports young people discussion about how to participate in society. Furthermore, the phase provides methods for innovation work and stimulates creative thinking and reflection on solving the defined problem statement. The young people must test their ideas with others to secure youth-friendly aspects and courage.	5
Ability for interaction	**Deliver / action** Provide time and methods for the youths to disseminate their ideas to get valuable feedback for further development and reflection. The young people should be challenged in communicating and defending their problem statement and innovation for local actors.	1 +local festival

Each phase served a specific purpose and enhanced the components of sustainability action competence. Figure 1 outlines the purpose of each phase. The course design equipped and trained the co-researchers with the knowledge and tools required to conduct field studies in the local environment, engage in discussions and reflect on challenges and potential solutions. For a detailed breakdown of the collaboration, see Figure 2, in which each square represents a module and describes the content. The outer circles illustrate the co-design and follow-up interaction with the teacher.

The collaboration originated from the high school teacher's interest in a more action-oriented teaching approach that linked education to the local surroundings. The co-design process created a framework that integrated CSS with learning objectives related to the nature

Figure 2: Overview of the collaboration with the high school through 17 modules.
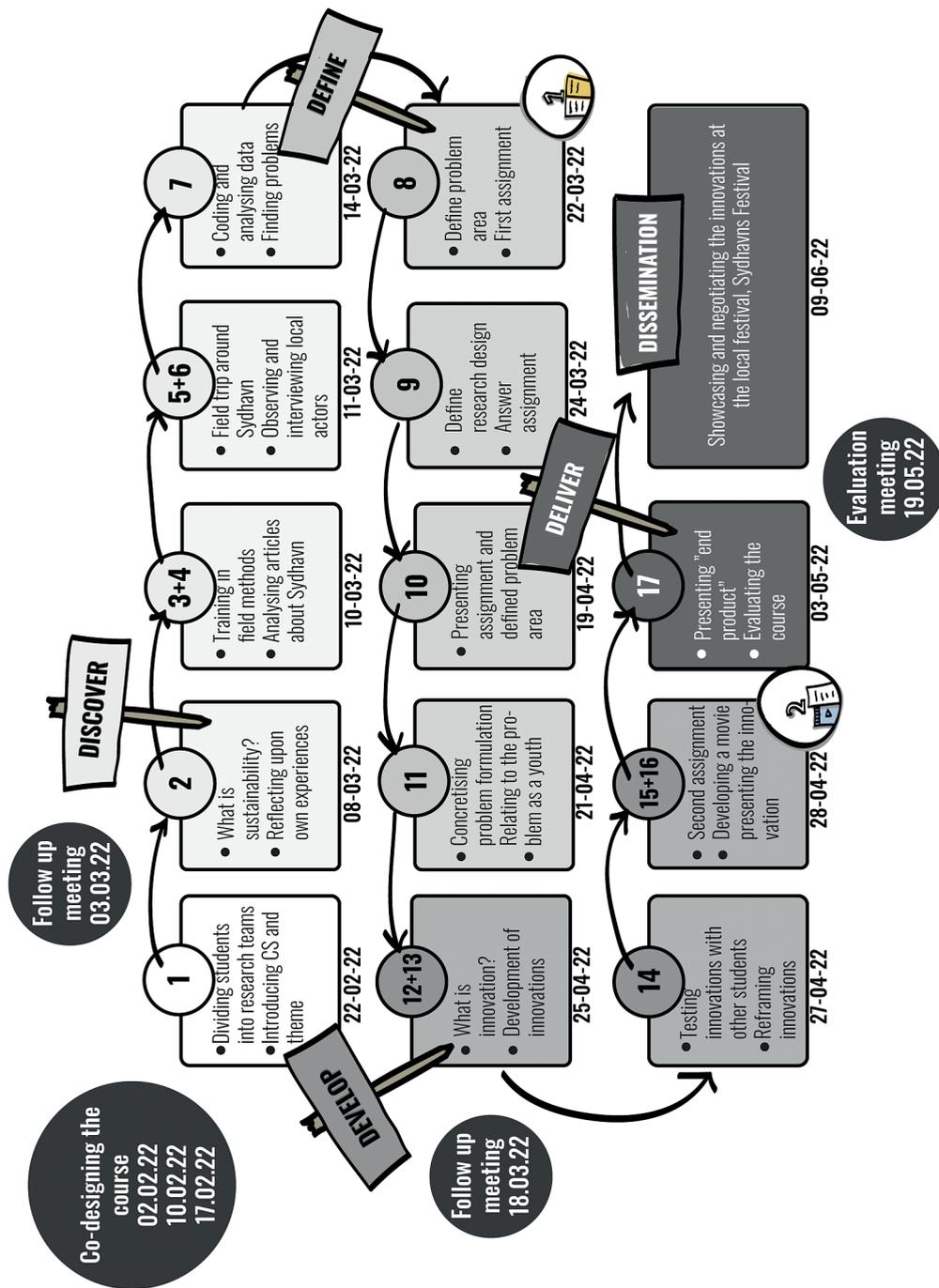
geography theme *sustainable city development.* In addition to investigating, analysing and innovating, the students were required to submit two assignments and a video presentation outlining their problem, research design, data and innovations (see figure 2, illustrated as circles containing documents).

4.2 Empirical data collection

The empirical data utilised in this article comprises two main components. Firstly, we draw on the co-researchers' experiences with various action research methods including interviews, observation techniques, field notes and thematic analysis (Beck et al., 2015). These methods allowed them to investigate and formulate problem statements. Secondly, we collected data through participatory observation (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011), involving notetaking and observations of reactions, engagement, informal conversations and collaboration between the co-researchers. To support the evaluation, we conducted two focus group interviews, the first during the collaboration and the second afterwards, each with six co-researchers participating.

The 17 students were divided into five research teams, each of which were tasked with identifying a local sustainability challenge to address through youth-friendly solutions. The students provided their written consent to participate in the project.

The data collection phase consisted of six 1.5-hour modules (see Figure 2). The modules incorporated relevant literature and shared experiences from previous small research projects to make the methods more tangible and visual. Each team was provided with a notepad to record questions and observations. During a double module (3 hours), we went on a 4 km bike ride through Sydhavn to conduct field studies, which exposed the teams to various parts of the neighbourhood and existing sustainable initiatives. In the following two modules, students applied the thematic analysis method known as the affinity diagram (Beyer & Holtzblatt, 1997) to categorise their field notes and findings. An affinity diagram organises individual notes captured during interviews, observations and desk research to reveal common issues and themes, thereby providing a tangible and visual framework for coding. To encourage reflection on different sustainability aspects in Sydhavn, we developed an analytical model inspired by Copenhagen municipality's model for sustainable urban development (KK Bæredygtighedsværktøj, n.d.). At the end of the project, we organised a small exhibition at a local festival to facilitate interaction between the co-researchers and local actors, which allowed them to test their innovations.

5. Analysis: Developing sustainability action competence

This section follows the structure outlined in Figure 1 in Section 4 and focuses on analysing the co-researchers' development of sustainability action competence across the four key elements inspired by Jensen & Jørgensen (2002): 1) knowledge and insight, 2) visionary and critical thinking, 3) engagement, will and courage and 4) the ability to interact. We argue that knowledge is acquired continuously throughout the process through the reading of literature and reflection, which makes it an integral part of the other three components. Our approach to

these four elements involving students as co-researchers is inspired by the literature discussed in Sections 2 and 3.

- Section 5.1(Insight) draws inspiration from Gabrielsen & Korsager's (2018) approach to field-based teaching and creating hands-on experiences, which can make the teaching more relevant to students.
- Section 5.2 (visionary & critical thinking) incorporates Mogensen & Schnack's (2010) concept of asking critical questions and insights from Christensen et al. (2022), who emphasise the importance of stimulating reflection.
- Section 5.3 (engagement, will & courage) takes a cue from Perelló (2022), who claims that CSS can support a social perspective of research objectives. Furthermore, it is inspired by Freire's (2017) work on enhancing tools enabling action and UNESCO's (2020) focus on developing practice-oriented teaching approaches to ESD.
- Section 5.4 (ability to interact) aligns with Wiek et al.'s (2014) ideas of establishing collaborative experiences for motivation.

Besides analysing the empirical data, the following sections illustrate how our study relates to the existing literature. The empirical data is presented through quotes and pictures.

5.1   Creating insight, criticism and identifying challenges

Training the co-researchers to employ research tools for exploring their local environment proved valuable for creating a practical approach to teaching. Before entering the district, the co-researchers read and discussed articles to establish a shared understanding of Sydhavn and its potential controversies.

During the field trip (See photo in figure 3), we facilitated meetings with local stakeholders, which enabled the co-researchers to interview them about issues and sustainable solutions at four locations. This experience allowed them to ask questions, accumulate knowledge about potential opportunities and challenges in the neighbourhood and cultivate genuine first-hand insights: essential for fostering strong connections between the local environment and educational institutions (Gabrielsen & Korsager, 2018).

A focus group interview with a group of co-researchers revealed that the field study left a positive impression on the students, their learning and local understanding.

"The field trip, when we cycled around Sydhavn and engaged with locals, was the highlight of the project. It was interesting to interact with different people in a divided area, as they brought new perspectives to the table." – Focus group interview, Valdemar, co-researcher.

While they were talking with the local stakeholders, the co-researchers took field notes, which served as the basis for discussions in the following modules.

Figure 3: Photo from the field trip.

We observed that most co-researchers utilised the tools provided to document their observations and took photographs during the field trip.

Although the local stakeholders primarily discussed environmental solutions for sustainable urban development, the co-researchers began to grasp the social dynamics within the neighbourhood:

"It was eye-opening to hear the frustration from the old part of Sydhavn regarding the new developments. The loss of old authenticity in new building projects and the resulting cultural differences were discussed. One person mentioned that Sydhavn is one of the few remaining working-class districts in Copenhagen that accommodates unconventional residents. This states the importance of social sustainability" – Focus group interview, Jeppe, co-researcher.

The field trip provided co-researchers with new insights that altered their perception of Sydhavn and, consequently, their ideas for promoting civic engagement in their local environment. This underscores the potential of incorporating the local environment and stakeholders into the educational setting, to cultivate a more concrete and interconnected understanding of sustainability in the area. Furthermore, it supported a real-world context for sustainability, which is essential when making tangible and relatable teaching (Christensen et al., 2022).

5.2   Visionary and critical thinking: Defining and investigating problem statements

After the field trip, we facilitated several modules during which co-researchers actively processed their data and critically assessed their findings. The photos in figure 4 illustrate the co-researchers' analytical processes with the collected data. They engaged in discussions and coded their experiences into problem statements for further investigation.

Figure 4: Co-researchers working with the empirical data after field studies.

Allowing students to actively engage with the data enabled them to develop their own vision for the projects. Giving them the role of co-researcher gave them a new way to participate in the learning process:

"Giving us tools to investigate the local area helped us establish a background understanding of the problems and ideas of the neighbourhood's residents. It allowed us to grasp how they perceived sustainability challenges, which enhanced our basic knowledge of the area. It gave us new insights that fueled our creativity" – Valdemar, co-researcher.

By coding data and discussing their findings, the co-researchers had the opportunity to critically evaluate the local area and question their observations. Like Mogensen & Schnack (2010), we found that developing critical consciousness can help youths react to the state of the world and take position. As part of the definition phase, we developed an analytical tool that prompted the co-researchers to relate their observations to the three dimensions of sustainability, which made the analytical process more concrete and interconnected (UBU, 2022). This tool encouraged discussions and reflections about the effect the locations that were visited had on the social, environmental, and economic parameters (see figure 5, left side). If the local area supported the sustainability consideration, the co-researchers had to color the whole area in the analytical tool. However, if their observations only partly supported the

sustainability consideration, they only had to color some areas of the tool (Figure 5, right side).

Figure 5: Pictures of the analytical tool, inspired by Copenhagen municipality's model for urban sustainable development (KK bæredygtighedsværktøj, n.d.) before and after the exercise.
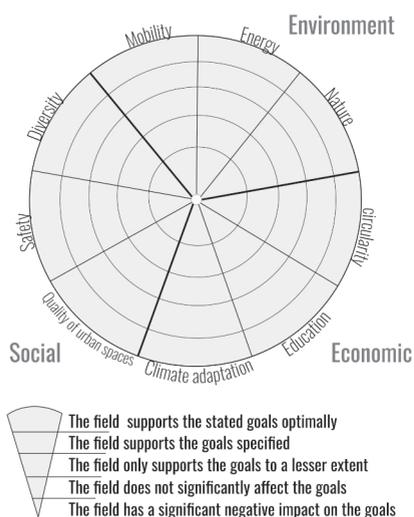
The co-researchers' reflections and the tool helped them develop their problem statements and stimulated further discussion about their findings. The observations highlight the importance of facilitating the analytical processes as it creates space in the educational setting for students to discuss, stimulates reflections on methods and observations, and fosters ongoing dialogue about sustainability challenges and opportunities. Being able to stimulate reflection is also highlighted as an important task to raise in teaching, because it supports developing students' capacity to make responsible choices (Christensen et. al, 2022). The practical approach enhanced the students' understanding of the area, enabled them to view problems from different perspectives and resulted in more complex insights into opportunities and dynamics. Additionally, it provided a tangible setting for considering real-world solutions. Co-designing the course with the teacher revealed that concretising concepts and encouraging students to take a position were essential for their engagement. Field-based approaches expanded the co-researchers' awareness of various aspects of the local environment.

"It has been super interesting because it is so different from what we are used to; Sydhavn is not just a boring place because there are so many different districts and people" – Olivia, co-researcher.

5.3 Enhancing engagement, will and courage: Developing reflective innovations

Engaging the young co-researchers resulted in them gaining a deeper understanding of the neighbourhood's complexities and the way in which relationships influence collaboration between the various districts of Sydhavn. They became aware of demographic divisions, which inspired them to seek sustainable ways to connect the areas. Although the co-researchers only interacted with a few community members, they grasped key aspects of the local dynamics. This social understanding is highly relevant to incorporate in activities in the natural science classes and sustainability teaching. It prompts students to reflect on the challenges of turning sustainable ideas into reality in neighbourhoods. Applying CSS in education enables co-researchers to consider the social dimension of sustainability, because it brings a social focus (Perelló, 2022). This is essential, because understanding the social processes that drive sustainability challenges and developing practical judgment are essential for responsible action that does not harm the community (UNESCO, 2020).

For instance, one group focused on the segregation between the old and new Sydhavn and explored the impact this segregation has on daily life. They also delved into subjective attitudes towards gentrification. The field trip provided valuable impressions of lifestyles in these districts. This engagement with the local environment not only brought co-researchers closer to the local environment, it also shed light on underlying challenges between the old and new Sydhavn. It motivated the co-researchers to explore ways of bridging these divisions through environmentally sustainable activities. Another group wrote the following in their assignment:

"We observed a unique focus on social sustainability in the fishing port in Sydhavn, which stood out from other districts as there was an emphasis on environmental sustainability and energy efficiency. This distinction, combined with the ongoing urban development challenges, sparked our interest. We intend to investigate the tensions between the new and the original residents in the fishing port and explore cultural shifts associated with recent construction projects." – Excerpt from Liva, Sebastian, Cecilie, and Anahita's assignment.

Using qualitative CSS methods in education has the potential to boost motivation and drive change among co-researchers. The co-researchers found it relevant to investigate the social parameters behind the sustainability challenges, which demonstrated that they were taking responsibility for supporting the development of ideas that could guide the neighbourhood in alternative directions. This approach fosters a more interconnected understanding of sustainability, making it tangible for the teacher to facilitate through concrete tools:

"We haven't tried to facilitate the innovation in real life, but it has great potential, we are trying to establish a strong community in Sydhavn between the old and the new, but through an environmental sustainability activity (collecting trash)." – Valdemar, co-researcher. *"It won't necessarily be easy, but it wouldn't take many resources to establish such an event compared to building new greenhouses (referring to another innovation)".* – Frida, co-researcher.

The quote illustrates the co-researchers' engagement with their innovation, and their will to explore its potential further. Some even returned to the field after school hours to present their

innovations to some of the residents in the area. They did this because they needed more information about the district to develop their innovation and complete the assignment. This illustrates the co-researchers' initiative, courage and desire to gain more knowledge about the residents in the area. The process not only equipped them with tools to work with their findings, it also nurtured action-oriented skills, which they could use to tackle sustainability challenges, thereby echoing Freire's emphasis on empowering people with practical tools to drive positive change (Freire, 2017).

5.4   Enabling interaction: Delivering the innovations for action

Throughout the collaboration, the co-researchers enhanced their ability to present and discuss their findings and innovations with each other, which improved their capacity to advocate for their ideas.

"We were not sitting individually in front of the computer, it was very much discussion-based, which gave you the ability to argue for the idea." – Valdemar, co-researcher.

These collaborative experiences are essential for creating motivation and making the subject of sustainability more concrete (Wiek et al., 2014). We witnessed courage to interact with local actors. As described previously, establishing debate, critical awareness and feedback is essential for future sustainable visions and innovations (Jensen & Jørgensen, 2002).

    To acknowledge and support the co-researchers' ideas, we organised an exhibition during a music festival in Sydhavn, where the co-researchers showcased the knowledge that they had developed during the 17 modules. This event allowed local stakeholders and residents to engage in discussions and provide input for further development (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Photo of the festival.

The exhibition consisted of posters which guided dialogue about the collaboration and three movies which presented the co-researchers' sustainable innovations. We also placed poly-

styrene boards which illustrated their innovations and allowed the audience to add their reflections (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: The polystyrene boards illustrating one of the innovations. The audience's additions is seen on the right side and the co-researchers' ideas on the left side of the board.

While only three of the 17 students participated in the festival, it was still valuable for disseminating the co-researchers' work and allowing them to interact with the local community. The event placed their innovations in a real-world context, and demonstrated the potential for creating new conversations. Having an opportunity to discuss with residents outside school stimulated different types of discussions than those that occurred in the classroom:

"We talked to people about how we have focused on different sustainability aspects, and the district in Sydhavn we have focused on. The audience we spoke to told us that they had a close relationship with the area, so it would be nice to have an idea like ours to get started with" – Rachel, co-researcher.

The innovation the quotation refers to is a community garden, the aim of which was to make the new district greener and create a meeting point for residents. Through participating in the festival, the co-researchers gained awareness of the community's interest in their innovations. The exhibition created a space in which the audience took the co-researchers seriously and showed that their ideas could foster inspiration.

By enabling local actors to interact and reflect on the co-researchers' work, we created a tangible way of fostering new perspectives on their innovations.

As a part of our collaboration, we provided the co-researchers with various creative tools such as design games, frameworks and paper-based exercises to stimulate interaction and

discussion within their groups. These tangible materials were well-received by both students and the teacher as they made the process more engaging. The teacher expressed interest in using similar materials in future classes, thereby highlighting the need for additional support in developing new educational materials and tools for sustainability teaching.

6.   Discussion

As the results indicate, implementing CSS in an educational setting has significant potential for advancing sustainability teaching and fostering sustainability action competence among students. The various components of our approach, including field studies, data processing, innovational work and dissemination activities, provided students with tangible, hands-on exercises that increased their engagement with the local environment. In particular, making sustainability teaching more practical is something that is frequently requested by teachers and educational institutions (Christensen et al., 2022; UBU, 2022; Wiek et al., 2014). Furthermore, this approach enhanced their understanding of the neighbourhood, encouraged critical reflection and contributed to their overall knowledge development.

It is important to note that while the positive outcomes are evident, it remains unclear whether it was the action research methods in an education setting, the opportunity to participate in an EU-funded project, exposure to relevant literature, the creative exercises initiated before and after the field trip, or a combination of these that had a positive influence on the co-researchers' engagement. However, one or more of these elements had an impact on the students' connection to the area.

Throughout the project, our aim was to facilitate collaboration by structuring it through the design phases of discover, define, develop and deliver to meet the components of sustainability action competence. While this approach demonstrated its effectiveness in fostering sustainability action competence, further investigations are needed. Collaborating with additional high school classes and exploring different districts may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the potential benefits of the approach and may highlight potential areas for improvement.

6.1   Moving from case to implemented approach.

Developing sustainability action competence among the co-researchers was a time-consuming process which necessitated careful planning, facilitation and collaboration with the high school teacher and external stakeholders. However, constraints on teachers' time due to their busy schedules may make it challenging for them to dedicate sufficient time to such activities. Therefore, there is a need for a well-structured concept and supporting materials to facilitate the integration of CSS and action research methods into educational settings.

In Denmark, many high school teachers rely on online platforms to access teaching materials that align with their specific learning objectives. While this approach is convenient, it frequently lacks action-oriented resources (Systime STX, n.d.). To address this gap, we integrated the action research principles of criticism, investigation, reflection and action

(Stoecker, 1999) into our approach, in order to provide teachers with a more hands-on and interactive approach to education for sustainable development (ESD).

Although we collaborated with a nature geography class and covered the learning objectives of sustainable cities, it revealed that the competencies developed through a CSS approach are applicable to various high school subjects including social sciences, economics, mathematics, language and biology. However, ESD is still in its early stages across educational levels and experimental examples like the ones presented here are crucial for incorporating sustainability action competence.

According to our analysis, the co-researchers demonstrated that they gained competencies through a CSS approach, which allowed them to:

- Move from taught knowledge to investigating a local context
- Define a problem based on field data
- Develop a solution to a defined problem
- Disseminate and discuss a problem and potential solutions

Applying the competencies above to the central components of environmental competence (knowledge and insight, vision and critical thinking, engagement, will and courage, ability for interaction) (Jensen & Jørgensen, 2002) creates a simple framework for supporting sustainability action competence in teaching (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Illustration of the developed framework of sustainability action competence.
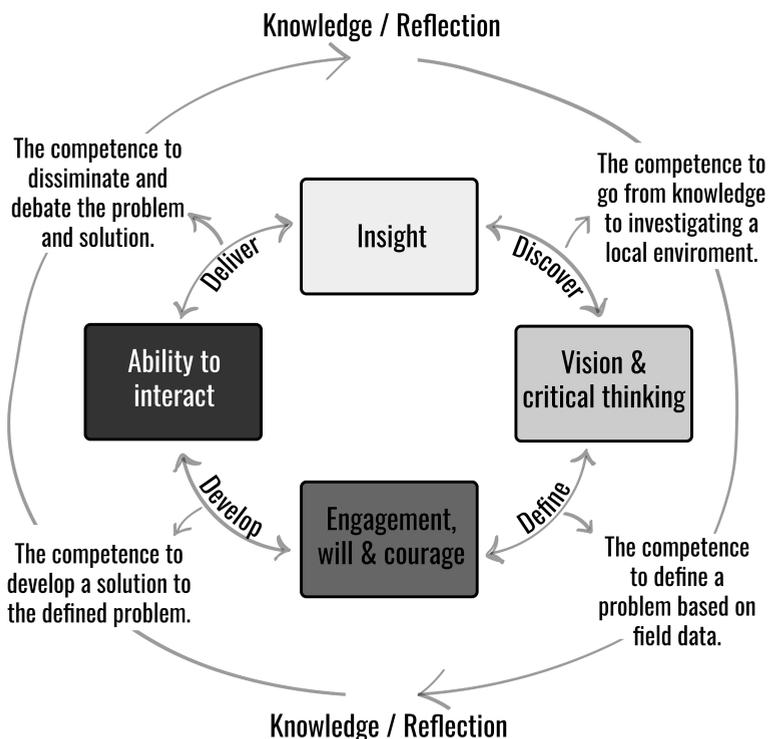
This model allows teachers to integrate their class-specific learning objectives into the framework and use it as a practical tool for inspiration and planning. Each box in the figure contains the main components of sustainability action competence while the arrows between the boxes indicate the skill necessary to obtain the competence. Throughout the process, knowledge must be shared, discussed and reflected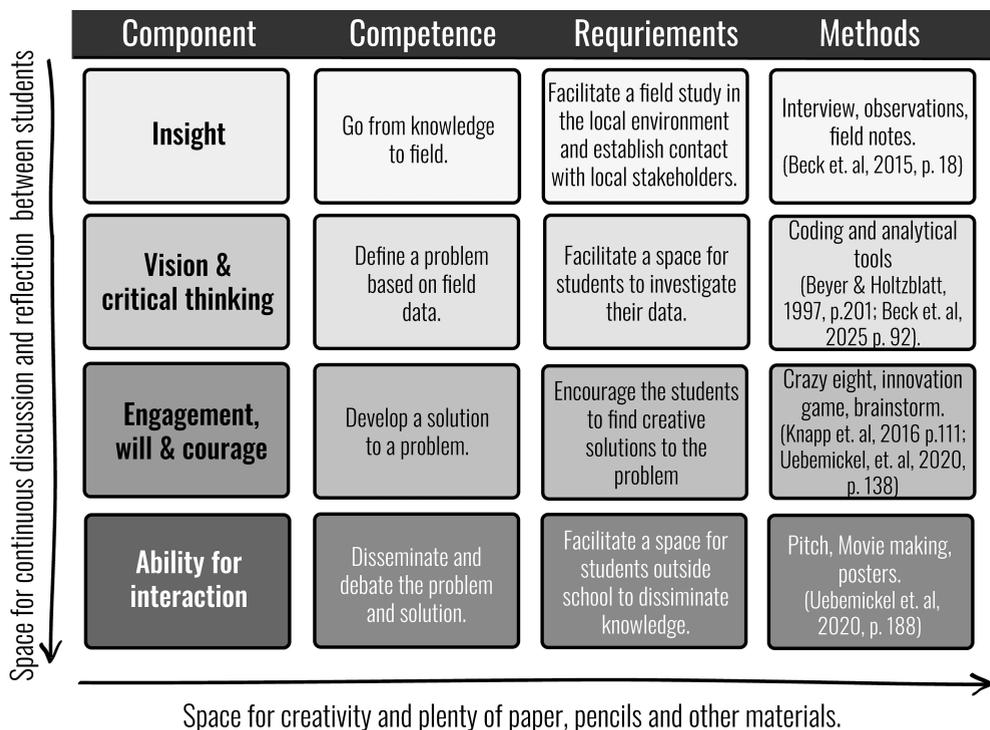 upon during all phases. To implement this approach successfully, teachers need to create an environment that stimulates and supports discussion throughout the competence-building process as this encourages the students to be creative and reflective.

Effective implementation also means that the teacher must develop professionally, while adjustments must be made to the curriculum in order to incorporate field studies, action research and innovative teaching methods that foster creativity, problem-solving and critical thinking among the students (Mogensen & Schnack, 2010; UBU, 2022).

Our study demonstrated that involving students in field studies, encouraging collaboration within research teams (Gabrielsen & Korsager, 2018), allowing creative problem-solving and providing opportunities for dissemination and discussion with the local community all contributed to heightened student engagement and motivation.

Figure 9 presents the components, competencies, requirements and suggested methods to enhance sustainability action competence in an educational setting.

Figure 9: Illustration of the components, competences, requirements and suggested methods to enhance sustainability action competence in an educational setting.

Component	Competence	Requriements	Methods
Insight	Go from knowledge to field.	Facilitate a field study in the local environment and establish contact with local stakeholders.	Interview, observations, field notes. (Beck et. al, 2015, p. 18)
Vision & critical thinking	Define a problem based on field data.	Facilitate a space for students to investigate their data.	Coding and analytical tools (Beyer & Holtzblatt, 1997, p.201; Beck et. al, 2025 p. 92).
Engagement, will & courage	Develop a solution to a problem.	Encourage the students to find creative solutions to the problem	Crazy eight, innovation game, brainstorm. (Knapp et. al, 2016 p.111; Uebemickel, et. al, 2020, p. 138)
Ability for interaction	Disseminate and debate the problem and solution.	Facilitate a space for students outside school to disseminate knowledge.	Pitch, Movie making, posters. (Uebemickel et. al, 2020, p. 188)

Space for continuous discussion and reflection between students

Space for creativity and plenty of paper, pencils and other materials.

However, further research involving various classes, teachers and students is required to refine this framework. It is essential to determine whether the framework can function as an independent educational package, or whether it requires the co-design and support given in this project. In addition, future research should explore the impact of discussion, creativity and physical tools (such as design games and paper-based frameworks, etc.) in educational settings on students' engagement and motivation.

6.2   Supporting youth engagement and local action

Combining action research methods and citizen social science presents a promising avenue for engaging young people in the local environment, fostering their ability to identify opportunities and propose changes to the neighbourhood. As mentioned, previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of integrating action research and citizen science, such as the study by Evans-Agnew & Eberhardt (2019), which involved youths in air sampling through photovoice, where they transformed from data collectors to active contributors to community knowledge and drivers of policy change.

In our research, we have identified the potential of combining CSS and action research methods within an educational setting to encourage an interconnected reflection on sustainability challenges. During the local festival, we observed that the co-researchers took pride in their work and engaged in discussions with the audience. This indicates a self-transformation process facilitated through collective knowledge development, which is a fundamental aspect of action research (Kemmis, 2009).

Incorporating educational activities into public settings and involving the local environment and its actors offers young people authentic, first-hand knowledge (Gabrielsen & Korsager, 2018) and empowers them through the educational institution. Though the students did not implement their ideas, they engaged in observation, definition and idea development, which they were able to evaluate at the local festival. This approach aligns with the principles of Paulo Freire (2017), who emphasises the importance of equipping people with tools to address oppressive experiences through reflection, analysis and action. The co-researchers not only had the opportunity to investigate and define challenges in the neighbourhood, they also, and more importantly, had the opportunity to propose actionable solutions. This approach also brought new perspectives about the local environment, which opened up further opportunities for youth engagement.

7.   Conclusion

In this paper, we have investigated the potential of utilising a Danish high school setting to foster civic youth engagement in the local environment. Furthermore, we explored the effectiveness of combining CSS and action research methods as a supportive framework for cultivating young people's sustainability action competence. Our findings suggest that further investigations of this combination are warranted, in order to promote an action-oriented approach within educational institutions when implementing ESD.

Our research underscores the importance of incorporating practise and field-based approaches into the curriculum, as these approaches make literature and methods more tangible for both students and teachers. While it is challenging for teachers to find the time to implement alternative approaches to sustainability teaching, our study presents an opportunity to address the complexity of sustainability and connect teaching to students' everyday lives.

By training the co-researchers in action research methods and hands-on exercises, we equipped them with tools to explore and experience the local area differently. This approach encouraged meaningful discussions and reflection, which developed understanding and built critical awareness. Facilitating learning environments that inspire the students to step out of the classroom and away from their computer screens was shown to significantly increase their engagement.

Our analysis demonstrates that co-researchers developed competencies in terms of insight, visionary and critical thinking, engagement, will and courage and the ability to interact. Incorporating the elements of CSS contributed to an interconnected understanding of sustainability challenges, which is a crucial aspect for successful sustainable transitions. Furthermore, the framework brought the co-researchers closer to the local community by providing them with methods to explore the neighbourhood and gain valuable collective knowledge about the opportunities for civic engagement.

Given that the analysed case, nature geography, combines social science and geomorphology, we see the potential of including CSS in various subjects such as social science and natural science classes to gain a broader understanding of global issues. High school teachers often face pressure to achieve specific learning objectives within a limited timeframe. To facilitate the adoption of this approach without the support of researchers, the framework should be formalised and seamlessly integrated into teachers' daily responsibilities.

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Action Research: A Participatory Approach to Improve Measures of Labour Market Integration of Refugees

Alexandra David, Judith Terstriep, Silke Steinberg

Abstract: This paper illustrates the benefits action research adds to successfully co-creating measures for the labour market integration of refugees. Germany has become one of the most popular immigration countries in the world. In addition to current refugee flows from Ukraine, migration from third countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Turkey again increased in 2022. Compared to Ukrainians, who are subject to a special measure granting immediate and temporary protection in the event of a mass influx and direct access to the labour market, third-country representatives still have a limited path to the world of work. Following these events, this paper is motivated by the early research on developing measures for the labour market integration of refugees in Germany. It was conducted shortly after the so-called European "refugee crises" during 2015–2017. Due to increasing refugee movements, the findings are highly topical and thus make a renewed contribution to integration policies and action research as a participatory approach.

Keywords: participatory action research; refugees; labour market integration; pragmatic approach

Investigación-Acción: Un enfoque participativo para mejorar las medidas de integración laboral de los refugiados

Resumen: Este artículo ilustra los beneficios que la investigación-acción aporta para co-crear medidas exitosas para la integración laboral de refugiados. Alemania se ha convertido en uno de los países de inmigración más populares del mundo. Además de los flujos de refugiados actuales de Ucrania, la migración de terceros países como Siria, Afganistán y Turquía aumentó nuevamente en 2022. En comparación con los ucranianos, que están sujetos a una medida especial que les otorga protección inmediata y temporal en caso de un flujo masivo y acceso directo al mercado laboral, los representantes de terceros países aún tienen un camino limitado hacia el mundo laboral. Siguiendo estos acontecimientos, este artículo se motiva por la investigación temprana sobre el desarrollo de medidas para la integración laboral de refugiados en Alemania, llevada a cabo poco después de la denominada "crisis de refugiados" europea durante 2015–2017. Debido al aumento de los movimientos de refugiados, los hallazgos son altamente relevantes y, por lo tanto, hacen una nueva contribución a las políticas de integración y a la investigación-acción como enfoque participativo.

Palabras clave: Investigación-Acción Participativa; refugiados; integración en el mercado laboral; enfoque pragmático

1   Introduction

The huge influx of approximately 1.1 million refugees from Syria and the Middle East to Germany between 2015–2017, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, created a need for speedy labour market integration (David et al., 2019). Former studies for Germany (Kosyakova, 2021; IAB, 2015) show that 40% of refugees continue to face difficulties in entering the labour market, also ten years after the arrival of previous refugee cohorts. In response, quick measures have been taken in the case of the Ukrainian newcomers. Those of working age were immediately provided with a work permit, but relatively few work in permanent jobs (Giesing et al., 2022). It must be reflected that several Ukrainian refugees consider Germany as a stopover. However, as the war progresses, the situation is subject to change. Distinct from Ukrainian refugees, third-country refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Turkey (OEDC, 2022), in most cases, envisage and strive for a stable social and economic future in Germany. Yet, these groups often are excluded from the German labour market due to their residence status. A reason to revisit German labour market measures and the effectiveness of the approaches between 2015 and 2017 to consider lessons learned. Multiple studies indicate that these measures were mainly designed and implemented without prior consultation with the refugees, leading to their failure (Siebert, 2019).

Contemplating the above, we ask *what the action research approach adds to the co-creation of improved refugee labour market integration measures.* Opening the research process allows refugees to bring in their aspirations and concerns and shape the outcomes (Ataöv et al. 2010) as part of the European 'Science with and for Society' concept[1].

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: In the next section, we introduce the action research approach used in this paper and its benefits for the transfer of scientific findings into action. The research design following the action research spiral is introduced in section 3. Section 4 presents our findings and the actions taken in response to making a change. We conclude by discussing our findings for future interventions supporting refugees' labour market integration and its meaning for action research (Section 5).

2   Bringing action research into play

Originally, Lewin (1946, p. 35) defined action research as "[…] comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action." Based on the argument that "[r]esearch that produces nothing but books will not suffice," Lewin (1946, p. 35), at the core, developed the methodology to study social psychology in the framework of field theory. Since then, the concept of action research has become increasingly popular to justify applied research, especially when undertaking consultation (Rowell et al., 2015; Koshy et al., 2011; Parkin, 2009; Cassell and Johnson, 2006). Leand on Bradbury (2015: 1), all of the action research approaches are based on the "[…] pragmatic co-creation of knowing with, not on, people".

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1   Science for and with Society (SwafS) is a Horizon 2020 programme that aims to build effective cooperation between science and society, recruit new talent for science, and pair scientific excellence with social awareness and responsibility (https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/wp/2018–2020/main/h2020-wp1820-swfs_en.pdf).

Figure 1. Action Research Spiral
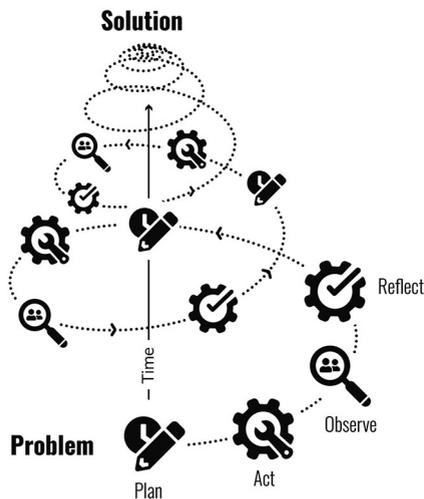
Source: Terstriep et al. (2021)

While acknowledging the limitations, there are several reasons for applying the concept in the context of the labour market integration of refugees. Following Greenwood (2007), we refer to action research as a practical strategic approach that engages (social) researchers and other experts with local stakeholders to make a change.

First, drawing on the basic understanding of action research (Lewin, 1946), scientific results can be turned faster into action, especially under extraordinary conditions (here, the high volume of immigration to Germany), which require fast solutions. Hereby, a strong focus is given to critical thinking (Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001, Ram, 2019), explained as "[l]earning to become critical of information and forming an opinion [...]" (LaPoint-O'Brien, 2013, p. 15).

Second, the participatory nature (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Reason & Bradbury, 2008) inherent in action research advocates for adopting this approach. Counteracting the exclusion of refugees from developing the measures for their labour market integration, participatory action research (PAR) recognises individuals as self-governing, engaged, reflective, accountable and knowledgeable participants collaborating to bring about change (Greenwood, 2014; Adelman, 1993). According to literature (Cassell & Johnson, 2006; Harrison & Leitch, 2000; Whyte, 1991) it follows that groups whose perspectives are usually silenced have the opportunity to be given a voice. In so doing, these groups can express and actively participate in the context of power relations (Avelino & Wittmeyer, 2015).

Third, intergroup relationships, connecting refugees with company leaders, researchers, and intermediary organisations simultaneously, are considered essential to presenting reciprocally how and why these groups behave according to their lived environment (Lewin, 1946).

Consequently, it is important to consider the refugees as co-researchers and experts in their situation. This procedure requires the greater engagement of society in research and innovation activities and direct access to research results in due consideration of the ethical dimension. In general, power relations are essential elements in action research, influencing

the dynamics and outcomes of the process (Kemmis & McTaggert, 2005). In line with Greenwood (2007), collaborators are involved in co-generating processes of knowledge, action design and evaluating outcomes.

In so doing, action research includes an ethical aspect in creating the possibility of participation (Terstriep et al., 2021; Whyte, 1991), being mindful of informed consent, and ensuring participants' rights and well-being are respected.

Fourth, including action learning (Raelin, 1999) allows all groups involved to come together and help each other to learn from their experiences. Generally, action learning can be described as a process involving working on real-world challenges, using the knowledge and skills of a smaller group of people. Accordingly, for Zuber-Skerritt (2001, p. 2), "[a]ction learning means learning from the action or concrete experience, as well as taking action as a result of this learning."

3 Explicating our action research approach

Acknowledging the distinct traditions in action research, we have deliberately chosen the participatory approach to action research, which places emphasis on the active engagement of individuals directly in the research process from the beginning. In the following, we exemplify the application of action research in the context of the labour market integration of refugees.

3.1 Background and scope of action

3.1.1 The German context

At the outset, our research aimed to enhance comprehension of the opportunities, challenges, similarities, and distinctions in refugees' labour market integration. Additionally, we sought to develop measures facilitating refugee employment in Germany. We focused on three sectors: information technologies (IT), geriatric care and construction as examples. These sectors have in common that they face a serious shortage of skilled workers. Besides, several factors supported the selection. The *IT industry* is known for its globalised work arrangements and its inclusive culture. It has exhibited a high degree of diversity and a willingness to facilitate employee mobility across various branches and positions. The *geriatric care sector* has significant prior experience in dealing with migration regarding employees and customer-patient relationships. Integrity and diversity in the teams are often well accepted but not always systematically exploited. Lastly, the *construction sector,* rooted in the longstanding German craft tradition, is acknowledged for its strong work ethic. Historically, the construction industry has demonstrated an incorporating of immigrants into its workforce. As will be shown in Section 4, these sectoral differences did not outweigh the common barriers refugees face in labour market integration.

Action research and data collection were conducted from January 2017 to December 2018 in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populated federal state, with over 18 million residents. The federal state has a long migration history that originates (after Warld War II) from the era of guest workers in the 1950 s and 1960 s.

3.1.2   The action research process

Scientists from three research organisations (hereinafter the 'scientific team'), including the authors, ten Syrian refugees as co-researchers, further interested refugees, companies and intermediary organisations such as chambers of commerce, economic development and employment agencies, and grassroot migration organisations (hereinafter referred collectively to as "actors" or "collaborators") engaged in the action research. They coordinated the iterative research process to develop measures for labour market integration. Drawing on Herr and Anderson (2015), we locate ourselves on the 'continuum of positionality': ranging from insiders (1) to outsiders (5): close to 4 as participatory outsiders collaborating *with* insiders. Accordingly, our main role was contributing to the knowledge base, facilitating collaboration, mediating conflicts and misunderstandings, and critically reflecting on established practices to improve them. This put us in a situation of continuous self-reflection of engagement and distance. Practical insights, individual and organisational experiences, and scientific knowledge were integrated to inform the research and its outcomes. Various modes or formats of interactive exchange and collaboration were employed throughout the process, as shown in the following.

In line with pragmatic PAR, which prioritises consensus-building (Greenwood, 2014, 2007), all participating actors initially underwent ethical sensitivity training before engaging in various exchange focusing on potential misunderstandings and unconscious biases (see Table 1). To circumvent power disbalance, members of the scientific team with expertise in intercultural communication and negotiation provided guidance to the involved actors, except the refugees; a grassroots migration organisation member: trained in trauma and ethical awareness, consulted with the refugees.

Second, mediated by the employment agency and grassroot migrant organisations, ten Syrian refugees acting as co-researchers underwent an *internship programme* at the participating research organisations. Through daily collaboration on action-related research, scientists and refugee co-researchers fostered mutual understanding, trust, and reciprocity. Diverse work cultures and perspectives have enabled the co-development of a multifaceted approach to improve labour market integration measures.

Third, the refugee co-researchers, the scientific team, intermediaries (e. g. migration organisations, employment agencies) and further interested refugees engaged in a series of "empowerment workshops" (s. Table 1). Subject to the respective topic, the ten workshops with ten units were organised as peer groups to share experiences and provide mutual support, encouragement, and guidance.

Fourth, organised in cooperation with the chamber of commerce, a matchmaking event facilitating the connection between refugees and companies, i. e. intergroup relations, was conducted (see Table 1). Participants identified common integration challenges faced by refugees, and exchanged ideas to develop solutions and mitigation strategies. This was followed by matching companies' needs and refugees' labour market aspirations, providing an opportunity to collaboratively identify shared challenges, gain perspective from each other, and devise solutions leading to successful recruitment.

Fifth, collecting feedback during these formats enabled an agile development in which improved approaches have been jointly designed repeatedly. Organising these events as open spaces allowed participating actors (mainly refugees and intermediaries) to take ownership of the process.

Sixth, six round tables gathered refugees, researchers, policymakers and representatives from intermediary organisations and companies to monitor and evaluate new insights stemming from our action research and its meaning for practice. Additionally, a project board of refugees, companies from the three sectors and intermediaries moderated by the scientific team and refugee co-researchers met five times to discuss lessons learnt in the process and their transfer into action.

Table 1. Interactive exchange and collaboration format utilised in the action research process

Format	Content	Number of events/units	Number of participants					
			R	CR	S	C	I	P
Awareness raising training	Two-day ethical sensitivity training	1 / 2		10	3	10	1	
Internship	Programme to provide practical work experience and training for ten refugees in the participating research organisations	continuously		10	3			
Empowerment workshops	Identification of own competencies and potentials; guidance for labour market; guidance for German education systems; compatibility of formally acquired competencies and their recognition; working cultures; empowerment tactics against ressentiment	10 / 10	15	10	5		3	
Matchmaking	Matching of refugees' labour market aspirations and capacities with companies' needs and expectations	1		10	5	10	3	
Open space events	Collection of feedback on the research process and joint elaboration of the further proceeding	12		10	3		4	
Round tables	Discussion of insights stemming from action research and its meaning for practice and improvement of labour market measures	6		10	5	10	5	3
Project board meetings	Critical reflection on the action research process	5		3	3	6	2	1

R = Refugees, not acting as co-researchers CR = refugee co-researchers C = Companies S = Scientists I = Intermediary organisation P = Policymaker

All formats were accompanied by at least two members from the scientific team acting as mediators in case of misunderstandings and discussing situations of discomfort by any participants.

3.2   Methodological approach and interim findings

The process of conducting our research followed the spiral model (see Figure 1) of:

- *Defining problems:* goal definition jointly with refugees in Nord-Rhine-Westphalia who arrived after 2015, companies in the three sectors, labour agencies and organisations supporting refugees[2].
- *Planning and doing research:* sector profiles, literature review, secondary analysis of measures, biographical interviews.
- *Interpreting results and designing action:* reflecting research results with refugees and further collaborators, facilitating intergroup relationships.
- *Evaluation of outcomes:* round tables involving refugees, companies, scientists and intermediary organisations.

Throughout this process, we applied different data collection techniques, encompassing (1) conducting qualitative interviews, (2) engaging in participatory observations, and facilitating (3) group discussions (see section 3.1.2).

3.2.1   Defining the problems

In the initial phase, the research goal has been defined with the help of the ten refugee co-researchers during their internship programme. To concertise the goal and act on a specific policy issue (Eden & Huxham, 1995), the involved researchers conducted a sectoral profile analysis and a literature review on identified barriers to the labour market integration of refugees. Ram's (2019) advice to develop measures only after a review of scientific work dealing with the subject, including critical scientific discourse, has been followed. Based on the analysis, the main barriers identified were categorised: using the critical thinking approach, as the so-called *hard barriers.* Examples of such barriers are high levels of bureaucracy, qualification recognition, or insufficient language skills, well-documented in previous research. These were supplemented by the observations of refugee co-researchers, which they experienced firsthand and classified as *soft barriers.* In the literature on refugees' labour market integration, soft barriers still receive less attention (David et al., 2019) as they are characterised, for example, by the habitus[3], work milieus[4], and work cultures: all of which are difficult to grasp, and different understandings of the terminologies. Before formulating measures, the feedback from collaborators emphasised the importance of conducting additional research on the underlying factors of soft barriers to gain a deeper understanding.

3.2.2   Planning and doing research

Drawing from this, the collaborators decided to delve more deeply into the factors underlying soft barriers. To compare the results of the literature review with real-life settings, 20 bio-

2   To this end, stakeholders were addressed via regional institutions and intermediary organisations, businesses via chambers and associations. Refugees were approached via refugee initiatives, employment agencies and regional support organisations. Interviews were conducted in refugee shelters and in companies within the three sectors that already employed refugees or intended to do so.
3   In sociology, habitus refers to socially ingrained habits, skills and dispositions and how individuals perceive and react to the social world around them. Bourdieu (1996) explains habitus as the structures and generative principles of distinct and distinctive practices.
4   The term refers to a specific social, cultural, and organisational context in which people work, including social interactions, power dynamics, norms, values and practices that shape work experience.

graphical (employment) interviews with refugees (Bron & Thunborg, 2015) were conducted, including the refugee co-researchers. Refugees with different occupational and educational backgrounds were selected to account for the group's heterogeneity. It was important to include the refugees' views on the conditions of their labour market integration and to detect the soft barriers further. It made sense to uncover the potential and resources of the respondents, regardless of official qualification recognition. The survey sample, in the context of employment and educational biographical interviews and workshops on potential analysis and career orientation, is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Sample of interviewees
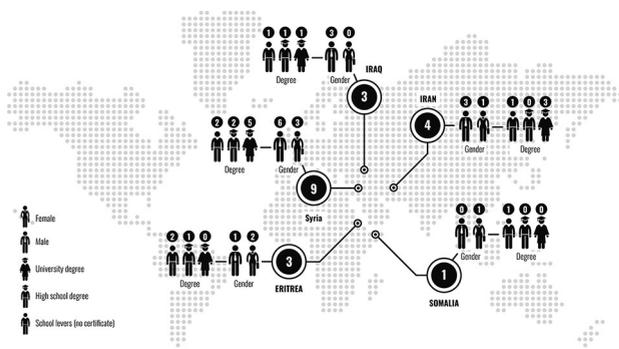
Source: own compilation

Based on the interview results, 15 expert interviews were conducted with diverse authorities from politics and administration, science, and intermediaries, as well as twelve interviews with companies from the three above-mentioned sectors (see Table 2).

Table 2. Sample of expert interviews and case studies

| | Experts | | | | Company/Sector | | |
Interviewees[1]	P	A	S	I	IT	Geriatric care	Construction
City of Gelsenkirchen	x						
Chamber of Crafts, Muenster			x				
Red Cross, Gelsenkirchen			x				
MHECA[2] North-Rhine Westphalia	x						
J. Oltmer, University Osnabrück		x					
F. Coenen, University Twente		x					
P. Sospiro, University Macerata		x					
NRW Centre for Talent Promotion			x				
Employment Agency, Gelsenkirchen		x					

	Experts				Company/Sector		
Interviewees[1]	P	A	S	I	IT	Geriatric care	Construction
Employment Agency, Essen	x						
Workers' Welfare Organisation			x				
Task Force, Gelsenkirchen (migrant organisation)			x				
Revier Ressourcen (NGO)			x				
Gafög (non-profit employment promotion)			x				
Economic Development Agency, Gelsenkirchen	x						
Care Service St. Gerion, Hückelhofen						x	
Residential facilities for seniors and disabled						x	
Family and nursing care Bochum						x	
Gantner Electronics, Bochum					x		
Cryptovision, Gelsenkirchen					x		
Adesso GmbH, Dortmund					x		
Neiko GmbH, Herten							x
ZINQ, Gelsenkirchen							x
IKKE, Duisburg (interview with three companies)							x
University Hospital, Bochum					x		

P = Politics A = Administration S = Science I = Intermediary organisation [1] Anonymised [2] Ministry of Health, Emancipation, Care and Ageing

3.2.3   Interpretation of results and designing action

The refugees and further practitioners critically reviewed the synthesis of measures and the interview outcomes, resulting in an empowerment workshop series with refugees, refugee co-researchers and the scientific team. As outlined in section 3.1.2, these activities were accompanied by a continuous reflection with the collaborators organised as open space events (s. Table 1) and laid the ground for the joint elaboration of a matching event that initially supported employers and refugees as potential employees separately in developing a mutual understanding and strengthening their cooperation skills. In a further step, both groups were brought together to develop a cooperation culture, common ideas and framework conditions.

Finally, the policy issues were defined from scratch based on the previous reflections.

3.2.4   Evaluation of outcomes

The results from the actions taken and the interpretation of findings fed into six round table discussions (see Table 1) with engaged policymakers, intermediaries, company leaders, researchers and refugee co-researchers to monitor and evaluate the actions taken. Each round

table was organised and hosted by a different collaborator resulting in distinct focus areas. For example, the round tables organised by the local chamber of crafts and the chamber of commerce centred on the needs and experiences of the companies in the three sectors. At the political level, missing or obstructive legal regulations took centre stage, as did bureaucratic procedures.

These discussions facilitated a deeper understanding of individual aspirations. Concurrently, the refugees had the opportunity to realise that what they perceive as discriminatory practices are often bureaucratic obstacles rather than intentional discrimination. This process helped comprehend personal attitudes and habitual decisions, highlighting that the concept of work, work ethics are cultural constructs that can be valued and interpreted differently.

The results were incorporated into transfer-oriented recommendations for action, improved measures developed, and research contributions.

4   Results

In the following, we present the results relating to (1) advancing the understanding of barriers, possible similarities, and differences in the labour market integration of refugees, drawing on the three sectors of IT, geriatric care, and construction, and (2) co-creating measures for labour market integration of refugees through action research.

4.1   Understanding of barriers to labour market integration

Our primary findings in understanding barriers to refugees' labour market integration can be condensed into two topics: refugees' residence status and qualification recognition and individual aspirations vs labour market requirements.

4.1.1   Residence Status and Qualification Recognition

From the process, the refugees have repeatedly emphasised the priority of individuals' residence status (can I stay, or can I go). A Syrian interviewee (R5) described:

"No company wants to invest in you if they don't know how long you can stay in Germany."

Accordingly, depending on the *appropriate* status, refugees, who cannot prove such status quo, are excluded from measures (OECD, 2017) and miss the first important connection to education and labour-related actions. In this regard, an expert on labour market integration posits:

"[…], the workplace is the best place for integration and language acquisition, and it is a pity if this possibility is missing from scratch."

Also, making it into integration and language courses, refugees experienced a disconnecting of the measures from practical labour market experience, excluding teaching technical language according to different sectors and competencies. A refugee (R17) commented thus,

"especially if I want to work in nursing or in the trades, I need to know technical terms to avoid mistakes with patients".

After the first step of status recognition is taken, the long-lasting recognition procedure of foreign qualifications remains slowing down the integration process. The refugee interviewees revealed a need for more understanding of foreign education systems by the German recognition system and a lack of commitment of the intermediaries involved in qualification recognition to refugees. An Eritrean refugee (R9) describes the process as follows:

"It depends on the employer, his mood, his knowledge, whether a qualification is recognised or not, and how long this takes. You completely depend on this person and his/her attitude towards you, the refuge and the migration."

One central finding from the collaboration with company leaders pertained to the recognition of formal qualifications, which highlighted the importance of competency development in the CoO and individual employment histories during displacement. A manager (C2) of a construction company highlighted the limited availability of structured mechanisms to assess informal skills stating,

"There are still few opportunities to assess informal skills systematically."

At the same time, all interviewed refugees, regardless of their formal educational qualifications, came to Germany with a wide range of work experience and informal skills. Some have even acquired the skills during migration in so-called transit countries such as Turkey (Dereli, 2022). An interviewee from Iran (R11) narrates:

"I did assistant work in Turkey for an Iranian businessman because I also speak Turkish. I have not dealt with such skills before. At the same time, I learned from him [the employer] how to act entrepreneurially."

Many of these skills are not perceived as relevant by refugees themselves and are challenging to grasp, so they do not mention it during a job interview in Germany. However, the interviews with the refugees show significant differences between the five countries of origin (CoO) being analysed in terms of the education systems.

To simplify, the education systems in Syria, Iraq, and Iran differ greatly from the refugees' point of view (a differentiated school system, vocational training, and higher education). They have fitted in relatively well up to the recent past but have a different character than the German system, so it is difficult to link the educational qualifications. According to the refugees, education is a high priority in Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Completing secondary school is self-evident for many young people in the cities and the subsequent university education. Vocational education and training (VET) are not attractive and are for many. On the one hand, VET has little social esteem (as in many European countries), and on the other hand, there are few opportunities for skilled VET graduates that promise the prospect of a well-paid job. An exception is Iran. Here one can find strong approaches for a functioning non-academic VET system. Before the embargo, Iran cooperated internationally to build up a dual VET system with strong links to the German approach of dual VET. Thus, the Iranian participants had some previous VET and an understanding of the importance and function of VET in Germany. Looking at the poor image of VET in CoO, academic careers were reported to be highly recognised and therefore desired to be achieved among refugees. An interviewee (R2) from Syria draws the following picture:

"Most people I know prefer occupations such as physicians, lawyers, and engineers – all in all, academic qualifications."

An expert on education (E3) reports that:

"[a] significant proportion of refugees, especially from Syria, have been self-employed before leaving the country. This would also be a desirable option for many in Germany."

In the sample, nine out of the 20 refugees from the three CoO hold university degrees, and two more have a high school diploma. Among the interviewees with a higher education degree or university degree, graduates in their CoO are seldom employed in the profession corresponding to their degree (keyword: deskilling). In all three countries, the education system has little relevance to the world of work. One Syrian interviewee (R7) reports:

"I studied English literature in Damascus, but then I worked in a bank and got a foothold in the financial industry."

And this is not an isolated case. An Iranian engineer who has worked as a cook in a hotel in Tehran and an Iranian physicist who has worked as an interpreter for an Iranian company because of his good command of English are further examples. A young female computer scientist with a university degree has already worked as a social worker in Syria and sees her competence and fulfilment as being in this area in Germany as well. This pattern of *discontinuous employment biographies* has also been confirmed in the narratives of the refugees about friends and acquaintances in their CoO. Examination of the competence profiles shows that formal degrees and certificates are meaningless regarding the refugees' actual work potential. Real work experiences are more helpful in most cases. They are often a 'hidden potential' developed in VET and in cooperation with companies in different sectors.[5]

Additionally, 16 out of 20 refugees from all five countries have had informal work experience in various jobs in their CoO. In Syria or Iran, for example, it is normal to take up gainful employment in addition to attending school or college. From the refugees' point of view, this is easier in their CoO, but also in the transit countries where they lived during their flight (e. g., Greece, Turkey, Italy) than in Germany. They explained this phenomenon concerning the *unbureaucratic* labour market, with only a few formal hurdles. Despite these difficulties, all participants have had a range of work experience and have acquired not only work-related skills but also soft skills (e. g., intercultural dialogue, conflict management, resilience) and, to some extent, foreign language skills. The individual development paths are very different but often relate to the previous career biographical experience. An Iraqi participant who has worked in car sales in Iraq has worked his way up to becoming an interpreter and assistant to a supplier in Turkey. An Iranian engineer, who has already worked as a Teheran cook, has managed a restaurant's kitchen in Athens for a year. The Syrian computer scientist, who has already cared for children with disabilities in Syria, has worked in Italy with a refugee support organisation.

For companies, the bureaucratic effort to employ a refugee whose residential status is still unresolved plays a major role in their decision-making. This raises the question of how many businesses are interested in training a refugee whom they may be deprived of after a couple of years. In addition to legal uncertainty, most companies have few resources to fully capture the informal qualification of refugees but rather concentrate on the recognised certificates. Consequently, it becomes challenging to effectively match refugees with suitable job opportunities. One company leader (C3) pictures:

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5   For example, employees with a refugee background in craft businesses often have technical expertise that is not common in Germany (a German tiler offers to lay mosaics with the support of his Iraqi employee). In care institutions, new customer groups can be addressed due to the intercultural competencies of the new employees; in IT, business relationships can be established in CoO or transit. These potentials can often come to fruition very quickly in a professional context, which shows the professional sector to be a positive field of integration.

"We need something formal like proof of qualification that we can rely on. As a medium-sized company, we don't have the capacity to find out the potential soft skills of these people. Time is money; I don't have the time and capacity for extra work."

Given the significance attributed to qualification recognition by the collaborators, it became a focal point of numerous discussions during the action research process. While the perspectives of collaborators varied based on their respective roles as employers, employees, policymakers, or intermediaries, a consensus was reached that there is a need for enhancements in the realm of qualification recognition.

4.1.2   Individual aspiration vs labour market requirements

Interviewees with higher educational qualifications revealed that they had developed definite career and life aspirations for their future in Germany. They often have clear expectations developed during the flight (lawyer, engineer). The sense of purpose and the feeling of doing socially recognised and important work play a major role. A young Syrian female refugee (R15) confirms:

"If I can start again here and build a life, then I would also like to do meaningful work, earn money, and have a qualification."

At the same time, the development of further competencies has shown to be very important. One Somalian (R18) woman explains:

"The focus here lies first and foremost on developing good language skills to better understand Germany and the people here and be understood by Germans."

The younger refugees, who had already started higher education in the CoO, expressed their desire to restart studies in Germany. Refugees with a lower education level are challenged to develop a concrete vision for their employment biography. Nevertheless, irrespective of their former qualification, the refugees desired to be gainfully employed as quickly as possible and earn a salary for a living.

Another aspect that promotes the mismatch between refugees' aspirations and labour market requirements is *deskilling.* The war in Syria, which has already lasted for more than one decade, has, in many cases, resulting in a devaluation of qualifications and gained knowledge since the refugees had less chance to pursue employment or training. This is an obstacle, particularly in sectors based on technical and digital progress. The IT sector especially relies on skilled workers and, according to the collaborators' perception, is one of the few sectors in Germany that still offers cross-access for employees. And yet, if the acquired knowledge in the areas of work is not sufficient or outdated, there is little hope for a quick labour market integration for refugees. This also applies to the construction industry, where company leaders often have high expectations.

"In Germany, everything is certified. In the construction industry, people work according to certain standards that should be adhered to. If someone does not know the standards, it will be difficult. It has tradition. Those who don't know the standards need time to get in. But I don't have the time to teach them the standards",

clarifies a manager from the construction sector (C1). These expectations are met only to a limited extent because work in the construction industry has taken place at a different level in the CoO. In the interviews, some refugees described that medium-term internships have proven to be useful in some companies in construction, which on the one hand, allow an

assessment of the individual and, on the other hand, slowly introduce the existing team to the newcomer. Further interviewees in the field report that the established workforce in the companies is much more open to *newcomers* when it comes to personal contact through personal bonding. Additionally, the entire team can decide on the way the skills and abilities of the candidate are to be involved. The matching event (see Table 1), which brought together companies as employers and refugees as prospective employees, demonstrated the potential for collaboratively developing tailored 'integration concepts' that harmonise the needs of both parties involved.

Most of the refugees applying for a job in construction, however, are candidates for VET and rarely for direct full-time employment. "*Furthermore, companies act primarily in a short-term profit-orientated manner*", the manager (C1) explains. For instance, they only respond to intercultural adaption needs of working conditions[6] in individual cases and mainly to cope with their demands for skilled labour. Thus, diversity concepts in the workplace to adapt to the intercultural needs of the employees regarding their working conditions in Germany are still marginalised or surface. Yet, these could be relevant in sectors such as geriatric care. Collaborators reported that diversity plays a role and that it is intrinsically considered in companies, but that comprehensive diversity concepts are still missing. In this vein, C5 claimed:

"In care, we need diversity concepts for customer orientation and employee orientation. However, the employees organise themselves because there are still far too few concepts and hardly any time to implement them."

Another mismatch area is the divergent expectation of payment, which is difficult to reconcile with the refugees' expectations, especially in the geriatric care sector. Furthermore, through the open space and round table discussions, it became apparent that a significant number of refugees do not grasp the necessity for extensive training to work in the field of geriatric care. In their native cultures, the primary responsibility for caring for the elderly lies within the family and as a result, this line of work is not highly professionalised in their CoO. It follows that the acceptance of caregiving as a recognised profession remains low, leading to high dropout rates in this field.

4.2 Co-creating measures

With the increased migration of 2015–2017, there was a mass movement to Germany. This new situation also brought with it a new group of involuntary migrants that was different from the cohorts of the guest worker generation. Against the background, the lack of existing knowledge motivated the direct involvement in all research activities of the refugees from scratch. This created the opportunity to develop a common and profound understanding of the situation.

4.2.1 Actions addressing residence status and qualification recognition

In Germany, the residence status is legally regulated, as is the qualification recognition. However, as a result of the decentralised nature of the German federal state system, these

6 Concering diversity concepts consideration must be given to respecting and accommodating the religious requirements of staff in their working environment and addressing cultural disparities and personal challenges resulting from traumatic experiences among employees with a refugee background. Additionally, it is crucial to recognise the diverse skill sets and varying competence development needs of refugees, necessitating a joint analysis of their potential and requirements to tailor appropriate competence development strategies.

procedures are executed by regional authorities. Hence, the process of attaining status and recognition involves navigating through bureaucratic channels. The collaborators, including refugees and companies, noted that apart from established guidelines, it is ultimately the discretion of the state authority individual as the executing body to determine the duration of the recognition process and whether recognition will be granted.

Based on the formats depicted in Table 1, the participants have been invited to emphasise mutual trust and understanding of the other's points of view on the topics of qualifications, educational systems, migration history of refugees, and German legislation.

For example, participants told each other personal stories about their lives and the reasons for their escape. An Iranian refugee reported that he was shot in his car, shortly after marrying his wife, while she was pregnant. She lost the child. In turn, a German civil servant told how desperate refugees insulted and threatened him when he had to follow the rules and turn away some refugee qualifications. The willingness to embrace challenging circumstances in life has contributed to the establishment of trust.

In such ways, all experts were involved in the process of critical thinking. The events aimed at openness, tolerance, and co-working without prejudice. In addition to the group of refugees and state authorities, further groups of actors were involved in the process. The dialogue initiated among the involved actors identified further barriers to labour market integration, including gender aspects and the absence of profound network structures. This gave leeway for the different groups to critically discuss existing instruments and needed within a safe space: independently of their resident status and social roles. In evaluating these events utilising individual and group interviews, it became clear that the exchange resulted in an increased sensitivity to the needs of the other and a greater willingness to cooperate and accept. To adjust their daily work with the target group, especially regarding non-formal qualification identification, the state representatives collected keywords for a consultation to better identify 'hidden' skills. By bringing together the different actors from science, business, and practice, a common catalogue of measurements and a questionnaire for non-formal competence assessment was created, from which the other actors could learn. As side-effects, these activities reduced the insufficiency of existing parallel support structures at the regional level, such as dual counselling and promotion of identical preparatory training for labour market entrance.

4.2.2   Actions addressing individual aspirations vs labour market requirements

In response to the identified mismatch between refugees' aspirations and labour market requirements, the collaborators designed measures for the process of work integration, which would enable a sustainable entry to the regional labour market. In the first step, a workshop concept for empowering refugees was developed and pre-tested. Working groups comprising refugees and experts were established for each topic outlined in Table 1, engaging in detailed discussions and refine personalised approaches to address specific challenges. The outcomes of these working groups were then deliberated upon in a larger forum. A comprehensive list of recommendations was compiled for each topic to provide guidance when necessary. Being involved in such a process, refugees have become individually sensitised to Germany's work, sectoral, and company cultures. The co-design process prepared them for the expectations of the labour markets.

On the contrary, the involved companies were supported in developing a targeted transcultural *integration competence procedure*, which contributes to improving both the competence development of the new employee and the social integration of the employee into the established workforce. For this purpose, a matching workshop concept was developed to support the refugees, the companies, and intergroup relations (see section 3.1.2). These actions yielded innovative notions for potential remedies, including adopting a soft skills assessment framework by the regional employment agency. Rather than constituting a formal document, it functioned as an internal directive for labour market agents, complementing formal recognition schemes. In addition, proposals were elaborated, helping other companies successfully integrate refugees. As an illustration, tandems of employees with a migration background and refugees were formed to facilitate the onboarding process within the company. In addition, more informal actions were taken. For example, long coffee breaks were introduced in several companies in the construction so that the religious employees could pray and the others could rest or take time for other actions (e. g. sports). There was no control, but these actions were trust-based.

5   Discussion and conclusion

The paper aimed to answer *what action research approach adds to the co-creation of improved refugee labour market measures.* To answer this, the authors first introduced the concept of action research and its benefits for a real-time transfer of results into action. Second, the action research process for co-developing refugee labour market integration measures was discussed and exemplified. Based on the previous, results were presented and approached by the action research possibilities. In such a way, direct interventions by refugees and further collaborators were taken in the process.

5.1.1   Learnings from the process

In line with Greenwood's (2007) understanding of pragmatic action research, our findings suggest that the approach is valuable for collaboratively developing measures to integrate refugees into the labour market, as it recognises refugees as active participants who take ownership and responsibility for improving their own circumstances. In particular, the intensive collaboration with refugees during the internship has proven valuable. We engaged in ongoing critical dialogues with our co-researchers, questioning each other's perspectives and exchanging arguments for and against different actions.

Uninterrupted, we have had to ask ourselves as scholars, are we pushing certain views and actions because we think it is good for the refugees, or because the refugees think it is of importance for them. Trust has helped in this. We scholars have opened ourselves up to new perspectives that have not always conformed to our view of the western world. Meanwhile, the refugees have understood and surrendered to the democratic idea that our laws (even in the case of qualification recognition) imply.

Integrating these discussions into our daily work made the exchange process much smoother. After the process, four refugees found stable employment in companies and social institutions as well as in a bank. In addition, the involvement of the refugees as co-researchers

helped concretise the research questions. For example, identifying what our co-researchers termed "soft barriers" elucidates the ambiguities inherent in labour market integration measures resulting from socially ingrained habits, skills and dispositions shaping refugees' aspirations and perceptions of the labour market and companies' expectations of their employees.

Also, our results indicate the impactful role of employing action research in the realm of refugee labour market integration, particularly in the context of intergroup dynamics. This is evident from the collaborators' notable level of openness, active involvement, and willingness to share valuable insights, emphasising the positive difference made by this approach. The interdisciplinary collaborative activities led to a continuous exchange of experiences, perceptions and views, cultivating trusting and reciprocal relationships among the collaborators. Yet, considering relational ethics facilitated this process. Delving below the surface problems and identifying underlying roots resulted in mutual learning and elaborating meaningful solutions for labour market integration.

Hence, PAR facilitated a collaborative process in which we collectively examined the underlying reasons behind challenges in the labour market integration of refugees and identified potential trajectories to address them. Through this process, we developed a shared understanding of each other's circumstances, broadening the range of possible actions and compelling each party to actively address the situation. However, this journey was far from easy or straightforward in various instances. Instead, it was marked by diverse motivations, aims, thought patterns, and behaviours, leading to occasional setbacks and a continual necessity to re-engage with one another. Hence, in line with Cornish et al. (2023), we posit that jointly articulating a "theory of change": setting out a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen, as an initial step at the stage of "planning and doing action" would have helped to overcome the "black box" between what we are doing in our research (i.e. actions taken) and how this leads to desired outcomes and impacts. Backing the theory of change with qualitative and quantitative indicators would also facilitate ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the actions taken with a view to impacts achieved, including negative or unintended side effects.

In addition, the process revealed that vertical policies defined and implemented by the central authority at the level of the federal government (e.g. migration policies, regulations on refugee recognition) contradict horizontal policies emphasising collaboration and coordination among multiple actors and organisations at the same level of governance or within a specific sector. In essence, vertical policies tend to be uniform and standardised, disregarding contextual and individual factors. Conversely, horizontal labour market integration policies prove most effective when emphasising shared responsibility, collective decision-making, and implementation by various actors, including refugees, companies, policymakers, and intermediaries. Therefore, they require multidimensional approaches, as exemplified in PAR.

Moreover, taking into account Larrea's (2023) findings leaned upon Gustavson's (2017) assertion that a worldwide process of democratisation appears to have reached a standstill, particularly in relation to the obstacles hindering labour market integration, we contend that there exists a formidable barrier that is difficult to overcome unless the entire society engages in democratic discourse.

5.1.2   Limitations

Despite its usefulness, the action research approach also has its limitations. For example, successful interventions usually occur on a small scale within the individual sphere of those concerned. Attempts to scale them are often associated with insufficient consideration of this individual component. Hence, if the collaborators are no longer involved to the required extent, and their needs are not considered, the action research approach loses its meaning in real-time action transfer. Next to that, action research is often context-specific and aims to generate relevant and applicable knowledge within that particular context (Gustavsen, 2020).

To broaden impact, interventions and the active involvement of the refugees are needed at all spatial levels concerning politics, society, and the economy. In so doing, intergroup relations can be guaranteed by a direct transfer between the horizontal and vertical hierarchies. Policymakers, in particular, need to recognise that the impact of such jointly created measures is not tied to political election cycles.

With respect to the current mass migration of Ukrainian refugees to Germany, their access to the labour market has been facilitated compared to other refugee cohorts. This could imply that labour market integration is now easier for certain refugee groups, and measurements are obsolete. Yet, studies with the Ukrainian target group show (Giesing et al., 2022) that a systematic approach in the field of labour market integration is still lacking. Second, as each refugee cohort is different, there is still a lack of co-creative measures and approaches that consider the needs and resources of the target group.

From our point of view, only co-creation offers the possibility to adapt measures to new groups of migration, to heterogenous cultures inside these groups and to a specific gender perspective. In our experience, the needs of women regarding a successful integration into the labour market differ from men's in all three sectors due to, for example, distinct cultural socialisation and care responsibilities.

In conclusion, our findings indicate that the action research approach could add value to developing refugees' labour market measures. However, considering the current situation more action research and direct transfer of findings into practice are needed. In addition, accounting for the contextuality of refugees' labour market integration: concerning refugees' aspirations, labour market requirements, political, institutional, economic framework conditions, and societal climate, our findings do not allow for generalisation. Nonetheless, they provide meaningful guidance on how action research supports developing more tailored interventions that can be taken up by scholars and practitioners in other regions in Europe. This is especially true in cases when the described procedure can be detached from the respective context and adapted to new contexts within the framework of action research. We agree with Gustavsen (2020), who elaborates on this issue. To solve the problem of the single case consideration, we, therefore, propose a decontextualisation of the single case, combining it with multiple cases of similarity from multiple contexts to enhance the reliability and generalisability of the findings and to recontextualise for validity reasons.

6   References

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Participatory Action Research for Urban Connectivity: Bridging Inequality in Metropolitan Monterrey

León Staines-Díaz

Abstract: This paper argues for participatory action research as a potent method for urban connectivity, surpassing government or expert-led methods. It introduces two approaches: integrating dialogic interviews to foster reflexivity and adopting an Ecosystem mapping-based approach encompassing social, economic, physical, and cultural dimensions. Dialogic interviews promote inclusivity by enabling diverse perspectives to shape research outcomes. Ecosystem mapping visually captures intricate connectivity dynamics. By combining participatory action research, dialogic interviews, and Ecosystem mapping, a robust framework emerges to address urban connectivity challenges. Empowering communities and embracing diverse axes of connectivity, this approach transforms urban planning practices, fostering contextually relevant and sustainable solutions. A co-created, resilient urban future becomes achievable through engagement and active stakeholder involvement.

Keywords: Action Research, Dialogic interviews, Ecosystem map, Urban Planning, Monterrey

Investigación-Acción participativa para la conectividad urbana: Abordando la desigualdad en el Área Metropolitana de Monterrey

Resumen: Este artículo argumenta que la investigación-acción participativa es un método potente para la conectividad urbana, superando a los métodos liderados por el gobierno o expertos. Introduce dos enfoques: la integración de entrevistas dialógicas para fomentar la reflexividad y la adopción de un enfoque basado en mapa del ecosistema que abarca dimensiones sociales, económicas, físicas y culturales. Las entrevistas dialógicas promueven la inclusividad al permitir que diversas perspectivas moldeen los resultados de la investigación. El mapa del ecosistema captura visualmente las dinámicas de conectividad intrincadas. Al combinar la investigación-acción participativa, las entrevistas dialógicas y la cartografía del ecosistema, surge un marco sólido para abordar los desafíos de la conectividad urbana. Empoderando a las comunidades y abrazando diversas dimensiones de conectividad, este enfoque transforma las prácticas de planificación urbana, fomentando soluciones contextualmente relevantes y sostenibles. Un futuro urbano resiliente y co-creado se vuelve alcanzable a través del compromiso y la participación activa de las partes interesadas.

Palabras clave: Investigación-Acción, Entrevistas dialógicas, Mapas de Ecosistema, Planeación Urbana, Monterrey

1.   Introduction

The main goal of this paper is to add knowledge to the action research literature about the use of action research in the entry phase of urban planning processes in vulnerable communities (Mitlin, Thompson, 1995; Wilson, 2019).

Using action research in this entry phase can be important because comprehensive plans or beautification projects often disregard public participation and inclusion of actors other than planners; consequently or architects, they tend to be rejected by residents. Hence, it is critical that people from diverse backgrounds are included in the planning process, especially if they live in the area that the plan or project comprehend. The importance of their participation rests on the future well-being of a particular place. Action research can help nurture this participatory dimension of the process.

Action research can help urban planners and public officials to understand and inform the coherence of spaces as they represent and form people's behaviours, livelihoods, agency, and political power. Moreover, it is important that the planner understands the critical significance of the participation of the society that produces their spaces, since its production cannot be replicated for others. As mentioned by Lefebvre:

> Any social existence aspiring or claiming to be real, but failing to produce its own space, would be a strange entity, a very particular kind of abstraction unable to escape from the ideological or even the cultural real- It would fall to the level of folklore and sooner or later disappear altogether, thereby immediately losing its identity, its denomination and its feeble degree of reality (Lefebvre, 1974: 53).

Most of this paper is written as a first-person story because it focuses on the lessons that I, the author, learnt conducting the entry phase of his doctoral research. Costamanga and Larrea (2017: 85–86) indicate first-person action research is a method that can help the facilitator remain continuously open to the self-reflection process. This paper operates bystressing the awareness of one's own biases, such as preconceptions, assumptions and positionality in the process of establishing relationships of understanding, mutuality, parity, and equality. The importance of reflexivity on the fieldwork can be traced in Case (2017), Owen and Westoby (2012) and Wilson (2016; 2019). This article shares how to generate a new productive and collaborative conversation among internal community actors and external actors, such as government and scholars around different dimensions of connectivity. More specifically, this case focuses on the relationship between the community (internal) and the action researcher helping the planning process (external).

One inspiration to write this first-person narrative after conducting a second person action research process is the case of Orkestra-Basque Institute of Competitiveness (OBIC) in the Basque Country of Spain (Larrea, 2018). First-person AR has been used there to mediate between different positions on territorial development practices. The author describes the personal and institutional transformational process of OBIC, founded to study territorial development (TD). In her article, Larrea mentions how the OBIC changed their role of social researchers from a position primarily restricted to TD observers to the self-realization of territorial transformation actors/agents. I argue I could operate similarly in the contested relationship between planners, researchers, and community members in Monterrey, Mexico.

This paper is based on the experience of the author in the first stage of creating an issue ecosystem map through dialogic stakeholder interviews in La Campana (Mexico). It is an important step for social researchers starting their inquiry, to establish a comprehensive

starting point, which in turn, contributes to guide future research. An Ecosystem map is a research tool that helps establishing an initial stance about the research issue by a synthetic representation capturing all the key roles that influences an organization or an environment.

The main contribution of this paper is to illuminate the action researcher's own process of self-awareness in conducting the interviews and building relationships of mutual understanding with multiple stakeholders. Using first-person action research, the paper documents the experience of the author working at the intersection of urban informality and local government. This is a journey of the process, but also of the researcher who begins working with a community and the challenges that can be encountered along the way.

The research question that inspires the paper is: how can informal communities be approached in productive and successful ways? The answer is based on the experience of the author working with an informal community in Monterrey, Mexico. The findings are relevant because fortunately, there is an increasing interest in working with informal or low-income communities. However, even with the theoretical information and the extensive practical experience on the subject, urban interventions in Northern Mexico are traditionally top-down approaches; therefore, the success of such interventions are null or limited, as the communities never feel identified with such interventions.

The paper shows that it is important to consider that for an intervention to be successful, it must come fundamentally from the society that will be benefited or affected by any project. The challenge is to generate bonds of trust and an adequate process so that these relationships navigate in a productive and just way.

The main finding from the self-inquiry process based on the eco-system mapping and stakeholder interviews is the clear feasibility of including scholars as a point of equilibrium between the government and the community. This role of researchers offers the opportunity to bridge the efforts that public officials, as well as scholars, are doing in the field of social inequality and urban connectivity in informal settlements. Scholars bring two things into the equation: trust and legitimization in the process.

In the first part, I present the research problem regarding the profound disconnection between planning and planners and informal communities in Monterrey, Mexico. In section 2, I explore the conceptual framework within which this paper operates, focusing on the exploration of participation in planning literature. In section 3, I introduce the case study of La Campana, providing contextual information about the study site. In section 4, I outline the Action Research methodologies used in this paper. In section 5, I describe the interviews and Ecosystem Mapping. The Discussion section follows, providing an overview of the process as well as initial findings. Finally, in the Conclusion section, I summarize the main findings of this research.

2.   Conceptual framework

This paper is based on an experience where the author experimented with action research to integrate participation in the context of planning.

The topic of participation has been largely explored in the planning literature. For Sandercock (2000; 2004), the incorporation of new actors is crucial to overcoming planning

challenges. Nevertheless, in the neoliberal context, participation can be manipulated, especially in spaces of poverty like informal settlements or other undesirable places from the capitalist point of view. Caution about participatory processes has its origin in the 1960 s, as is reflected in Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969), in which she distinguishes public participation as an 'empty ritual', and one with real power to affect the outcome. More recently, both Bayat and Biekart (2009), and Miraftab (2009), warn us about public participation in the neoliberal era. For Bayat and Biekart, concepts such as decentralization, citizen participation, and anti-corruption, are operative concepts and vehicles used by imperialist domination. They go further by asserting that NGOs do not represent communities, instead, they "play the role of contracted State agents" (Bayat & Biekart, 2009: 819). This argument aligns with Miraftab's (2009) discussion of democratic discourse being used as a vehicle to legitimize neoliberal goals through a perception of inclusion, all in the pursuit of hegemonic power (Miraftab, 2009: 33; see also Mehta, 2016; and Novoa, 2018). Miraftab (2009) makes a distinction between 'invented' and 'invited' spaces of citizenship; the former are real counter-hegemonic spaces of change, whereas the latter is designed to maintain the status quo. Nevertheless, this idea has been challenged by Sletto and Nygren (2015), as they argue that even in these contradictory spaces regulated by the State, researchers can act as change agents by reshaping the conceptualization of dominant structures (p.980).

Participation has to do with the importance of inclusion of diverse voices into planning. To this respect, the case can find roots in Lefebvre's (1974) "production of space" concept. A society produces their own spaces in a process known as spatial practice, consisting in a degree of cohesion, competence, and performance from the specific groups that participate in the creation of such spaces. After a certain spatial practice has been developed, a social space exists with certain features and cohesiveness (Lefebvre, 1974).

Finally, the case focuses on participation and diversity of voices in informal settlements. These are a result of their own self-production without governmental regulation, they are each original and unique, responding to specific, local stimuli. These distinctive characteristics of spaces in urban informality cannot be imitated by planners, as the originality lies in these spaces which are self-produced.

3. Case study: La Campana

The community of La Campana is located in what once was agricultural land on a central area of Metropolitan Monterrey. In an interview on June, 2018, Mrs. Blanca, a local resident, shared that people used to sow oranges, corn, and *nopales* (cactus) in La Campana. Few people lived there when Mrs. Blanca moved there in the 1970 s, but it rapidly populated as people searched for opportunities. Most of the original settlers moved in from other Mexican states such as San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, and Hidalgo (Cedillo, 2018). Many of them believed Monterrey was a temporary stop on their way to the United States of America, but stayed when they found industrial jobs in Monterrey.

For the last five decades, the people of La Campana organized their own land use and distribution and mediated internal problems. Services such as water, sewage, and electricity that the community managed to get (in some areas of La Campana) took years of struggle and

negotiations with the municipal and state governments. Being widely ignored by the authorities changed in 2012 as a result of drug violence. In the last decade, La Campana has had the attention of local media, government, and the private sector.

The problem addressed through action research is that planners in Monterrey have fallen short regarding the understanding of informal settlements and conducting planning processes and projects that include local communities. This has often led to problems such as manipulative processes (Arnstein, 1969), expulsions (Sassen, 2014), gentrification (Clark, 2005; Janoschka et al., 2014), and power imbalances (Forester, 1982).

Thus, the use of Action Research for a novel exploration of a contested site, such of La Campana begets the design of a new approach to planning in contexts of informality respecting the processes in place.

My introduction to La Campana was the result of an academic exploration conducted during my doctoral studies. Initially, my intention was to illustrate the dichotomy between traditional urban planning carried out by urban planning departments and the informal approaches to planning. Leveraging my contacts from my previous experience as a practitioner before pursuing my doctoral studies, I was able to quickly establish connections with colleagues to delve into the formal side of urban planning. However, it proved to be a more significant challenge to locate representatives from the opposite end of the spectrum since, in the realm of urban informality, having a gatekeeper is crucial. In this particular case, I reached out to an urban sociologist I had met in 2014 during my collaboration with the Municipal Institute of Urban Planning (IMPLAN). I was aware that following her tenure at IMPLAN, she had conducted research in the informal settlement of La Campana. Therefore, I contacted her for an interview. To my surprise, her involvement with the community had escalated to the point where she had assisted a group of concerned residents in formalizing a non-governmental organization (NGO). Through a series of interviews, my interest in the subject grew, and after discussions with my advisor, we decided that approaching research with La Campana presented a significant opportunity to explore the contrasts within urban planning.

4.   Methodology

4.1   A critique of traditional urban planning methodologies in the Global South

In the Global South, both governments and urban planners follow design and discursive models inspired by the Global North. Governments, regardless of their political orientation, pursue such long-awaited development, incorporating in their normative framework technocratic values and concepts associated with functionality, efficiency, and a very specific idea of order. Meanwhile, urban planners are charged with shaping a city that enables the efficiency of its inhabitants' activities. This vision of city and urban planning has meant both obliviousness and oppression of a range of ways of living outside this idea of order established by the economic and social powers.

The hegemonic power involved in traditional urban planning has produced and reproduced a homogeneous image of the city corresponding to bourgeois aesthetics and functionality. This contrasts with the image of informal neighbourhoods, where the production of the built environment does not come from an aesthetic idea or rules established in texts,

treatises or academic reflection. Urban informality is born out of the enormous need for shelter and is regulated based on the constant interaction with the elements and resources within the reach of the residents, in addition to the endless community deliberation. This article argues that values behind informal settlements have gained an unquestionable validity, and should be seen as an important teacher in the processes of urbanization and urban research.

Top-down planning approaches have been particularly harmful in contexts of urban informality, as they have failed to support the communities' agency, skills, and resources. This story of neglect has left many residents hesitant to work with researchers, planners or authorities. However, this article also explores possible avenues for fostering an emerging relationship between community members in an informal settlement and planners, articulating the diverse knowledge available through the lens of participatory action research methodologies.

Development oriented practices have become hegemonic in many parts of the Global South, and indeed this is evident in cities and urban areas. These ideas reflect and shape how society values what is good and desirable, or bad and undesirable. Many governments have opted to make invisible the subaltern populations; that is, all populations which are socially, politically, and geographically outside the hierarchy of power (Green, 2002). Thus, I argue that the planning practice should find co-generative knowledge that fosters vulnerable informal populations.

4.2 Action research and the methodological proposal in this paper

As action research methodologies have a transformational component, this article explores finding creative paths to improve the relationship between the municipalities and their precarious communities to maximize well-being, understanding, and mutual working relationship, beyond a traditionally vertical governmental power.

Greenwood and Levin (2007) argue for action research as a methodology that action researchers can enact using different methods. This section reflects on two methods designed to achieve a successful entry phase with the planning environment in Monterrey, Mexico, at the intersection of formal and informal planning processes. The use of these methods enabled pursued not only obtaining a competent knowledge of the planning practice in regard to urban informality, but also establishing a long and fruitful relationship with diverse actors in place for long-term research.

One of the methods used was ecosystem mapping, the other stakeholder interviews. These are iterative and non-linear processes, in which the information is continuously tested and where there is no preconceived fixed answers. Although this work engaged differing stances and points of views, the main intention of this inquiry was to find a common ground from which to initiate a collaborative process with the community members, with the strength and structure provided by the involvement of other actors with voice and decision-making power in the process.

4.3 First, second, and third-person Action Research

As previously mentioned, this article is based on first-person Action Research (transformation of the action researcher) in the context of a second person action research process (participatory planning process).

AR methodologies provide a solid relationship among actors. Although this research is based on first-person AR, second and third-person AR are also present. In this section I provide the definitions and boundaries between them. However, the reader should note that the methodology employed is the first-person AR.

First-person action research responds to the forms of inquiry-practice by individuals into their own research process. The goal is to help individuals develop an inquiring attitude toward their own lives and act in an informed, aware, and purposeful manner (Gearty and Coghlan, 2018). First-person AR is a method of benefiting from the researcher's self-awareness in the research context to understand how they observe their own thinking, process data, come to negotiations, judgments, decisions and actions (Costamagna and Larrea, 2018). This paper shares the self-inquiry process of the author in his attempt to begin a closer and co-generative relationship with members of a population living in a context of urban informality.

In addition to first-person AR, there are collaborative actions between the different actors involved in this research that exemplify second-person AR and collective learning from doing. Second-person AR entails the researcher's ability to engage in face-to-face communication with others in a context of authentic mutual concern. It is a collaborative practice involving multiple stakeholders, which requires participants learning from each other (Coghlan, 2007). This research prompts this engagement by encouraging others to take action and evaluate others' actions.

Third-person AR stems from the work at the first and second person levels and represents the contribution of the study to an impersonal audience through dissemination of the knowledge produced in this research. Third-person action research aims at creating communities of inquiry, involving people beyond second-person AR. Third person is impersonal and is reached through dissemination by reporting, publishing, and extrapolating from the concrete to the general (Coghlan, 2005). This paper represents the third person dimension of this process.

5. The process to generate a stakeholder map through interviews

The Ecosystem Map originates from diverse viewpoints and approaches. Nevertheless, through the facilitation of dialogic interviews, the process becomes more humanized, which subsequently impacts the fluidity of community work. Humanizing the process opens up a wide spectrum to address the problem, but it also introduces a unique complexity. During fieldwork, the role of the researchers is not to direct the conversation but rather to observe and understand the pre-existing conditions. This initial assessment serves as a foundational platform for future work, identifying areas where different actors can reach agreements. The researcher's task is not to dictate methodologies, but rather to comprehend and analyse existing processes and their current functioning. By assuming this role, researchers gain

insights into the dynamics at play, paving the way for informed and contextually relevant interventions in the future.

5.1   Overview of the process and its tangible result

Urban planners in Northern Mexico, including Monterrey, have not traditionally fostered a history of collaboration with communities. This isolated working attitude is particularly pronounced in informal settlements.

This part of the process aimed to be aware of the different actors present in the local planning sphere, as well as understanding the different knowledge, interests, and motivations in place. The main objective of this part of the research process was to learn about the myriad of information around the contested intersection of informality and urban planning, as this provides clues as to how a researcher can effectively navigate at the beginning of an investigation.

The aim of this section is to show how the stakeholder map was not a static structure created by the researcher, but grew due to the interactions with the actors.

The intention was to generate a fluid process starting from a common ground and not from the conflicting spaces that may exist. It is necessary to emphasize that in this part of the process, research was conducted based on my prior knowledge and experience, as I had worked as a professional and academic in the city for several years before embarking on the doctoral studies, although it was strengthened and enriched during the investigation.

It is intended to maintain the stakeholder map, not as a static structure but as something that must be growing constantly as a consequence of the interactions with the object of study.

The participants in this initial stage came from several existing spheres; first, scholars and researchers who have worked on the issue of informality and were interested in participating in the formulation of new processes; second, by residents, advocates, and non-governmental organization members, who worked in informal communities and serve as a bridge with local authorities; the third were government officials; and fourth, both the private sector and Tec de Monterrey who are financing small projects in the community and organizing efforts for the ongoing process of Distrito La Campana-Altamira. The following is the composition of the group:

- *Academic.* Four academic researchers were selected based on their academic production, 1) A local professor at the University of Nuevo Leon; 2) A second professor from the same university whose research is focused on socio-spatial inequality from different perspectives; 3) A third professor from the University of Nuevo Leon, who has also worked closely with this informal settlement in the city of Monterrey, which gives them a different vision and stance than the other scholars interviewed; and 4) A researcher from the University of Arkansas, who from his perspective of landscape, has worked on the integration of landscape and city. Much of his work has been done with local governments in Mexico.
- *Non-Governmental Organizations.* The director of a non-governmental organization "Barrio Esperanza" who have built a strong rapport with the local community.
- *Government.* At the Federal level, a planner from the National Agency for Urban Development (SEDATU). At the State level in Monterrey, the director of urban spaces, who

works in the project development area, was interviewed. At the Municipal level, the director of the Urban Development area of the San Pedro Municipality, was interviewed.

As the interviews unfolded, I generated an evolving Ecosystem Map, in which a variety of topics related to informality and community work could be seen from differing perspectives, both institutional and personal.

It is important to mention that the interviewees were either people that I knew, or people referred to me by acquaintances. Most of the individuals interviewed were people I had encountered during my practitioner phase in Monterrey. Given that I was teaching at the School of Architecture and Urbanism while working in the City Planning Department, I engaged with a broad spectrum of perspectives on urban planning. Thanks to this, it was easy to make the first contact, and schedule the conversations over the phone and future in-person encounters.

This way Participatory Action Research (PAR), which is community-led (as opposed to outsider-led) orientation committed to a democratic and collaborative approach (Reardon, et al, 1993), offered an alternative to the mainstream 'expert'-driven, quantitative, extractive approaches by introducing a process that challenged existing power structures, inequalities, and knowledge(s), placing the decision-making power in the hands of those most impacted groups.

I, the author, had my first visit to the community in the Summer of 2018 following my request for a meeting with the urban sociologist I had previously interviewed, tried to maintain an open heart and mind (Wilson, 2019), facilitating a safe and creative space for all involved to express and develop their ideas. In no way did I control the process by projecting my opinions as a "specialist" onto the community or assume to know more about local conditions, practices, and dynamics. This made me feel vulnerable, without a plan and with more questions than answers, but it was essential for a true community-led participatory processes. Recognizing this vulnerability and seeing it as an asset, despite the fear it provoked, increased the potential of what we achieved.

The goal with this mapping was to establish a comprehensive starting point, which contributed to guiding future research. The tangible result of this process is represented in Figure 1. In the next sections I present features of the process that help understand the richness behind it.

Figure 1. Ecosystem map of planning in Monterrey as a solid starting point for the process. Source: Author.

By participating in the elaboration of this map, the actors guided the direction of involvement at the early stages. Using the information gathered, new actors and shared concepts were added to the ecosystem map, and also points of conflict were probed for validity in the field. For instance, a cross-cutting concept that emerged was governance. Participants delved into the complexity of working in environments where multiple levels of government and civil society were involved, which complicated decision-making to the extent that it discouraged action in certain areas of the city with numerous stakeholders. One such area included locations near bodies of water (under federal jurisdiction) or human settlements in proximity to risk-prone areas (under state jurisdiction). In such cases, municipal urban planners often preferred minimal intervention, as it would entail demanding coordination within a context of intense workload and demands for public servants.

The starting point of the Ecosystem Map came from very different points of view and approaches. However, through the dialogic interviews, the process began to be humanized. It is common to assume that the inaction of authorities results from ignorance or negligence. During the research process, I was able to witness that while the actions of public servants were insufficient in incorporating diverse perspectives, there was a desire to enhance internal procedures. However, a hindrance to achieving this was the high demands placed on local government coupled with a shortage of public officials. This often translated into leaving procedural innovations as mere aspirations in the face of more pressing needs. The human-

ization of the process gave us a broad spectrum of concepts to address the problem, and adds nuance to the process. The work in the field was not to guide the conversation but to observe the existing conditions that would guide the research process. It also provided hints of where the different actors could generate agreements. At this point, I did not formulate conclusions.

From the beginning of this process, it was clear that the interviews were not simply instrumental means to obtain information, but to explore topics, listen to their stories, experiences, hopes, and concerns, and to establish mutual respect and rapport. The dialogic interviews with stakeholders helped me to know different perspectives about the same issue, and then, to understand how from those perspectives, people have different ways to respond to the same phenomenon. Regarding the incorporation of knowledge from residents of informal settlements into urban planning, scholars were the group that openly recognized the inhabitants of these settlements as bearers of a legitimate way of living. Consequently, scholars acknowledged the existence of a set of skills that should be taken into consideration when working in such neighborhoods (Patel, Barlett, 2009). On the other hand, public officials were also concerned but focused on the established legal procedures available to them to assist the community.

5.2 The lived experience of participants. Importance of an authentic approach with the community.

Beyond the map represented in Figure 1, there are lived experiences of participants that give meaning to the process. In this section I share some of them, which serve as samples.

Relationships of planners with urban informality are traditionally top-down, which result in shallow approaches entailing dissociation between the population living in these communities and the government entities or civilians living outside. In other words, there is not an acknowledgement of the differences that exist in such diverse urban and social entities, nor of the tangible and intangible plethora of resources and values in these communities.

Community members have increased distrust of processes brought to their communities by external actors. That is what Beatriz, a community member of La Campana, mentioned in 2018 when she was asked about her opinion of an organization sponsored by a local cement company was conducting projects in the area.

"Antes de hacer cualquier cosa tienen que sondear, no *no'mas* llegar y poner las cosas. Oí que querían hacer un proyecto de murales en el barrio; entonces yo lo primero que le dije a la persona que estaba con eso fue que teníamos que hacerlo con la comunidad porque aquí ya todos nos conocemos: Cuándo la comunidad lo hace, la misma comunidad lo apropia."

"Before doing anything, they have to sound things out, not just arrive and arrange things up. I heard that they [referring to a community project led by a local cement company] wanted to do a mural project in the neighborhood; so the first thing I said to the person who was communicating it was that we had to do it with the community because we all know each other here: When the community does it, the community itself appropriates it."

Beatriz, community member, 2018.

Conducting effective participatory processes with the community can lead to better results, says Beatriz, who relied on the approach once the local cement company conducted more sessions to get the pulse of the community. The first time they approached to her, she said "*otra vez pan con lo mismo*" [again, these people coming with the same things], "at first, I thought they might came with a hidden agenda, but after a few meetings I said to my *comadre:*

Aquí va a pasar algo bueno [something good is going to happen here]". This is a good example of how good communication can potentially bring trust into the process.

In contrast, other group of neighbors had a very different experience with a group of researchers from a local private Architecture school.

Figure 2. Photograph of the space done with collaboration of a student group. Source: Author.

The project in collaboration with the architecture school aimed to enhance one of the stairways in the community, addressing an area known for difficult access within La Campana. The project involved a professor and his architecture students who participated in designing the stairway. However, the initial design received lukewarm reception from the community, prompting modifications to incorporate the preferences, needs, and resources of the local population. An instance highlighting the disconnection between the proposal and the users emerged when neighbors shared an unfavorable experience with the student group. The incident appeared to reveal a lack of contextual understanding on the part of the students. For instance, during the construction phase, one student visited the site and, with limited sensitivity, instructed the removal of recently built concrete steps due to minor discrepancies between the stair riser and tread measurements and the plans. While the students' intentions were commendable, this incident underscored the significant gap between two parallel realities – that of the students and the local community. This experience reinforces the urgent need for improved approaches to engaging with communities through effective collaboration and co-generative knowledge. It emphasizes the importance of a more empathetic and contextually informed methodology that empowers communities as active contributors in shaping projects that truly meet their needs and aspirations.

This story is an example of the mistakes that we, as society and government, constantly make in comparing the circumstances of a community with others, especially when it reflects such contrasting realities, with the use of the same parameters and measurement methods in

circumstances where the conditions clearly do not apply because of cultural, technical and economic differences.

Figure 3. Photograph of a graffiti done by the initiative *Open Muro*. Source: Author.

Another good example was one of the projects that community members began to carry out as a community were some corridors for the *Open Muro* event; a project in which the neighborhood walls were conceded to local artists to paint graffiti art on them. As a parallel project, they created bridges and corridors to improve the interconnectivity of these murals. This intervention is outstanding not only for the elaboration of the high quality artistic murals, but the feeling of belonging generated with this type of projects. The community chose as the theme "birds in the neighborhood", so those are the images distributed throughout the walls of La Campana. It should be mentioned that, although the murals were made by artists who live outside the community, the murals are being respected to the point that they have not been modified in five years. Martha explains it by saying that "the community decided when they wanted the murals, and the theme they wanted the murals to have". There was never imposition in any step of the process.

5.3 The self-inquiry of the author

This first-person reflection in the context of a second-person action research about ecosystem mapping with dialogic stakeholder interviews shows how I, the researcher, became more aware of the complexity of the ecosystem surrounding the issue of informality in Monterrey, Mexico, and the opportunities it offered. It also shows how dialogic interviewing can build understanding and relationship with the 'other', thus setting the stage for collaborating across political, cultural, and philosophical differences to focus on practical solutions.

But more than that, this first-person action research reveals the transformational impact on the researcher in becoming comfortable with uncertainty and not knowing, and trusting the unfolding of process. Here is how I interpret it:

Having as a background being a professor of architecture and urbanism, my solutions and approaches were driven by the modification of the physical space, and always as an "educated" response, through urban design projects, to community issues. This process taught me how to get rid of these structural limitations (Case, 2009; Martin, 2011; Kur, DePorres, Westrup, 2008; Wilson, 2015; 2019), to be aware of them, and what I must do to replace them with openness. If I had to summarize it in one sentence, it would be: to be okay with not knowing what could or has to happen.
Source: Reflections from field work.

Trusting the process is to trust the outcome. The interview process started from my critical "I" giving way to my curious "I", from the "I" that has the solution, to the "I" that has the genuine interest of listening and only listening to understand the whole panorama. At first, this seemed difficult for me to understand, I put up resistance to it because of my background and training that made me keen to seek for something that must be tangible and measurable. I now know that what is required to discover is the Ecosystem itself and to identify all the elements around it. The most important thing is the process, even more than knowing where the project is going to end. This process and the methodologies used taught me a panorama that shows how the success of a project has to do with how well the problem is diagnosed, and the importance of the voices involved in the diagnosis.

Another significant finding was to understand the thin line between work and socialization. On one occasion, I was conducting an interview to Carlos, a community leader in an informal settlement placed on a hill. The site where the interview took place was impressive by itself: the edge of a cliff with view to a contrasting landscape, where the low-income settlements and rich neighborhoods merged on the horizon. In this place, Carlos answered all the questions on my semi-structured script. From the most basic information such as the time when his family moved into this settlement, to interesting information about his intentions to organize a semi-vigilante neighborhood group specialized in talking with young people. We talked for about an hour. However, as soon as I closed my notebook and considered the interview over, Carlos and I started chatting about meaningless things or topics unrelated to the research. For instance, when I mentioned some aspects of my life in Austin, Carlos told me about the almost 15 years he lived and worked in San Antonio, Texas. Later, when we briefly talked about soccer (we are both fans of the same club), Carlos slowly started changing his face expressions, his voice tone became solemn, and his eyes locked in an imaginary spot in front of him. I did not know how important that instant was at that moment, but I knew I was witnessing something significant. He then talked about how one of the first activities he and others organized with kids and teenagers was a soccer tournament on an improvised soccer field. He told me that tournament was very important to the community because it was a historic weekend activity suspended in a time of gruesome violence in Monterrey in 2010 (Villarreal, 2015). As soon as he remembered the violence on his neighborhood, he started crying with his eyes still locked on that same imaginary spot. He kept talking about his reasons for organizing community work, the kidnapping and further assassination of his brother, the traumatizing time for his mother, and ultimately, his intentions to participate on the pacification of the area through community organization. After that heartbreaking moment, I realized about how significant that conversation was. Notably, as soon as we dropped our interviewer-interviewee caps, a new kind of conversation was possible.

Figure 4. Research journey reflecting on how the process started challenging my believes.
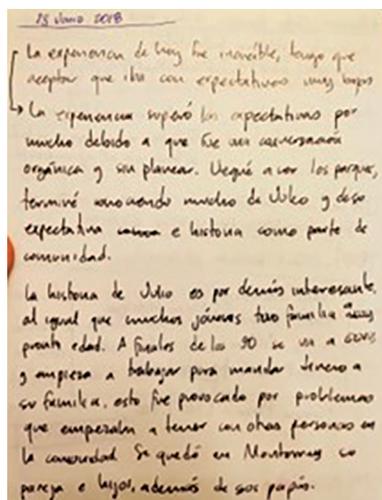
In my notes (Figure 4), I reflect on how one of my visits to La Campana was approached with low expectations. I had planned to conduct an interview with one of the community leaders about the history of a residual space that the community had intervened in. Initially, this didn't evoke much excitement, as I assumed the information would be anecdotal at best, providing only contextual details. However, this visit turned out to be an opportunity to delve into the neighborhood's history through the personal narrative of an individual, infusing profound meaning into the place on various levels. In my notes, I described it as "*una conversación orgánica y sin planear*" [an organic and unplanned conversation]. In other words, what gave this dialogue its significance was the mutual trust, which allowed it to unfold into deeper topics. This process changed my entire perspective about how to approach an issue. I have always considered myself someone open to face complex topics, so I figured that the process was going to reaffirm such openness. In contrast, I learned to be immersed in the issue, specially to be engaged with the community, embedded within the group, and knowing that the process involves me as much as the group. This translates into co-producing with the community as opposed to just extracting information, the process is about creating new information-knowledge together.

6.   Discussion

6.1   Overview of the process

My research process was guided by a graduate action research seminar called "Deep Dive: Exploring Issue Ecosystems," from the UT Graduate Program in Community and Regional Planning at UT Austin. In this course we learned how to initiate contact with interviewees and start the process of an Ecosystem Map, among other things. Within the methodology, it was

very clear that dialogic interviews are not simply instrumental means to obtain information from the interviewees, but to explore topics, listen to their stories, experiences, hopes and concerns, and to establish mutual respect and rapport. In addition, we were advised to share our issue Ecosystem maps with the interviewees and engage them in making it richer and more wide-ranging. To be fully present with my interviewees required me to be aware of my own judgments, opinions, and goals. I also needed to identify the right time to keep silence or to express my positionality, since the main objective was to hear and understand the other. I had to be aware of my own communication and listening skills.

The dialogic interviews with the ecosystem stakeholders helped me first to learn different perspectives about the same issue and then understand how, from those perspectives, people have different ways to approach similar issues, sometimes from radically different positions. The dialogue interviews were carried out in a fluid way. One of the interesting things that happened during the interviews was the perception of openness and sincerity from interviewees, which can be attributed to the prior contact I had with them. Notably, the interviewees were cautious to use certain language, especially those working at the government level.

The preparation for conducting these interviews consisted of anticipating responses that could trigger a reaction in me due to my personal beliefs. Being self-aware of my reactions and how they might manifest in gestures was crucial in maintaining equanimity. A significant learning experience was realizing that the purpose of these interviews was to deeply understand the perspectives of the interviewees. This approach ensured that my perspective on the subject would not bias the opinions of the interviewees, thereby preventing any limitations on the information they chose to share.

Thanks to this approach, I managed to establish more enduring connections with the interviewees, even offering follow-up interviews in the future, which contributed to the consolidation of the research in subsequent stages. Had I not been mentally prepared in this manner, my interactions with the interviewees would have been more limited, and it would have been challenging to grasp the underlying logic behind certain public policy decisions.

6.2   Discussion of the second-person process

The dialogic interviews conducted with stakeholders of the Ecosystem provided valuable insights. Firstly, they allowed me to comprehend diverse perspectives on the same issue, shedding light on the varied ways people approach these matters, sometimes from vastly disparate standpoints. In comparison to the other interviewees, scholars exhibited a higher degree of open-mindedness in their willingness to consider the informal settlement population through an unrestricted and co-creative lens. Conversely, public officials, while expressing concern, tended to focus on utilizing established procedures governed by either governmental authorities or scholars. In essence, their approach emphasized the desire to exert control over both the process and outcomes of interactions.

Overall, these dialogic interviews proved to be instrumental in uncovering the complexities and divergent approaches among stakeholders, providing a nuanced understanding of the issue at hand. The openness displayed by scholars and the inclination towards control exhibited by public officials underscored the importance of inclusivity and flexibility in addressing the challenges within the Ecosystem.

The contrast in participants' arguments was evident. While scholars advocated for the validation of settlements as they represented a distinct identity, public officials presented a pragmatic vision constrained within the functions of the State. For them, residents of informal settlements deserved infrastructure improvements; however, as one public official mentioned on an interview, "they [the residents] should "be open to government solutions without resistance, as, at the end of the day, they are breaking the law." While the notion of justice was present in both academics and public officials, the nuances lay in opposing views on the means and motivations driving these perspectives. The researchers invited to participate in the Exploring Issue Ecosystems course brought a diverse range of professional expertise, offering valuable insights from various fields. This broad exposure to different approaches enabled me to pinpoint the specific situations in which issues emerged.

Dr. Deidre Mendez's perspective on Culture Solutions proved particularly impactful, highlighting the significance of comprehending the cultural and behavioral context within the Ecosystem map. According to Mendez (2017), cultural or institutional contexts shape attitudes toward certain issues. Given the considerable gap between academia and governmental roles, it becomes imperative to seek innovative approaches in order to transform practice.

This understanding is essential for effective collaboration and proactive engagement with individuals. Throughout the entire interview process, I remained mindful of this approach, recognizing that the objective was not to persuade or change the opinions of participants regarding an issue. Instead, the emphasis lay in delving into the origins of their ideas and identifying shared principles and common ground among stakeholders. The overarching aim was to forge alliances and cooperation to address tangible challenges rather than solely identifying philosophical adversaries (Mendez, 2017). This approach fostered a more collaborative and constructive environment, ultimately enhancing the potential for finding innovative and sustainable solutions within the Issue Ecosystem.

The interviews conducted were primarily aimed at comprehending the contextual intricacies of informal settlements through the diverse perspectives of various stakeholders. Participants shared insights regarding the origins, development, and consolidation of these settlements, underscoring the resourceful endeavors made by informal residents to effect improvements despite limited resources. Another focal point of the interviews was to explore the attitudes of the interviewees concerning the dynamic between authorities and community members. These approaches were predominantly paternalistic and often oblivious to the strengths and capabilities of residents in informal communities. On the other hand, within the community, there is a pronounced distrust of the government due to decades of neglect.

The interviewing process made possible great diversity in perspectives among the interviewees that provided a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of informal settlements and shed light on the multifarious factors shaping these urban environments. It allowed for a nuanced exploration of the complexities inherent in informal settlement dynamics, offering valuable insights for further research and potential policy interventions.

Through the interviews, a distinct posture emerged among the public officials, reflecting their earnest desire to drive progress while being mindful of practical timeframes. It became evident that uncovering the various perspectives offered a pathway to establishing common objectives that could accommodate the constraints faced by each group involved. For instance, the interviews revealed that government officials were particularly concerned about

time and cost limitations. With this knowledge, targeted mechanisms for public participation could be devised to address these specific issues.

As Scharmer (2016) pointed out, effective communication reaches its zenith when participants achieve a state of communion. At this juncture, a profound recognition of shared objectives arises, leading to interactions and conversations that emanate from a place of deep connectedness. Essentially, communication serves as the guiding axis in this process, and the channels of communication must be adapted to suit the unique circumstances of each situation. In this case, the willingness displayed by public officials to explore methods of inclusive participation based on respect and horizontality opened the door for future interactions on my part. As a result of this initial engagement, not only did my relationship with the governmental urban planning ecosystem grow, but also the interest of decision-makers in this subject matter increased significantly, to the extent that the Monterrey Planning Department asked me for an assessment on how to approach vulnerable communities (Staines-Díaz, 2022).

This process taught me that by fostering a sense of connectedness and shared purpose, fruitful collaborations and solutions can be achieved, while addressing the practical limitations faced by the different actors involved.

6.3 Discussion of the first-person process

The interview process provided me with a valuable lesson in testing my endurance and objectivity regarding the topic at hand. Throughout the interviews, I consciously refrained from interrupting, passing judgments, or imposing my opinions on the discussed issues. Instead, I adopted an attentive and open-minded approach, actively listening to the perspectives offered by the interviewees and making a concerted effort to comprehend their positions fully.

This experience reinforced the significance of setting aside personal biases and allowing space for authentic dialogue to unfold. By demonstrating a sincere interest in understanding others' viewpoints, I was able to forge meaningful connections and create a conducive environment for constructive exchanges of ideas. Such a approach not only enriched the quality of the interview process but also laid the foundation for ongoing collaborations and engagement with the stakeholders in the Issue Ecosystem.

The research approach adopted in this study emphasizes the vital importance for researchers to engage actively when working within an informal settlement context. It challenges the traditional notion of having a predefined "question" guiding the research process and suggests a different perspective. Instead, the approach advocates for embracing the idea that a significant part of the research involves genuinely listening and comprehending the underlying needs expressed by the community. In this context, the research process extends beyond merely relying on verbal expressions from the community members. Rather, it encourages researchers to attentively observe and analyze the actions, behaviors, and non-verbal cues exhibited by the community. By doing so, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the unspoken realities and concerns that shape the community's needs. In certain disciplinary fields, like urban planning, this is not the mainstream role of researchers and, in order to play it, researchers need to transform too. First person action research helps in this transformation.

Citing Wilson (2016), an Action Research approach underscores the value of being receptive and attuned to the community's lived experiences and challenges. By adopting this mindset, researchers can better appreciate the nuanced complexities within the informal settlement, leading to more insightful and meaningful research outcomes. Ultimately, Action Research promotes a more empathetic and participatory research process, fostering a collaborative and respectful relationship with participants. By letting go of rigid preconceptions and embracing a holistic understanding, researchers can contribute to a more comprehensive and contextually relevant study that addresses the genuine needs and aspirations of the people residing in the informal settlement.

This section illustrated the action researcher's own process of self-awareness in conducting the interviews and building relationships of mutual understanding with multiple stakeholders, using first-person action research at the intersection of urban informality and local government. My involvement in this research process resulted in immersion with community members of La Campana, as well as the three levels of government; municipal, state and federal, which is crucial for transforming the urban planning system in Monterrey.

7. Conclusions

The research approach employed in this paper emphasizes recognizing subaltern social groups in Planning, valuing their perspectives and struggles in generating knowledge. Fals Borda (2013) stresses breaking asymmetry between researchers and the researched, empowering people as thinkers and enabling them to conduct their research. This inclusive approach enriches decision-making and empowers marginalized communities.

This paper constitutes an exercise of self-reflexivity that can be inspiring for others researchers who are starting the early stages of a research. The action researcher must be able not only to 'see' the problem, but to 'sense' it (Scharmer, 2016)—i. e. to perceive an issue from the perspective of the whole social field, and at the same time from the different perspectives within the social field. Also, for the action researcher, the social field, or issue eco-system, is not 'out there'. The action researcher is part and parcel of it. As I began to sense the eco-system, I saw that I—as a privileged resident of Monterrey and now an international academic-in-training—was part of that ecosystem. The role that I could play began to crystallize: bringing together the polarized players into a new conversational field, a generative field that can perceive the city, its neighborhoods, its apparent dichotomies, as part of a connected living organism in need of healing.

As a result of this process, I became more aware of the complexity of the ecosystem surrounding the issue of informality in Monterrey, Mexico, and the opportunities it offered. It also showed how dialogic interviewing could build understanding and relationship with the 'other,' thus setting the stage for collaborating across political, cultural, and philosophical differences to focus on practical solutions. But more than that, this first-person action research revealed the transformational impact on me, the researcher, in becoming comfortable with uncertainty and not knowing and instead trusting the unfolding process.

This process taught me to search for new research paths. Having been trained as an architect, the training was geared to be an answer bearer. Bringing questions to the table was

seen as weakness of the project process, and any attempt to incorporate other actors in the process was seen from a simplistic and superficial stance. Being present *in* La Campana and getting involved in a learning processes through in-depth interviews, which usually took place while walking through the neighborhood, gave way to a new access to information, no longer from an extractive stance, but in a co-generative way that helped me to position myself *in* place and not just looking *at* the place.

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TORRES CARRILLO, Alfonso. Pensamiento epistémico, educación popular e investigación participativa. Mexico City: Editora Nómada, IPECAL, 2019.

Telmo Adams

Educator and researcher Alfonso Torres Carrillo, professor emeritus at the Pedagogical University of Bogotá, Colombia, acts as a popular educator committed to emancipatory social meanings and practices. His close relationship with the Council for Popular Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (CEAAL) led him to undertake an evaluation commissioned by this institution of La Piragua's productions on popular education between 2004 and 2008. The result of this research was published by the journal itself (Torres C., 2009) and also in a book (Torres, C. 2008 and 2021).

The book reviewed here is the result of a series of lectures given by the author at the doctoral schools of the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas (Colombia) and the Instituto de Pensamiento y Cultura de América Latina (IPECAL); its aim was to synthesize the ontological, epistemological, methodological and pedagogical assumptions of Latin American critical thought in the context of popular education. The author's choice was to establish a dialogue between Hugo Zemelman and other referents of popular education and participatory research, especially Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda.

The author, as a popular educator, has been a reader of Freire's work, interacted at various times with Fals Borda and worked with Professor Zemelman from 2000 to 2013, with whom he learned about the density of his thought in the political, epistemic, methodological and pedagogical dimensions. And the present book of 121 pages, with four chapters, corresponding to topics addressed in conferences between 2017 and 2019 in Colombia and Mexico, provides a contribution with unpublished aspects to the field of Education and Research.

A first point of reference refers to Hugo Zemelman's epistemology of the "potential present", a fundamental and inseparable element in dialectics, but often forgotten by pragmatic or (neo-) positivist currents of thought that are sometimes called materialist. As Torres presupposes, more than a theory, epistemology implies an ontology of sociohistorical reality and the place of subjectivity and subjects in its configuration, giving rise to dialectical readings, open to the movement of social life. Social reality, intrinsically contradictory and indeterminate, is the result of the actions of individual and collective subjects, an important key that allows us to overcome deterministic analysis. For this author, social practices are always impregnated with utopias, projects and potentialities, "as a synthesis of processes and possibilities of the present future; that is, as the given that contains the future" (Zemelman, 1992, p. 12).

A second aspect marks the importance of thinking from the Latin American context, considering the centuries of domination in which colonialism was forged, not only eco-

nomically and politically, but also intellectually. However, Torres emphasizes that the 1960 s were characterized by a break with colonial and imperialist social theories and methodologies, through the work of critical intellectuals who proposed what Fals Borda synthesized as "proper social science". This group of authors was influenced by European currents of thought, with a preponderance of Marxism, but which "constructed perspectives and concepts, in the face of the singularity of the problems they dealt with and the options for the future they promoted" (Torres, 2019, p. 13). And he highlights how this has been amplified by the influences of the exiles to which these intellectuals were subjected by the military dictatorships in our region of Latin America.

Both Freire and Fals Borda make an extraordinary contribution to overcoming deterministic analysis. But Zemelman's contribution is innovative, especially in the field of research, as a step towards dialectical readings, open to the movement of social life. He values subjectivities by understanding subjects as particular manifestations of social expression (Zemelman, 1992). The category of subjectivity – as a set of values, beliefs, languages and ways of apprehending the world (apud Calvillo and Favela, 1995) – is characterized by the tension between constituted and constituent subjectivities.

In this process they "shape social subjectivity and its possibilities of empowering social practices and processes, generating new meanings and constructing reality" (Torres C., 2019, p. 19). As a result, participatory research, epistemic thinking and popular education, in the critical perspective, imply openness to the complexity of the social in the face of which "everything must be put under suspicion" (Torres C. 2019, p. 83).

Sensational is the pedagogical organization of the set of criteria of participatory methodologies (p. 28–32), among which the following stand out: 1) Critical distance from conventional institutionalized modes of research which, in practice, can mean a critical approach with the subjects of research so that their reality is the starting point for the production of new knowledge. 2) Production of knowledge with a liberating option, which is assumed to be critical and emancipatory. 3) "Localized" research practice in which local actors guide the research path. 4) Knowledge production linked to organizational processes and emancipatory collective action dynamics. 5) Insurgent task of producing knowledge in the face of institutional or disciplinary logic. 6) Collective production of knowledge with participatory processes in all stages of research. 7) Research practice that promotes the formation of knowledge groups. 8) Research that relates critically to theory. 9) Practice that promotes the 'dialogue of knowledge', valuing other experiences, languages, ancestral and popular knowledge. 10) Knowledge production that assumes the methodological as a flexible practice, in a critical and creative way. 11) Practice of reflective knowledge production, always taking reality as a starting point and reference.

Regarding point nine, on the dialogue of knowledge, it is important to point out that it is not a matter of relativism. It is a dialogue with ethical commitment that requires, as Dussel states, the sharing of vital criteria or principles such as the situation of the "other", the oppressed, the "victim", from which we situate ourselves, reflect and act. In addition, a twelfth criterion could be related: the research practice incorporates the contributions of communication, art, culture, an aspect that the author brings up in a nearby section. "Culture becomes a key element to understand these social dynamics, if we understand it as that set of imaginaries, representations, beliefs, meanings […]" (Torres C., 2019, p. 110).

In the sequence, Alfonso indicates some epistemological implications and methodological challenges of critical thinking: a) Epistemic thinking requires theoretical flexibility in a

historical reality in constant transformation; b) Cultural dialogue from the recognition of the existence of multiple rationalities, worldviews and perspectives of understanding social realities. c) "The need for the subject", both in the construction of the social and in research, guaranteeing its protagonism, and thus giving way to the potentiality of the present. d) The principle of reflexivity which is very clear in the line of Freire, Fals Borda and Zemelman. And these implications and challenges culminate in the question: "What does researching from this critical tradition of the potential present imply today?" (Torres C., 2019, p. 38).

In this perspective, popular education, as a pedagogical conception and critical thinking, can be understood in the context of the convergence between liberation sociology (Fals Borda), liberation theology (Gustavo Gutiérrez), ethics and philosophy of liberation (Enrique Dussel) and liberating/conscientizing education (Paulo Freire). The articulation between popular education and the epistemology of the present potential is important as a commitment to and "identification with utopian thinking from the transformation of reality. […] not only to recognize oneself in a historical context, but to recognise oneself as a historical subject; either as an individual or as a collective […]" (Torres C., 2019, p. 79).

The last part of the book brings out aspects of the vital convergences between Freire, Fals Borda and Zemelman. The formation of all three took place in a traditional conception based on Eurocentric thinking. They made ruptures and initiated new ways of thinking, establishing new visions of the liberating possibilities of social transformation. A second characteristic of this convergence is the relationship with each social context from which the authors come, since knowing their origins provides a basic key to understanding their works. In the context of all three, the stance of non-conformity, restlessness, discomfort was present, that is to say, a critical and hopeful stance towards the world. This was followed by another common aspect, which was the persistent questioning of "a common practice of the political and academic elites of our countries, which is the desire to imitate, "copy" or transfer ideas, institutions and practices from the Western North (Europe and the United States) […]" (p. 105). They proposed (re)thinking from our place, considering our historical conditions, the characteristics of our peoples and sovereign perspectives for the future.

The open, flexible, heterodox and anti-dogmatic use of theories and concepts to approach reality constitutes the fifth characteristic indicated. "Zemelman argued that reality must be read as something that is happening, as a process, as a movement, which does not obey prefixed laws; it is a movement where, as Marx would say, social conditioning factors are combined with the multiple possibilities, the different possible futures. And this movement of reality generates a permanent gap with theories, which tend to become fixed, to stagnate" (Torres C., 2019, p. 107). This is a very important emphasis because it is consistent with the recovery of the place of subjects and social subjectivities; and it points to the need for the constant (re)creation of theories. Freire, in similar terms, contributes to the principle of hope: the present reality is changing, it is not determined, and it is traversed by many possibilities for the future.

After these highlights on relevant aspects of the book, here are some considerations on its importance for the field of popular education and participatory research. In a more general perspective, the author draws attention, with great emphasis, to the care needed to understand the thinking of a thinker. It requires knowing their life history: the authors who underpinned their thinking, as well as the social, cultural, economic, political and intellectual contexts and events of their time; in short, all the aspects that influenced their way of thinking and acting.

As for convergences, our three authors mentioned here went through political exile. That is to say, they had to make existential ruptures that certainly had an impact on their way of positioning themselves before the world, their way of thinking and their way of projecting the future. Knowing an author's thought requires identifying the socio-historical space in which he or she was born. "To follow an author or a conceptual current is not to quote and repeat it, but to recreate it and overflow it from its own presuppositions and criteria […]" (Torres C., 2019, p. 84).

Epistemological openness as a permanent attitude of epistemic thinking requires, therefore, to be clear that the methodological problem in research goes beyond questions such as: What is the technique? What is the strategy? Popular education and participatory research have, above all, a commitment to the collective production of a reading of the world that contributes to its transformation. The elements provided by Alfonso in this book effectively contribute to constructing readings of dialectical and changing reality, to account for historicity in order to understand the potentialities of the present and thus transform "limit situations" into "unpublished viable ones".

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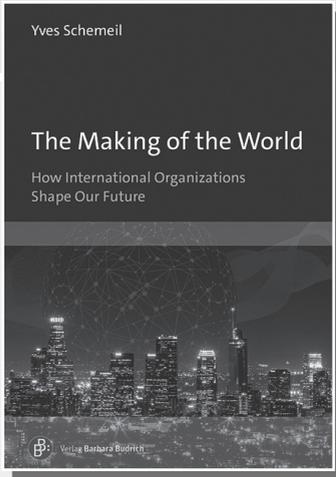
Yves Schemeil

The Making of the World

How International Organizations
Shape Our Future

International Organizations (IOs) were designed to provide global public goods, among which security for all, trade for the richest, and development for the poorest. Their very existence is now a promise of success for the co-operative turn in international relations. Although the IO network was once created by established powers, rising states can hardly resist the massive production of norms that their governments can be reluctant to respect without being able to discard them. IOs are omnipresent, and exert great influence on the world as we know it. However, rulers and ruled are hardly aware of such compelling and snowballing processes. Yves Schemeil uses his in-depth knowledge of IOs to analyze their current impact on international relations, on world politics, and their potential of shaping the global future.
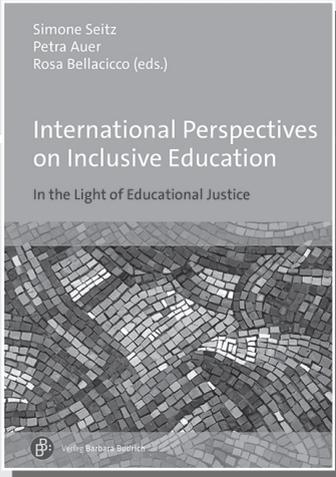
Simone Seitz
Petra Auer
Rosa Bellacicco (eds.)

International Perspectives on Inclusive Education

In the Light of Educational Justice

International developments and impulses call for the equitable and inclusive design of education systems. This book takes this up and focuses on the often blurred relationship between inclusive education and educational equity. By compiling current research results and theoretical contributions from several European countries on the topic, the authors create an overarching framework for discussion.

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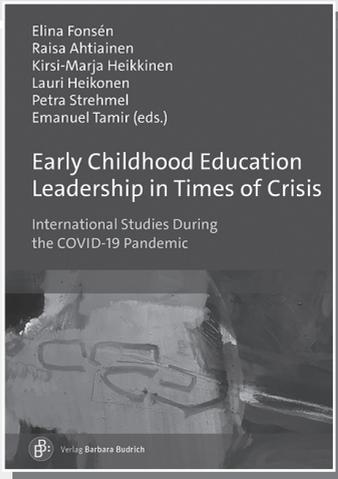
Elina Fonsén | Raisa Ahtiainen
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Petra Strehmel | Emanuel Tamir (eds.)

Early Childhood Education Leadership in Times of Crisis

International Studies During
the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically affected all aspects of professional and private life worldwide, including the field of early childhood education and care (ECE). This volume sheds light on leadership in ECE: How did leaders experience the challenges they were facing and what coping strategies did they apply in order to deal with the changes in everyday life and practices in ECE centres? Authors from twelve countries present empirical findings gaining information on different crisis management mechanisms in ECE systems around the world.

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