

Why action research and what it means to me

We are asked

- why did we choose to do action research and what brought us to this practice
- what keeps us involved
- what are the issues, values, experiences, personal characteristics of our commitment to action research, shaping our practice?

I understand action research as a process to meet and respect the other in joint reflection and action, creating equal opportunities with everybody involved, every participant having the chance to unfold and develop his/her creative potential. But I did not choose to do action research by a single deliberate decision. Instead I came to action research step by step as a result of a long-term personal learning process in political and research contexts. My entrance was research praxis, not theory.

There are, as far as I can see, two main sources of my commitment to action research:

1. My political activity as a young student. Together with my wife we cooperated with a group of socialist students investigating the careers of Nazi judges during Nazi time and after the war in West-Germany. Many of them had sentenced people to death in Germany and in the occupied Eastern European countries for slaughtering one of their own pigs "illegally", for stealing some food etc, while after the war they continued their careers at West German courts, some of these judges in prominent positions. Based on documents from Polish archives we organized an exhibition about these judges' careers and judgements during the Nazi period in order to start a public discussion about the then restorative elements in West German society
2. Research praxis: I have been studying economics and sociology at several German universities. There was never a word about action research at the university; it was unknown in German academia in the late sixties and seventies even more than it is today.

My first research project in a private research institute was about technical change in coal mines and the impact on engineers' work situation. The research question was how to reform education and training in order to help coal mining engineers meet the challenges of new technologies in the coal mines.

But to my understanding it was a one dimensional view to see engineers simply as subject to technical change only: They were at the same time creating technology! Together with my research team (three sociologists, one psychologist, one economist) we decided therefore to turn the research question around asking: What are the ideas of engineers to change their working conditions including technology, work organisation, health and safety conditions according to their interests? Which are the conditions (such as hierarchy, heavy work load) to prevent engineers from realizing their ideas by using their creative potential? We spent many weeks accompanying coal mining engineers during their work both above and below ground, observing

(and later analysing) their cooperative relationships in vertical and horizontal direction and asking them about their ideas to improve their working conditions: What was their critique, what were their perspectives?

This very first research was far from being action research. But we did already practice some of its main elements: We regarded engineers as subjects of their work situation, not as objects of an inquiry. We did not simply observe and analyse their situation from our outside perspective, and we were interested in what I called “analysis of opportunities” (Möglichkeitsanalyse). This means: we did not confine our research to an outside reality in its present state, but instead understood reality as a moment in a continuous process of social change with people (engineers) participating as subjects creating the contexts they were at the same time parts of and dependent on. This concept of reality as a process is inspired by Ernst Bloch who pointed out in several of his historical analyses, that both past experiences and future perspectives of mankind are present in any historical situation. What was still missing, is: we did not yet understand ourselves (researchers) as parts of these historical processes, there was no joint action with the engineers, though a lot of joint reflection. The research resulted in a training concept for engineers, which we developed with the top personal managers of the coal mining industry, but not with the engineers themselves. We understood ourselves as advocates of the engineers’ interests, as we had understood them in weeks of discussion and joint reflection, but they did not have their own voice in the process of defining and using the results of our research.

One of our next research projects was part of the state financed program “humanization of work”. It turned out to be very difficult to identify an enterprise willing to give room to an open participation process. It took us more than one year before we met top representatives of an enterprise within steel industry and managed to agree with them upon a framework securing the conditions for an open participation process in the sense, that a result to be achieved was not defined in advance. The top management accepted as a departure of the project, that all ideas developed by the workers during the research process were to be realized after having been agreed by works council and management in a joint committee. The project provided sufficient finance to realize the workers’ ideas. Management’s interest was to develop the innovative potential of the work force, especially because its middle management had not been very innovative throughout years.

For us researchers (three sociologists, one psychologist, one engineer) this research was a challenging learning experience. We went to the shop floor and started the process by asking every worker (45 men and women, foreign and German blue collar workers) of a screw factory’s department individually three questions: Please describe your work situation. What is your critique? What do you imagine should be changed?

The idea behind these questions was to see the work situation from the workers’ perspective and to find out their interests and ideas to improve their working conditions. But instead of innovative, creative potential we met deeply resigned people. Many of them answered: In our department nothing has changed throughout thirty years, and you will not be able to move anything. The workers did not trust neither their ability nor ours to change anything.

We understood their deep resignation as a result of up to thirty years of extremely monotonous work (due to Tayloristic forms of work organisation), high work load (extreme level of noise, piece rate wages; most of them had to stand at their machines eight hours a day, five days a week, year by year) and a very rigid hierarchy. Nobody was so far interested in any of them as a person, giving him a voice in his own affairs at work.

Our first idea was to create a situation with a totally different time structure, giving the workers the opportunity to discuss their situation and the direction of possible improvements. We took them to a place one hundred km away from their factory and organized a one week seminar, which we used to present their own descriptions of their work situation in a systematic manner. This seminar was a breakthrough for each of the workers as well as for us researchers. The workers realized, that they were able to describe and criticize their work situation and to elaborate and design very basic changes in the fields of technology, work organisation and wage system. In the following design process the workers developed about one hundred eighty different ideas and realized many of them in cooperation with experts and engineers from the enterprise. There was initiative, creativity, pride and self-confidence among the workers, who had so far been regarded as being unskilled by their supervisors and managers, though as a matter of fact the working conditions were unqualified, while the workers' creative potential was not only not used but suppressed by monotonous, very short cycled work, heavy work load and hierarchic structures.

During the next four years we shared six one week seminars with the workers and organized a design process in their department together with them. There developed a joint process of several cyclical sequences of learning and doing, which included great challenges as well as great learning opportunities for us researchers. When the work groups decided to construct a machine, where they could work sitting, such a machine was constructed with the assistance of engineers, accompanied by the research group, especially its engineer. We had to learn a lot about wage systems, work organisation, educational processes, and we did it by combining theoretical knowledge and workers' experiences in a joint learning process. But our main experience was to see the workers grow as individuals, developing pride, self-confidence, creativity, both at work and in their private lives.

The project was intensively discussed by social scientists, trade unions and employers' federations in Germany during the late seventies and early eighties. Sociologists denied, that our action research approach was to be called research, and in the academic understanding of the word they were of course right. Trade unions, especially their central organisations, were full of mistrust against open participation processes; they did not see, that workers' participation was an opportunity to enlarge and open the institutionalised concept of German co-determination, but were in the contrary afraid of direct forms of democracy. Employers' federations understood participation processes as enlargement of co-determination into the direction of industrial democracy, which they had been fighting since 1945. Industrial democracy was exactly the political dimension of participation, which we had in mind when we started the project.

During the eighties we did not only fail to introduce action research into the German academic scene, but were also unable to present democratic participation as a political perspective to German trade unions. After 1981 the concept of participation was eliminated from the state financed program "Humanization of Work" as part of a compromise between trade unions, employers' federation and the ministry of science and research to continue the program after a series of conflicts during 1974 and 1980.

So we were increasingly isolated in German academic sociology and trade union discussion (notwithstanding some exceptions in both fields). Therefore I intensified my contacts with colleagues from the Tavistock and Scandinavian tradition of action research. Based on my research experiences as described above I learned much about concepts of action research in discussions with Lisl Klein, Einar Thorsrud, Hans van Beinum, Davydd Greenwood, Björn Gustavsen and others. I invited Einar, Hans and Björn to seminars which I had the opportunity to organize in Germany. But as to the academic scene it was all in vein: Action research stuck in a minority position far from the mainstream in German sociology, which was and is dominated by positivistic approaches; to meet practitioners as subjects and equal partners in research processes, to see them as subjects of their work and working conditions is as rare in the German tradition as the tradition to analyse social reality as a continuing process, which researchers as well as practitioners are parts of.

At present I am participating in a regional development process aiming at reducing discrimination of migrants and developing strategies to integrate them into the regional labour market. A variety of very different actors such as migrants and their organisations, training institutions, small and medium enterprises owned by migrants as well as by Germans, labour market institutions, public administration, regional development agencies and research institutes are cooperating in an action research process. I appreciate this process as a cross cultural adventure, not only between Germans and foreigners, but also between the different values and cultural contexts bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, trainers and researchers are living and working in. We started by dialogues with all partners to reach a joint understanding of the situation, exchanged experiences from the different contexts, agreed on action plans for the next three years and on the future process of cooperation. I am monitoring the process of dialogue and cooperation, securing, that across all differences in language, culture, interests every participant is heard and has a voice in the dialogue, legitimated by his/her experiences. What strikes me, is the great variety of different people with their respective cultural, professional and individual backgrounds, which makes the action research process by far richer than in a single enterprise.

Conclusion: According to my experience action research is not a certain method nor a special bunch of methods. Researchers must know how to use their toolbox of methods and theories, and they need sufficient experience from change processes to do the right thing at the right time. Given these experiences, action research is – to quote Bert Brecht - "the easy thing, which is difficult to make" (Brecht was speaking about communism, I am speaking about my view of action research). Action research is empathy and listening while meeting the other, it is commitment to basic values like human creativity and democratic

participation, it is based on the perception of social reality as a continuing process with individuals being subjects of their history and the social contexts they are dependent on. Action research includes to be responsible for the development processes (changes), which have been achieved by joint action.

The concept of action research has epistemological consequences: Social science and research are part of ongoing social development processes; researchers do not possess a body of superior “scientific” knowledge, which practitioners are lacking; instead they are partners in social dialogue and transformation, responsible as any other citizen. Research is a process within society, it cannot (and must not) avoid values and personal commitment, it is producing contextual, not “objective” truth. Nevertheless I see one difficulty: Researchers and practitioners are working in highly different reference systems, contexts and time structures (see for instance the differences between enterprises, administration and science). Dialogue and joint action between these different actors are of course possible, necessary and fruitful for all participants, but it is only for a certain time, that they meet on the common ground of a specific change process, in which concepts (theories) have to prove their relevance in interaction with local contexts, while local contexts add new questions and experiences to theory. Having finished their cooperation, each actor returns to his contexts (probably changed by joint action and reflection). This means for action researchers to write good reports (thick descriptions) addressed to both practitioners and the scientific community and to reflect the impact of their research experience on theory. We all know the great difficulties action researchers face to bridge the two worlds of theory and praxis, but if they try to avoid these difficulties, they will be reduced to either consultants or academic scientists. In both roles they are missing the social function of action research: to enhance democratic participation and to create public spaces in economy, which Habermas called the field of instrumental instead of communicative action.