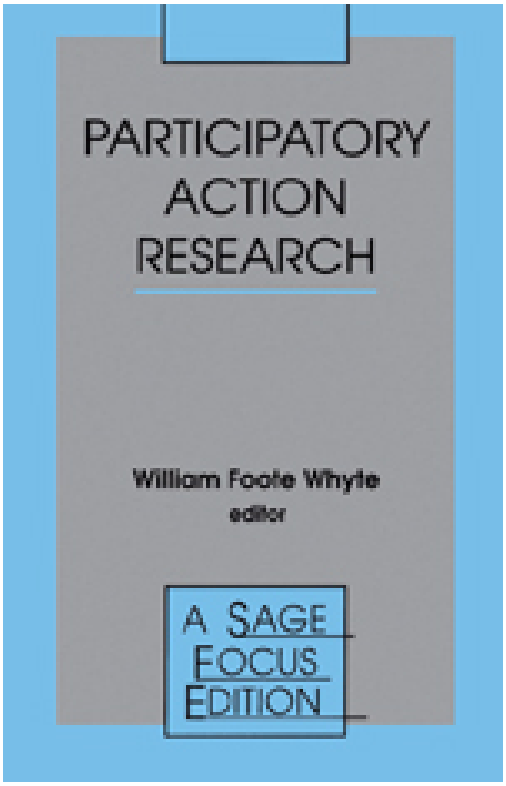

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Cogenerative Learning: Bringing Participation into Action Research

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> If you want to understand what a science is you should look in the first instance not at its theories or findings and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do.
>
> Geertz (1973: 5)

According to Rapoport (1970), action research (AR) is a strategy for using scientific methods to solve practical problems in a way that contribute to general social science theory and knowledge. This strategy leads to several dilemmas. The two most relevant to our concern here are what Rapoport calls the dilemmas of AR's “goals” and “initiative.” Each represents a choice between polar opposites. The first revolves around the choice between scientific rigor (at the expense of practical relevance) versus practical problem-solving relevance (at the cost of scientific validity). The second deals with the problem of who takes the initiative to bring forth the problem.

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It is either a researcher operating out of a disciplinary/theoretical framework or a person with a real-world problem stated in everyday language. Involvement of the participant from the research situation in the action research process moderates both these dilemmas. So one source for understanding participatory action research (PAR) is understanding AR.

In this chapter, we describe one way of defining and doing PAR. We have our doubts about the possibility and utility of general, abstract theory in solving real problems in a specific context or situation. As in AR, knowledge in PAR is context bound (Susman and Evered, 1978). Thus we reflect on, systematize, and generalize from our own experience as researchers in the context of doing PAR. We develop a model, new terms, and a set of concepts for describing what we do in situations where we attempt to create new knowledge in active collaboration with the people who live in that situation. They are not “subjects,” or “clients,” or “data sources,”

they are “colearners.” In trying to understand our own reality as PAR researchers, we hope to contribute to the ability of others trying this approach to democratizing work life.

We believe that our approach is typical and quite consistent with that of our Scandinavian colleagues (see, for example, the chapter by Karlsen in this volume and references to the work of Gustavsen and Thorsrud). We cite their work as well as that in other countries that supports and illustrates our “language.”

What is PAR in Scandinavia? Notes on a Model

Political values concerning increased democracy, political equality, and social justice are at the center of PAR efforts in Scandinavian work life. To realize these values, PAR researchers in Norway use sociotechnical systems (STS) thinking (often in projects with a strong component of technological change) to create more workplace democracy and self-management. We have contributed to and been influenced by the evolution of AR into PAR in Norway as a part of a strategy to reform work life since the early 1970s. This is more fully described elsewhere (Elden, 1979; Gustavsen and Hunnius, 1981; Gustavsen, 1985) but we can note here some of the key features of work life research in Norway.

As Scandinavian PAR professionals aiming to contribute to major reforms in work life, we are a long way from being detached, “value-neutral” individual scientists. For us and many of our colleagues, PAR in Norwegian work life means researchers who have

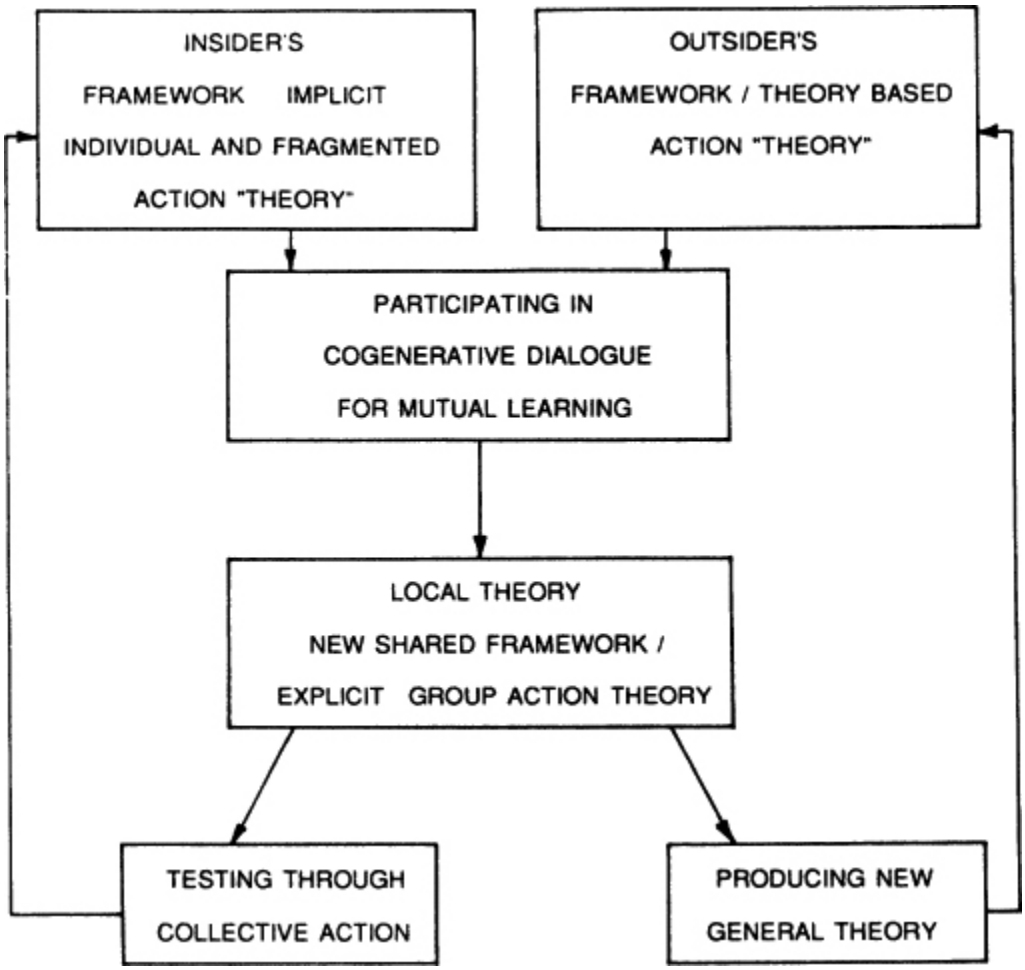
> (1) clear value commitments to democratization as well as economic improvement—people have a right to “good”-quality jobs;
> (2) a vision of the “good organization”—that is, one based on self-management, development of human potential, power equalization, and democratic principles;
> (3) well-developed and proven tools, concepts, and ways of working founded on sociotechnical systems thinking that can be used to (re)design organizations to achieve our visions and values;
> (4) a shared tradition of a way of working, a vocabulary, and a network of collegial relations and support structures mostly in the form of well-financed public or nonprofit research institutes;
> (5) a researcher role of “colearner” rather than of “expert in charge of change” in which the researcher's expertise includes the ability to “fade out” as participants take charge of their own learning; and
> (6) an extensive formal political infrastructure supporting participation in work life as reflected in specific labor legislation, national labor-management agreements, and industrial relations and traditions in Norwegian work life.

Our model of participatory action research should be understood in this context. Most of the projects we have done were institutionally based, involved long-term relationships with the participants, and were to some degree publicly financed. No project lasted less than two years, and we have had relationships that have lasted as long as five years. We have worked in cooperative labor-management projects (Elden, 1979; Levin and Skorstad, 1975), in projects exclusively for unions (Elden et al., 1980; Levin et al., 1980; Levin, 1981; Levin and Kaul, 1984; Levin and Havn, 1985), and in local communities (Levin, 1988; Levin et al., 1989). Our projects do not generate “data” in the usual sense of what independent reviewers can use to validate our conclusions. They are the basis for the concepts and ideas that we have developed and systematized in the form of a model of PAR. Our main purpose is to create concepts that clarify PAR and its praxis and not to prove a position through empirical evidence.

Cogenerative Learning in PAR

Our model of PAR rests on “insiders” (local participants) and “outsiders” (the professional researchers) collaborating in cocreating “local theory” that the participants test out by acting on it. The results can be fed back to improve the participants' own “theory” and can further generate more general (“scientific”) theory. The elements in our PAR model are illustrated in Figure 9.1.

Figure 9.1. A Model of A Participative Action Research Scandinavia Style: The Cogenerative Way



The basic idea behind our version of PAR is that those who supply the data have their own ideas, models, or frameworks for attributing meaning and explanations to the world they experience. Those who spend their work lives in a particular organization get to know more about it and have more ways of making sense of their world than would be possible for an outsider to appreciate without in some way becoming an insider. But “going native” is an expensive, time-consuming, and unnecessarily indirect strategy for researchers to reform work life. Our point is that the researcher has no legitimate monopoly on explaining social worlds or making sense or reality interpretations.

In Berger and Luckmann's (1971) apt phrase: Reality is socially constructed. This means that a scientist's theory about your world is not necessarily more valid or true than your own theory of your world. Both theories

are social products that can be improved through investigation and testing. The difference between the two socially created realities is both the methods used to create them (everyday, “espoused” thinking versus data-based scientific methodology) and their formal presentation (informal, “natural,” everyday language versus highly stylized, formal forms of scientific discourse). Theory is influenced by the local situation in which it is created. PAR is a way of learning how to explain a particular social world by working with the people who live in it to construct, test, and improve theories about it so they can better control it. We are interested in theories that help people learn how to better control the circumstances of their lives. Workplaces can be powerful sources of learning for empowerment and democratization.

Research is a particular way of systematic learning. PAR gives us a new answer to the question: Who learns from the research? The answer in nonaction, nonparticipatory research is clear. Only the researcher or those who can extract meaning from research reports (largely other researchers) learn, not the “subjects.” Participatory action research means that all relevant stakeholders do what only researchers usually do. It can be seen primarily as a learning strategy for empowering participants and only secondarily as producing “research” in the conventional sense.

PAR as learning empowers in three ways. First, it empowers because of the specific insights, new understandings, and new possibilities that the participants discover in creating better explanations about their social world. Second, participants learn how to learn. This is what Argyris and Schön (1978) identify as deutero-learning. Third, PAR can be liberating in Brown and Tandon's (1983) sense of participative research when participants learn how to create new possibilities for action.

Compared with conventional research, in PAR, the roles of practitioners and professional researchers are quite different. This makes analyzing and assessing or even talking about the equality in inquiry that we experience in PAR difficult. We have tried to overcome this in other contexts by talking about “colearning,” “participant-managed inquiry,” or “client as consultant.” In this chapter, we think the terms for describing what the two different kinds of participants bring to the party should be *insider* versus *outsider frameworks*. By *framework* we mean a way of understanding, a language, or a cognitive map. The richness and quality of the research depends on the ability of the insiders and the outsiders to play their different frameworks and expertise against each other to create a new, third explanatory framework. This new way of looking at things would not necessarily have been predicted from any of the initial frameworks. PAR is a way of generating new knowledge where the participants in the research process function as equals because of their different kinds of expertise

and frames of reference. Each of the two types of participants in the research process has its own expertise and “frame” as the point of departure in creating a shared framework or “local theory.”

Insiders (employees and others who experience the workplace directly) are expert in the specifics of the setting or situation and know from personal experience how things work and how the elements are connected to each other and about values and attitudes, local company culture, and so on. This knowledge tends to be highly individual, nonsystemic, tacit, and unreflected upon. Insiders are primarily concerned about a “science” of their own particular situation. They want to solve practical problems and achieve personal and organizational goals. The initial framework of what will become local theory comes from how individual organization members make sense out of their situation. They are experts in the particular situation but their theories are not systematically tested.

Outsiders (researchers and the external “experts”) have what's missing: training in systematic inquiry and analysis, in designing and carrying out research, and in recognizing patterns and creating new knowledge irrespective of content. Our PAR professional must also have a high level of interpersonal skills and be able to design and manage learning events. The researcher's initial framework of what will become local theory is based on general theory or a particular way of thinking about the problem at hand. How do researchers and social scientists make sense out of this kind of situation?

The insider comes to the inquiry because of a personal interest in a specific practical problem. The outsider, in contrast, comes because of an interest in solving particular kinds of problems (in theory and/or practice), methods, general knowledge, or values. The researcher's framework will be different: more explicit, full of ideas about how things could hang together, with lots of abstract concepts, and a high degree of formalism. The outsider's concern is basically relating to the research community in creating scientific theory, using acceptable methods, and communicating through publication (Kalleberg, 1989). The researcher is the linchpin so that what he or she learns contributes to accumulation of knowledge above and beyond a local, “context-bound” situation.

We have described the “what” and the “who” of participatory action research. Let us now turn to the “how.” What is needed is a connection between insiders and outsiders that integrates their different forms of expertise and different initial frameworks to generate a third framework or “practical theory” of the local situation. We aim at a partnership in which insiders become more theoretical about their practice and outsiders more practical about their theory. This occurs by participating in what we call a “cogenerative dialogue.”

Learning through Participating in Cogenerative Dialogue

“Participation” is a powerful but slippery concept. As Pateman (1970) makes clear, participation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for democracy. In her terms, we mean “full” rather than “pseudo-” or “partial” participation in our definition of participation in PAR. Participation within a nondemocratic structure is possible, and organizational designs for “high-performance systems” and the like can be quite humanizing without being democratizing (Elden, 1981).

Thus the degree and nature of “participation” in all phases of participatory action research is a critical factor. Not all participation is empowering. Participation must be full participation or a form of “codetermination” if it is to be empowering. This is consistent with Brown and Tandon's (1983) emphasis on participants being in charge of the inquiry. Participants create new meaning in their own terms through a learning process that follows the basic tenets of research design and methods. The insiders are not simply sources of data or sanctioners of studies and reports but actively help create and codetermine in every phase of the research process—especially in creating new meaning. (See Elden, 1985, and Jan Irgens Karlsen in this volume.) They are not merely consulted in each phase of knowledge production; they participate as cocreators. We call this *empowering participation*.

Empowering (i.e., codeterminative and with learning) participation in action research does not mean that every single person in an organization is decisively involved in every phase of the research process. Because PAR builds on learning by doing research within the context experienced by participants, the size of most companies poses problems in carrying out PAR. Indeed, in all of our projects dealing with large organizations, the actual research work is done by a small work group. In all but the smallest organizations, PAR is a representative form of participation in which all stakeholder interests and points of view are included. In Scandinavia, this means worker representatives, union representatives, and representatives of several levels of management, including, of course, top management at least at times. We have elsewhere reviewed the new methods and techniques of involving large numbers of participants in PAR (Elden, 1985; Gustavsen and Engelstad, 1985).

Empowering participation occurs between insiders and outsiders in what we call *cogenerative dialogue*. Both insiders and outsiders operate out of their initial frames of reference but communicate at a level where frames can be changed and new frames generated. Exchange on a level that affects one's frame of reference is a much more demanding form of communication than mere information exchange.

In the beginning of a project, participants have little experience in empowering forms of participation. We tend to move from partial to full participation. Participants seem to need some time to learn about their own source of expertise, and its importance, and how to be colearners in creating a new, shared framework. We develop relationships to insiders in the design phase that are like the relations we have to undergraduates. By the end of the design phase in our most successful projects, the insiders act more like graduate students doing their own research. Then comes a period of keeping in close enough touch that we can help them avoid pitfalls they might not know about (e.g., lack of systematic data, bias, incomparability), but, for the most part, they operate so autonomously that we often have to ask to be consulted. Participation means that the researcher also has to participate! In the final stages, the insiders take the lead in creating new knowledge. In this way, the dialogue becomes truly “cogenerative” (Levin et al., 1980; Greenwood, 1989).

What we call *cogenerative dialogue* seems necessary in any form of liberating learning. Paulo Freire (1972: 136) argues for a dialogical relationship that is characterized by “subjects who meet to *name* the world in order to transform it.” In the development of local theory, the dialogue between the “teacher” and the participants is crucial. The knowledge generating process should proceed under local control. A teacher-controlled dialogue would never create new local theories based on participants' gradually improved theory-creating competence. The balance between mentoring and the participant's control over the knowledge-generating process is always complex. There is no simple solution for this problem of maintaining a proper balance.

Oddly enough, for a communication process aimed at empowerment, power equality, and democracy, inequality is a hallmark of the dialogical relationship. Insiders and outsiders have different power and knowledge bases. The outside expert has much more powerful and explicit “sense-making” models. Indeed, a researcher could be said to be in the business of being a professional sense-maker. The Norwegian sociologist Bråthen (1973, 1986, 1988) calls this dominance situation “model monopoly.” Researchers have the most relevant training and specialized education and the most influential position, so they have a model monopoly in the sense that their way of thinking may dominate the dialogue.

How can the researcher's “model monopoly”—which is part of being a researcher—be overcome? It is not enough to bring insiders and outsiders together and hope for a happy and spontaneously created cogenerative dialogue. Overcoming the researchers' model monopoly is one of the real challenges for a PAR practitioner. The threat of model dominance must always be considered, and planning and action must be reviewed against this challenge.

The question of model monopoly is seldom reflected upon in the literature on dialogical relationships. Nor is it

as yet much considered among PAR researchers. Gustavsen's idea of “democratic dialogue” in Scandinavian PAR is quite similar to ours (Gustavsen, 1985). He builds partly on the philosophical thinking of Habermas, postulating nine criteria for evaluating the degree of democracy in a dialogue aimed at democratizing work (Gustavsen, 1985: 474–475):

> The dialogue is a process of exchange: points and arguments move to and fro between the participants.
>
> All concerned must have the possibility to participate.
>
> Possibilities for participation are, however, not enough: Everybody should also be active in the discourse.
>
> As a point of departure, all participants are equal.
>
> Work experience is the foundation for participation.
>
> At least some of the experience which each participant has when he or she enters the dialogue must be considered legitimate.
>
> It must be possible for everybody to develop an understanding of the issue at stake.
>
> All arguments which pertain to issues under discussion are—as a point of departure—legitimate.
>
> The dialogue must continuously produce agreements which can provide a platform for investigation and practical action.

His criteria are more systematic and extensive than ours and guarantee a set of procedural rights that protect stakeholders and relevant arguments from being left out, keep the exchange focused on relevant workplace issues and experience, and result in action. The researcher's job is to guarantee procedural purity. He or she does not interfere with content—that is completely the participants' job. In democratic dialogue, the researcher controls procedure but is not supposed to participate in creating content. This is one solution to the problem of researcher model monopoly. But it is costly. Participants may well spend significant resources to discover for themselves what could be easily available from a knowledgeable outsider.

Argyris and Schön (1977, 1978) also have a theory of change based on a special form of dialogue. They have developed specific and elaborate rules for communication between the researcher and the client. Peo-

ple are trained to be more skillfully self-reflective in perfecting a personal action theory. As one develops the ability to minimize the gap between what one says and what one does, one learns how to learn in a way that seems to approximate the scientific method. As a result, one is not limited by the trainer's models. Recently, Argyris (1985) has developed organizationally based action maps that seem similar to our idea of a new shared framework or group cognitive map. A key difference appears to be not so much in the product as in the process of dialogue.

Our theory, based on our practice, is that we intentionally and strongly influence content. We are always seeking opportunities to bring forth more self-managed forms of organization. Our experience indicates that, if we do not contribute ideas from sociotechnical systems thinking and organization design to the dialogue, then they tend not to appear in the results. Of course, this does not mean that these ideas necessarily are accepted. But elements from our initial framework usually appear in the resulting framework.

What's important is that the arena for possible action has been enlarged because ideas from our framework have been seriously considered. In addition, the challenge of model monopoly has to be resolved. The contradiction between the outsider's responsibility for introducing ideas and concepts and planning a learning process and the participants' control and active influence in framing the new knowledge that is developed must always be resolved based on the participants' values and interests. This contradiction is necessary and is actually the core of the cogenerative dialogue.

In brief, in our way of working, the dialogue becomes an arena in which participation by insiders and outsiders enriches all phases of the research process because of the intermingling of at least two sets of frameworks that contribute to creating a new, third framework or “local theory.”

Local Theory: The New Shared Framework

The idea of local theory initially emerged in the mid-1970s in the first project exploring the idea of participant-managed organizational self-study and change (Elden, 1979,1981,1983). The insiders in dialogue with a team of outside researchers designed an inquiry aimed at diagnosing the insider's organization. The key breakthrough for our purpose here was creating what we now call a “cogenerative dialogue”: We all cooperated to generate a concise and coherent explanation of why things were as they were in the organization. This explanation was not the result of a researcher model monopoly because making sense out of the data was a

joint task. The new explanation did not emerge only from the insiders' or the outsiders' initial frameworks. The two frameworks were merged to create a new framework that went beyond them.

The “theory” that emerged from this early form of PAR showed that frontline workers had a richer cognitive map about their workplace—the subject of the study—than their managers, but they did not have the authority to change things (Elden, 1979). In our collaboration on the first PAR project in the mid-1970s, Phil Herbst called the insiders' explanation a “local” theory. He wanted to distinguish it from a social scientist's explanations, which took the form of more general, abstract theory.

In our model, initial insider and outsider frameworks are the points of departure in generating a new, third framework or “theory” that integrates the first two and more. This new framework could not be predicted from either one or both of the initial frameworks. In sum, a local theory is situation specific but is generated in part from general knowledge and the rules of scientific inquiry. A local theory then is the most direct, simple, and elegant context-bound explanation of cause-and-effect relations in a given situation that makes sense to those with the most local experience. It could be described as a causally focused, group cognitive map (Eden, 1988) using everyday language and meanings generated by “insiders” in dialogue with “outsiders.”

The generation of local theory is empowering because those who create it learn why things are as they are, and this naturally leads to ideas about change. It is like problem solving: identifying underlying causes of what is problematic. Given that a good job is done on this, the solution is usually self-evident. So too with the action implications of theory generation in PAR. To implement what the participants think they have learned in more formal terms, “theory testing” becomes a natural next step in learning. Participants want to test their theory in action.

In one of our earlier projects (Levin, 1980), the research question was how the local union should try to cope with problems raised by new technology. We started by helping workers study how the technological changes in the last 20 years had affected working conditions. They found that there had been a reduction of the job skills needed by workers, a sharp reduction of the number of workers, and an improved physical work environment. Another lesson was that technology in itself never determined the working conditions but that the effects were also caused by the organization of work. This evidence generated activity for influencing technological development. The strategic and action-relevant knowledge consisted of several elements. One was to obtain information about planned changes as early as possible. Another was to involve the workers affected by technological change actively in the planning process. A third was to organize the union's work so that workers could develop their own skills and also work out a basis for identifying their own interests regarding

the introduction of new technology. The end product of this research was the local union's strategic initiative to develop a new organizational structure in the company, giving workers the possibility to participate in all technological changes.

A lesson learned from our local community development projects was a dramatic change in how the participants viewed their position as actors in a change process. “What we learned was that we could do something by ourselves, and not just sit back and wait for other people to solve our problems” (Levin et al., 1989). This fundamental change in thinking came along through several years' effort to establish new economic activity.

Theory Testing through Collective Action

A new local theory can be viewed as the learning that occurred through cogenerative dialogue. This local theory should be action relevant. It should help solve the practical problems that participants found important enough to study. But action also means testing and improving the local theory. Evaluation of the results leads to new, improved local theory. Reflection and action form a cyclic process that gradually improves knowledge and creates useful results. When we move from reflection and analysis into action and development, the insiders will usually lead the way.

In our experience, testing has always been a form of collective action. By *collective*, we mean that all stakeholders exercise informal choice and that there is a form of consensus about what changes are to be tested. There must be a mechanism to sanction meaningful trials where changes in existing authority relations are not off limits. In Scandinavia, *collective* means virtually automatic union involvement from the very beginning. We are not sure how PAR should function where workers have no independent voice in the form of a union. In our projects, action planning was always based on joint decision making. In our union projects in which management was not part of the research process, collective action occurred because the union could not implement any results of the research without management's agreement.

Our union research produced two important action results (Levin, 1980). First, the union stopped the introduction of new technology both by taking advantage of Norwegian legislation and by agreements on worker participation. Second, the union negotiated an agreement with management to get extensive rights to information and participation in the introduction of new technology. The collectivity—in this case, in the form of union power—was a key to success, seen from the union's side.

Generating Scientific Theories

In our model of the PAR process, theory does not remain local. The goal is to solve practical problems *and* develop new or improved scientific findings and theory. A scientist works under a specific paradigm that defines relevant theory, research methods, and ethics; a specified mode of operation in doing research; and a common technical language (Kuhn, 1962). The scientist is expected to produce knowledge according to specific standards and to communicate it to other colleagues in the scientific community. Thus a minimum requirement for the PAR professional is to generate general theory and findings that are communicated in scientific papers, books, and journals.

What scientific knowledge has been produced through PAR?

We can identify three categories of theory production. The richest one is concerned with reflection on meta-scientific problems regarding the PAR process. Gustavsen (1985), Eden (1985), Levin (1985), and Whyte (1989) all provide examples of “theory” dealing with either the basis for PAR or trying to develop a taxonomy of PAR. The second group of publications deals with specific social problems and the new knowledge generated in this process (Brown and Tandon, 1983; Elden, 1985; Greenwood, 1989; Levin et al., 1980; Walton and Gaffney, 1989). Most of this work is based on case studies, which are the primary source of data in PAR. The third group of work based on PAR is strictly academic-oriented theory production. One example of this is a theory of the fundamentals for trade union influence in the introduction of new technology (Levin, 1981).

Conclusion

Although PAR and cogenerated learning may help to overcome Rapoport's dilemmas, we have discovered that PAR produces new dilemmas. Our candidates for the most intriguing dilemmas of PAR are control, limited learning, and elitism. The main idea behind PAR is building up more democratic forms of organization and management. The control dilemma is that, even though participants are to be in charge of the research process, the researcher cannot give up control completely. The researcher has other goals beyond local theory and has special competence to achieve them. The dilemma of limited learning is that only a few participants are actively involved in producing new knowledge, but PAR aims at more widespread learning. The dilemma of elitism is that, while PAR intends to empower the many to more self-management, it operates to recruit

new managers. At best, this is a form of democratic elitism. We offer these dilemmas as issues for further consideration.

Our main effort here has been to systematize and explicate a model of our way of doing participant-managed action research. In our model, cogenerative learning produces local theory as a basis for collective action. We believe this model to be more generally relevant where people with different forms of expertise and frames of reference collaborate in creating a common conceptual field that makes possible collective action. The key is overcoming the expert's monopoly in defining what is possible for others. Cogenerating local theory opens up new possibilities for the possible.

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