Methodologies in action research

Action Research and Critical Theory

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Abstract
The pluralistic landscape of action research will, in this article, be treated from a methodological perspective. We present action research traditions from an academic point of view. As an academic approach, we understand action research as being related to theory and to methodology. We present controversies about ontological and epistemological aspects of the action research approach; and we only touch on specific forms of practices and techniques used by action researchers. Our approach to the different methodologies will be a discussion of how action research has been established as a “democratic social science” or as a knowledge creation based on democratic values. Starting with an interpretation of methodological values in Kurt Lewin’s concept of action research we follow two trends in Scandinavian action research: the pragmatic one represented by the so called dialog tradition and the critical theoretical trend represented by the so called critical utopian action research. It is argued that the two trends have different concepts of society and hence different criteria for knowledge and knowledge creation being democratic.

What is the problem?
The idea to relate action research to the concept of democracy was intensively on the intellectual agenda in the years around World War II. The reason was a necessity of a self critical reflection in academic research in a historical situation characterised by extremely authoritarian cultures as well in the fascist regimes as in the democratic regimes. Popper (1945) formulated the theory of The Open Society and its Enemies in which he argues that research based knowledge is not the exclusive guarantee for truth; but all kinds of knowledge need to be accepted until you can prove it is false. So for Popper knowledge is seen as a necessarily pluralistic phenomenon or an un-authoritarian kind of knowledge; you can never prove the right thing to do by scientific means or by use of research. Democracy cannot be subordinated to research or science which can lead into many directions.

In a more radical sense Adorno and Horkheimer discuss the relation between democracy and research or scientific knowledge. They relate the positivist domination in the
scientific society and in society as such to the authoritarian catastrophes. In *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1947) they argue that the separation of science (and research) from values or culture that dominate the scientific community is a constitutive part of authoritarian society and culture. If science only deals with observable facts and science at the same time become incremental in societal development and planning, you exclude humanism and democratic values from essential dynamics. The society – and not only the culture – ends up in an authoritarian logic of development. Consequently intellectuals must become *critical* not only to principles of scientific research, but also to the material structures in society. A critical theorist consider – as the starting point of reflection – the reality as wrong or inhuman. Science and research as positively institutionalised practice is a part of that wrong reality. Therefore, to relate democracy to science or research you have to find methods to include critique of undemocratic society in your research and reflection.

It was in the same historical era around World War II that action research was born and was presented as a practical effort to relate democracy and research. Action research challenges the idea of a separation of culture and values from research. Involving ordinary people in the creation of (scientific) knowledge is also a reintegration of democratic values and culture in institutional change. But is this enough to overcome the profound authoritarian elements in modern society? Or is it only superficial modifications to the problems expressed by Adorno and Horkheimer, who saw the structural separation between democracy and science based social development as deeply embedded in industrialised social structures? Methodologies in action research deal with those historical problems as they have developed since the end of World War II. The general question is how action research – and research as such – can practice a necessary critique of authoritarian or technocratic elements in society of today and tomorrow?

**The roots of action research**

Kurt Lewin, like Adorno and Horkheimer, was in the group of German intellectuals who were exiled during the nazi-regime. During World War II Kurt Lewin worked in the USA, where he developed the idea of action research as an idea for mobilising social sciences against authoritarianism. In practical experiments, Lewin wanted to integrate research and education to enable the growth of a more democratic culture. He developed experiments with a combined purpose: in the experiments he trained participants in democratic group dynamics whilst concurrently developing new knowledge or social technology usable for the solving of problems and better cooperation in organisations. Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, he believed in social
science playing a positive, reformist role without ending up being integrated into the existing alienated society.

Today’s cultural and political landscapes look very different, but still social science in the main resists or hesitates going in the direction of action research. All over the world methodologies of action research are becoming more accepted than they were just 10 years ago. At universities and in other research institutions discussions on the so-called mode II science have started - a way to produce relevant knowledge in a complicated world (see also Svensson and Nielsen chapter 2 in this book). In mode II, it is argued why there is a growing need for a combination of practical and theoretical knowledge in order to solve complicated problems and to develop technological innovations in a globalising world. But the general idea of strengthening democratic values and orientations and the critique of social structures is outside the mode II agenda. So something is missing in that general new paradigm of knowledge production.

In the following, we argue that Lewin’s heritage should not only be the idea of a closer relation between theory and practice, but also the development of democratic forms of knowledge and critique of authoritarian structures and culture. The impact of democracy on social science can, in our opinion, come to its optimal expression in the reception of action research in connection with Critical Theory, but we also discuss the answers by the pragmatic oriented tradition and theory. In both methodological contexts we find action researchers referring to Kurt Lewin’s basic programs put forward in the 1940’s. Here we will discuss the similarities and differences in greater detail.¹

Action research can be seen as a research tradition in which society is understood as being created in human action and, therefore, it can also be changed by human action; human beings are themselves creators of society and specific fields of society and are participants in the research and in the potential change processes, but of course to paraphrase Marx not under conditions they themselves have chosen (Marx 1969{1867}). In such expressions we find the basic democratic idea of action research – namely the potentials of research when combined with

¹ In US parts of action researchers’ tradition after Kurt Lewin ”gradually degenerated into positivistic experimentation in which a few variables were manipulated and only tangible, quantitative variables were accepted as results.” (Morten Levin 1999 p. 26) That part of action research which has been totally adopted into management-circles and without any democratic conscience will not be included in our presentation of action research methodologies. But we refer to the anti-positivistic or socio-technical tradition of action research as the main stream tradition, at least in Scandinavian countries, for more than 50 years.
democratic change: people try to change reality. Doing so they gain experience and knowledge, not as a reflection of data but as a reflection and development of the social culture itself.

Culture and social experience with change is, of course, not automatically democratic. In everyday life, cultural knowledge is a result of domination and of reified conditions for social behaviour. The action researchers’ role is to intervene normatively in social and cultural processes trying to organise them as a knowledge creating process. It is important that the action researcher find tools to overcome domination and reification. In doing so, the action researcher contributes (critically) to the creation of truth and solid cultural knowledge. The problem is how it can happen as a democratic process in itself; that is without ending in manipulation or new authoritarian interpretations.

Action research in its democratic, normative meaning is a child of a hermeneutic philosophy of knowledge. Prior to emigrating to the US, Kurt Lewin was situated in a German tradition of humanistic psychology. In the hermeneutic tradition, cultural and social phenomena are conceptualised through language. Hermeneutic dialogues create knowledge and meaning by changing preunderstandings by the dialogue partners and so through dialogues the partners educate and cultivate themselves. Lewin’s experiments were based on cultivating dialogues but it was not until Hans Skjervheim’s “Spectator and Participant” (1957) a methodological reformulation of hermeneutic principles took place. Skjervheim argued that the interpretation of language and expressions in dialogues are only possible when the interpreter and the interpreted individuals (conscious or unconscious) share some kind of practical case or interest. Precisely in the question of interrelation between the interpreter and the interpreted individual, one finds the difference between classical hermeneutic philosophy and the hermeneutic ideas embedded in action research. Hermeneutics in action research is not primarily aiming at interpretation, but interpretation and shared action is so to say the same thing. The creation of meaning through language as a fundamental credo in hermeneutic philosophy is necessarily connected to organising social change. The dialogue before and after a social action cannot be separated from the action itself. In the so called pragmatic direction of action research the unity between interpretation and action has become a basic believe. The pragmatists refer to Wittgenstein’s assumption saying that ’the meaning of the words is the practical use of the words’ (Wittgenstein 1953).

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2 We use the concept reification as an important concept to express alienated relations in modern societies. Using the concept reification - and not alienated relations - we underline that we are not talking about a mental feeling, but we are talking about frozen realities which means a more objective reality attracting people to act instrumental and obedient. Reification is a concept close to Marx’ ”Verdinglichung” from his discussion of commodity fetishism in Capital Vol. I (Marx 1969 [1867]).
The direction of action research based on critical theory has a different interpretation of the hermeneutic dialogues. They are not necessarily understood either as cultivating processes or as development oriented dialogues about practical issues. They are understood as scenes for critical re-orientations in a reified every day life. Here action and dialogue is connected, but not unified. In symbolic dialogues developing social imagination new horizons can emerge and hence open up for a difficult criticism of “inescapable” powerful social structures as expressed in the absence of alternatives to the “reality principle” in every day life.

In the following sections we will explain those differences – first at an ontological level which means in relation to assumptions about what constitute social reality and second at an epistemological level which means in relation to assumptions about critical knowledge creation in society.

**Ontology**

It is not an easy task to characterise the ontological assumptions of action research. As mentioned above, action research has developed in many directions with huge differences in basic assumptions. However, we will try to trace those views which are shared among most action researchers and those which are not. By ontology, we mean assumptions concerning what constitutes social reality and the value implications ensconced in those assumptions. We see a constructive controversy in the discussion between a linguistic inspired action research and a materialistic and psychoanalytical inspired action research.

Kurt Lewin (1946) was the first to use the concept `action research´. His scientific background was a critical attitude to the objectification found in experimental social research as for example practised in the Hawthorne experiments. What in the reports from the Hawthorne experiments was named a bias, and later named Hawthorne effect, was in an action research perspective the real result: the researchers influenced the field and pushed it in a humanising direction. Lewin saw researchers’ influence as something productive in the knowledge creating process. Experimental social science had and has problems ensuring its own validity. The answer to these problems was, for Lewin, to consider the field as something which is in permanent social movement or change. At the same time, Lewin believed that objectification in (social) science was

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3 The Hawthorne experiments were in a way the beginning of human relation tradition. The experiments were implemented as positivistic experiments. But they gave name to the Hawthorne effect and so to a long methodological discussion in relation to the role of researchers as being a part of the reality investigated. Gillespie (1993) presents a new interpretation of Hawthorne experiments; he argues that the Hawthorne experiments from the very beginning was negotiations among dominant partners in the factories about reforms – and not as we read in all reports scientific results coming out of measuring stimulus and response.
incremental in the authoritarian and undemocratic social orientations in contemporary modern societies. He understood that positivistic objectification of people in organisations or social systems (for example as practised in scientific management) contributed to an increasingly authoritarian culture. He was convinced that an organisational and cultural reorientation aimed at giving people and employees more responsibility was an important cure for authoritarianism and that action research could play a role in this reorientation towards a democratic society.

The idea of creating social responsibility on the shop floor or in the street by means of participation was a guideline for Lewin in his group experiments. He showed that you find no objective laws of behaviour in groups that could not be emancipated and restructured through democratic training and building responsibility. The same attitude guided his understanding of the research process. The research process should express a democratic orientation in the meaning that the researcher should share knowledge with practitioners in the formulation of problems and solutions.

Lewin was a practitioner and inventor of experimental research designs for action research. Hans Skjervheim (1957) developed, in philosophical terms, the ontological assumptions in action research. Hans Skjervheim connected Critical Theory and hermeneutic philosophy with a practical experimental approach to social science. Skjervheim wrote his most original contribution to the ontological basis of action research in his treatise published in 1957: The Spectator and the Participant. In the short but classic text, he developed the hermeneutic philosophy about commitment in scientific recognition as well as in actions in everyday life: “We cannot choose the commitment – as human beings in the real world we are committed. Commitment is a basic structure of all kinds of human living.” (Skjervheim 1957 p 11).

A researcher trying to establish neutrality or independence can never reach his goal. The researcher is necessarily in the same ontological condition as everybody else. Relations to the other are built on requests or invitations to do something with him/her. It is the same basic ontology we find in classical hermeneutic sociology such as that of Max Weber. He also understands the researcher as being obliged to share the values and intentional meanings of the actor. Interactive relations are per definition not neutral; they are rooted in shared values connected to intentional orientations. But in contrast to Weber and hermeneutic sociology, Skjervheim denies the necessity for, or the reason in, trying to obtain neutrality or reduce commitment. If the researcher tries to obtain a neutral position, he ends up in a new social construction – a reality which is created for the purpose be under investigation. So the traditional researcher duplicates the reality: what he/she
investigates is a - for the purpose of research - established reality; and not the reality for the normal actor. This is for example the case in the classical controlled experiment, in the qualitative research interview or in surveys: the researcher creates situations which only make sense because of the researchers’ project. What is investigated is not the reality in constant movement or change but a frozen reality, suitable for the needs of the researchers. We reduce the truth about reality when the researchers perform their research as a construction with an exclusive or artificial purpose in the research process alone.

In all interactive relations, you always face an element of performative commitments which means an element of being on a way somewhere. If the researcher avoids the performative dimension of reality in his or her striving for neutral observations, reality in itself becomes reified or frozen. For Skjervheim, reification is the undemocratic aspect of modern reality and positivism contributes to sustaining the reification. In all realities you find reified relations and social structures; they are so to speak false but real. An action researcher should normatively or intentionally communicate with the field against the elements of reification.

In his reformulation of hermeneutic philosophy, Skjervheim demands the researcher to become a direct participant in the reality. In interactive processes between the researcher and the actors in the field you should find shared orientation upon practical issues. Researchers’ normative participation in the investigated field becomes the basic virtue for the action researcher. So, the researcher should not only relate himself to the commitments made by the actors; in order to obtain valid observations, he or she should also make his or her own normative orientations explicit or articulated.

A consequence of Skjervheim’s social philosophy is that it does not make sense to speak about universal rules or laws and that reality is always to be considered as unfinished; as something that can change in many directions – and hopefully determined by interactive decisions made by ordinary people. Perhaps reality seems directed by laws, but according to Skjervheim this is false and only an expression of the actual strength of reification. But reification is never absolute: you will always see unfinished interactive relations in any field. The Norwegian sociologist Dag Østerberg (1971) calls the unfinished elements of any social system or reality the existentialist dimension of society. We can see action research as existentialism in social science.

The idea that people in modern societies live under reified circumstances but are capable of undertaking democratic actions, at all levels, to transform circumstances is close to Marxist materialism. When Marxists often see the reification in the big scale society, action
researchers tends to be more aware of reification and possibilities to overcome reification at a small scale level. For Marxists – and for Marx himself – the transformation and development of self-management culture and alternatives were difficult to realise unless actors unite as a class in a coordinated struggle. Skjervheim did not share that idea, and action researchers tend to act with the more naive interpretation within liberal democracy. We will come back to this issue below.

Most directions of action research share the ontological assumptions made above. Critical Theorists are closer to Marx in the interpretation of the strength of reified social structures while pragmatists are closer to Skjervheim in his interpretation of possibilities of democratic change within existing social structures. But it is not in the ontological assumptions we find the big difference between the directions. The normative idea that history can be made by human beings in democratic processes in every day life is the strong value orientation among most action researchers. But in the pragmatic tradition you find representatives who rarely identify reified social structures because the field of reflection is limited to an organisational reality.

Peter Reason (2002) extends Skjervheim’s philosophy of participant research in his elaboration of the so-called “participative worldview”. He also extends the concept of action research to an idea of participatory research. Reason includes relations to nature or biological realities in his participatory research. Researchers in the natural and technological sciences should also see themselves more as participants in nature or biological systems than as people who control or exploit nature through technology. “The participative worldview” replaces the positivist idea about nature as object for domination. Participatory research in the natural sciences makes you see the relation between man and nature as analogy to dialogues in the social world: nature has its own needs that you as a human being cannot dominate. Reason also refers to the system-thinking of Gregory Bateson, who incorporates human being in eco systems. With a phrase of “patterns that connect” he also argues for a more humilitate – participative – nature relation (Bateson 1972).

In Critical Theory, too, the issue of nature relation is part of a normative ontology. Adornos pupil Rudolf zur Lippe sees the nature relation as embedded in aesthetic knowledge and not just functional or practical knowledge. Aesthetic knowledge about nature expresses an interaction involving the nature and senses of man him/herself. (Rudolf zur Lippe 1987). Only in the aesthetic relation to nature, that means in a relation expressing sensibilities like pleasure, irritation, happiness or despair, does the human being recognise and form (humanise) his or her own nature. Consequently, aesthetics has a special critical possibility in a modern world dominated by reification and lack of cultivation.
In the concept of a participatory worldview Peter Reason is looking for a more profound normative orientation to both social and natural surroundings. This brings perceptions of sustainable development at local and global levels in focus of action research. We need to step into a direction which includes the natural scientist. Such steps are very new and we will not go further into the issue here. But we see a necessity to move action research away from exclusively being a social science perspective. In the coming years, this might be a very important methodological challenge.

**Epistemology**

Epistemology means theories and assumptions about knowledge creation. For the action researcher epistemology is the key to understanding possibilities and conditions for creating new knowledge in a world we consider as always unfinished, and in which both researchers and ordinary people simultaneously find themselves in a reified and in an existential relation to the field of practice. Most action researchers would agree on the ontological assumptions we have presented above. In terms of epistemology, we see strong disputes among different schools of action research. We will present different epistemological approaches, but our focus on action research is from a Critical Theory point of view.

**The socio-technical tradition**

Action researchers often characterise the knowledge creation process as a joint venture (for example Hans van Beinum et al 1996 page 182); researchers and the actors in the field develop a shared horizon of practical change, the creation of knowledge then takes place as an ongoing dialogue about the experimental implementation of actions. The hermeneutic dialogues and interpretations are not only connected to texts or expressions, but to practical steps. Knowledge thus becomes the result of an embodied experience – also for the researcher.

The criteria for truth or new knowledge are not only a question of measuring collected data from the field, but more a question of creating experiences which can, potentially, change all participants’ values and beliefs in the same process. Lewin’s methodology was institutionalised in the tradition of socio-technical analysis. At the Tavistock Institute, the epistemology of socio-technical analysis was developed as an experimental practice in which researchers cooperated with

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4 In spring 2006 we publish a book (in Danish language) titled “A Human Nature. Action Research for Sustainability and Political Culture”. Here we present our arguments about analogies between nature relations and social relations and we present a case story about citizens’ participation in nature conservation and in local sustainable development as practical frame of reference for our arguments.
practitioners in organisations to create development and problem solutions. The researchers were the initiating part. The epistemological heart of the research was the experiment; design and testing of new forms of organisation and shared evaluation as a combination of subjective experience and objective results: did the experimental organisation lead to competitive new routines? In respect of traditional experimental science, the socio-technical researchers discussed possible generalisations from the results of experimental practice.

They struggled with a series of experiments which went well in the short run, but broke down in the long run. In the famous Norwegian experiments in “industrial democracy” carried out in the 1960’s a conclusion seemed to point in the direction of successful action research experiments as long as researchers are active in the field; but when researchers leave the organisation, it falls back into traditional forms of action. Experimental practice was not able to justify itself as general knowledge. Researchers started reflecting upon the nature of experimental action research: they questioned whether the classical experimental design was the best way to develop organisationally useful knowledge.

Jürgen Habermas (1981 p 167) praised Skjervheim for bringing a concept of practice into hermeneutic interpretation. He also confirmed the importance of the researchers’ normative intervention. For Habermas, it is part of the critical role of research to open up the possibility for seeing alternative social realities. But Habermas also criticized Skjervheim for going too far in the definition of researchers’ participation in the field actions. Habermas argued that the researcher should restrict his commitment to normative participation at the level of discourse rules. The researcher should only involve him or herself in the language game and not in instrumental or practical action processes. The reason behind the restriction is what Habermas calls a risk of being biased towards instrumentalism. Habermas finds a differentiation in participatory roles in the change process as necessary in a modern complicated world. Here you need to have a specialised eye on the language process and the development of general rules for discourse. Democracy through discourse ethics was Habermas’ practical normative commitment. New knowledge could come out of creating an evolutionary communicative culture.

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5 The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations is the most famous place for the direction in action research called socio-technical analysis. After World War II the Institute took Kurt Lewin’s program as a kind of paradigm for organisational studies. Today the institute represents an important branch of action research – a system oriented therapeutic practice aiming at leadership education and organisational self management.

6 The Norwegian experiments in industrial democracy were guided by Fred Emery and E. Thorsrud. Emery came out of the Tavistock tradition and Thorsrud had roots in Norwegian hermeneutic sociology. (Emery & Thorsrud 1976)

7 Jürgen Habermas is here presented in relation to pragmatic and socio-technical action research and less as a critical theorist. The reason is that Habermas was taken in by action researchers in order to reformulate socio-technical tradition. See Gustavsen 1992.
The pragmatic turn in socio-technical tradition: Dialogues

Since the 1980’s, developments among socio-technical action researchers tried to follow Habermas in his argumentation for a restriction of the researchers’ commitment. Pålshaugen (1998) and Gustavsen (1992) both argue that action researchers should concentrate on methods and the construction of arenas for dialogues and not on designing experiments. Or as Pålshaugen says: “The action research strategy aims at reorganising the established pattern of communication in the enterprise by organising new forms of discussion and talks – dialogues – between people and groups who normally do not enter into such dialogues with each other within the traditional organisational form of the enterprise’s discourse.” (Pålshaugen 1998 p 21-22) As a consequence of the methodological turn, which also is a linguistic turn, researchers transformed socio-technical analyses into the dialogue tradition. Gustavsen and Pålshaugen had ambitions to reconstruct socio-technical analyses also on a level of methods and performing arenas. Pålshaugen uses the expression reorganising discourses as the linguistic formulation of the new aim of action research. It is still a normative intervention, but as you can only reach the organisational reality through language, the key to reform organisations has to be the language too. Making actors in organisations use other words is making them practicing work in a different and more reflexive way. New research knowledge is knowledge of how to make reflexivity efficient and useful.

Behind this is an assumption that many dialogues and reflexivity in action lead to a less reified society or less traditional organisation. Pålshaugen and Gustavsen have formulated the theory of the development organisation. An “establishment of a development organisation is to a great extent an attempt to reorganise the company’s discourse formation” (ibid p 62). So a development organisation is - in contrast to the productive organisation running everyday business – an organisation which takes care of change. A development organisation is a normative theory of procedures how to improve democratic change in an organisation – including all interest groups inside and relevant interest groups or partners outside the organisation in a dialogue.

The action researchers and the actors in the developing organisation have different roles to play; however they all are players in the same game and with some kind of shared values. But generalised knowledge becomes possible – not as substantial knowledge about democratic productive organisation, but as methodological knowledge about how to manage reorganisation of discourses in the organisational world.
We will argue that Habermas’ reformulation of Skjervheim’s epistemology has some difficulties. And the difficulties also hit the pragmatic action research strategy. We will question the possibility in practical research processes of making a clear distinction between the communicative and the practical commitments. Can affections, emotional gestures and instrumentalist orientations expressed in language be separated from procedural principles and rules which the researcher should exclusively care about?8 In our opinion, the results of such action research do not meet the obligation of being critical. To be critical, the researchers have to draw attention to substantially excluded issues or suppressed subjectivity if he or she sees or feels it and create space for expressions. If the researchers only concentrate on procedures for dialogue they will not allow themselves relating to excluded or dominated subjectivity. In our opinion, the researchers should actively support latent potentials and emerging tendencies of transcending domination and exclusion, and that requires a specific form of commitment and interactive performance which is more than procedural. We argue that the pragmatic turn in socio-technical tradition ends up in a too formalistic definition of the role of researchers and a reduction of researchers’ subjectivity involved in the action research process. That brings us to a discussion of subjectivity in Critical Theory. See also Eikeland’s arguments for seeing the researcher as “a native” in chapter xx in this book.

Critical Theory as a background for action research

Habermas is, of course, a critical theorist. But he has developed Critical Theory in the direction of pragmatic philosophy. Another direction in Critical Theory is more faithful to classical or first generation Critical Theory (Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno). Below we will clarify how that direction of Critical Theory has inspired us and our colleagues towards what we call a critical utopian action research.

The name “Critical Theory” derives from its contrast with traditional theory. In traditional theory, concepts and knowledge express truth about “what is” and traditional theory systematically tries to avoid expressions about what we might wish or hope for. Critical Theory turns the meaning of theory upside down: theory as critical thinking should express an understanding of what is in light of what it “should be” (Adorno 1984 p 206). Behind Critical Theories about phenomena or concepts about “what is” you can always trace a utopian otherness. The utopian otherness is not arbitrary wishes; it is embedded in the classical bourgeois philosophy

8 In Oskar Negt (1988 p 231) you find a critique of Habermas pragmatic formalism. Negt argues that it is not rules for the communication you need in order to overcome domination and instrumentalism, but rather a reorganised time and space for expression of experiences. See also Kurt Aagaard Nielsen 1996 p 259-261.
of enlightenment in which people educate themselves and emancipate themselves from domination and stupidity. The utopian horizon is necessary in order to create critical knowledge. Only through the utopian categories can you understand human democratic possibilities in the existing reality. In other words, Critical Theory tries to conceptualise what is but in a subjective systematic relation to a classical utopian idea of an un-reified society articulated in the Philosophy of Enlightenment (Adorno 1963).

For Adorno and Horkheimer, Critical Theory represented an intellectual practice working with analyses of modern and classical philosophy, social science and culture. They did not go into alternative social movements or alternative experiments. In fact, they made a virtue out of independency from institutionalised activities as they saw such commitments as carrying a risk of instrumentalism; you risk making the alternative or the experiment a purpose in itself. So they also stayed out of any connection to social movements or progressive political parties.

Critical Theory is in a way paradoxical. On the one side, the intellectuals or the researchers should outline a utopian dimension in society in order to deconstruct reification and rationalised culture. On the other side, the intellectuals or the researchers avoid practical or institutional commitments in movements or organisations working for alternatives; they do so in order to remain independent and able to deliver criticisms of all kinds of positive strategies. From this paradox in Critical Theory, we bring the philosophy of utopian criticism into action research; the need to deconstruct frozen reality and culture by means of historical utopian categories. Action research processes must, so to say, be followed by theoretical reflections of the societal nature around your field in the research project. This is a deconstruction process in the first case done by the researchers themselves, but of course the issues in the critical reflections of societal context can, during good action research projects, substantially become a part of a dialogue in the field. The deconstructing reflections are important for how to construct “time and space” – arenas – for participants and researchers doing and expressing experiences from every day life and expressing utopian ideas of a better life.

The tradition of classical Critical Theory was also connected to Freud’s *psychoanalysis*. From psychoanalysis, the Critical Theorists bring in concepts of learning processes and of contradictions in socialisation and learning processes. Action research always has an element of (social) learning. Actors do something from which they obtain experience. When individuals makes experiences they do so within a socialised subjective structure. To make an action research process optimal is also to work with the subjective conditions for learning out of experience.
Critical Theory does not construct a general theory of subjectivity and neither do we as action researchers. But critical theorists observe contradictions in the socialisation processes in modern life. Such observations were used by psychoanalysts in a therapeutic context. In action research such observations are useful and necessary in the construction of arenas and in the reflection of interrelations in practical projects. The individuals are not conceptualised as functional socialised identities or as a well defined psychological structure. The individual creates itself in social and practical relations. Since relations are contradictory, self-creation is problematic. Because of authoritarian and reified social structures in everyday life, we develop ambivalences which make social learning and self determined cooperation difficult. The tragedy of socialisation is not alone those difficulties, but the lack of conditions to make experiences out of practical complicated processes. In action research it is important to construct arenas and processes which enable people to make experiences and social learning. We need new structures of time and space to stimulate development of experiences and social learning.

Social imagination is a key concept in the psychoanalytical dimension in Critical Theory. In our imagination we work with the contradictions and ambivalences. In our imagination we can open up the possibility for actions and change as possible answers to difficulties. But in our everyday life we do not very often have the possibility systematically to develop social imagination. Action research can create arenas – we call them “free spaces” - in which social imagination emerges in an easier and more productive way than what is possible in the structure of everyday life. We can create laboratories for social imagination. Without such “free spaces” many practical actions or changes would never occur. They come out of a productive social imagination (for a practical approach to the idea of free space see E. Schwenckes article in this book).

Such practical orientations were far from the ideas of Adorno and Horkheimer. Habermas rejected subject philosophy. Oskar Negt, however, took up the psychoanalytic interpretation of Critical Theory. He brought it close to action research even if he never uses the concept. Kurt Lewin and the early socio-technical action researchers were critical of psychoanalysis; they found it too deterministic and unproductive in relation to social change and social learning (William Passmore 2001). In the 1960’s and 1970’s Oskar Negt (1969), Alfred Lorenzer (1974) and Regina Becker-Schmidt et al (1987) use the constellation of Critical Theory and psychoanalysis to formulate a theory (and practice) of social learning. Doing so, they moved

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9 An important psychoanalytical inspiration is here D. W. Winnicott’s considerations on playing, transitional phenomena and potential space (Winnicott 1971).
Critical Theory a step towards an action research issue: to connect imaginative processes to practical social change and to theory of societal development.

Oskar Negt was, in the 1960’s, the initiator of a research and social learning oriented project in cooperation with German trade unions. The project was called “Sociological imagination and exemplary learning.” In this project he and his colleagues took an important step towards making Critical Theory a practical oriented research. Essential for Negt’s ideas of social learning processes is his critique of reified and authoritarian social structures in working life. He made experiments initiating time structures and space for workers’ creation of social imagination as mediation of experiences from work and everyday life. Contradictions in life expectations are taken into an arena: a so-called proletarian public sphere. In the creation of a proletarian public sphere, the participating workers tried out new forms of actions and learning processes making themselves self regulated both as individuals and as a group.

The projects resulted in new organisational forms in the unions and in a critical theory of learning in connection with practical reorganisations of union activities. In our action research we saw possibilities in Negt’s understanding of learning through mediated experience from a life context. Learning and education of workers must overcome instrumentalism in daily work and express collective needs in modern workers’ lives. Negt uses the concept life context to stress that learning is connected to identity for the entire person – and not only to roles in systems or organisations.

The role of researchers in the learning processes was partly to be responsible for creation of the “free space” for mediation of social imagination and partly to create a theoretical irritation of ideas in order to prevent an instrumentalist reduction. Negt’s theories and methods also maintain the negative dimension from Adorno and Horkheimer and their Freudian inspired interpretation of identity building and learning. Negt never called his project action research. And he never saw such projects as harmonisation between theory and practice in research. We tend to agree in such hesitation to label action research as a highly integrated epistemology. And we find it

10 Oskar Negt (1969): Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen. Zur Theorie und Praxis der Arbeiterbildung. Eur. Verlagsanstalt. Frankfurt am Main. The project took place as a co-operation between IG Metall and a group of researchers. In the project researchers created dialogues and learning processes to develop traditional trade union orientations into a more societal union policy. The researchers created learning processes dealing with workers experiences from production as well as from reproductive life.

11 The concept is more systematically developed in Negt and A. Kluge (1972): Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung. Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit. Suhrkamp Verlag. Even if the word “proletarian” may today sound out of time the meaning in the book of Negt and Kluge is to come closer to an understanding of working class or employees as individuals and so to criticize a too collectivistic concept of class. In a way Negt and Kluge take a step towards contemporary class theories in which individualisation is an important aspect.
important to work with the question of researchers’ own creation of experience from his or her contradictory life context. The action researchers’ substantial contribution to development of knowledge and change depends on his or her own subjectivity and his or her subjective participation in cooperating process with practitioners. Making this cooperation transparent is a big challenge to any action research process in order to give it democratic legitimacy, but also in order to anticipate democratic structures in the fields of society, where the researchers and scientists are involved.

To complete our presentation of an epistemology for critical utopian action research we will finally present a futures research philosopher, Robert Jungk (1913-1994). Robert Jungk invented tools and arenas for democratic change. We see his contribution to action research as very important for our practical interpretation of Critical Theory. Jungk did not belong to the group of academic Critical Theorists, but he was inspired by the same theoretical heritage. He worked most of his life in connection with new social movements which were emerging in the last part of the 20th century. He saw those movements as a new way of rethinking change and understanding political power structures. We introduce Robert Jungk’s work because he, more than any other practical philosopher, underlined the importance of working with social imagination and utopian future oriented ideas and sketches as the essential link between critical analysis of authoritarian and instrumentalist culture and democratic change. It is difficult to point to the most important of Robert Jungk’s books on futures research; in the practical end we shall however mention his 1981 book about *Future Creating Workshops* ("Zukunftwerkstätten") which was written together with Norbert Müllert, and his late treatise of *The Project of Encouraging* (Projekt Ermutigung) published in 1988.  

Robert Jungk’s ideas about the importance of social imagination and utopian future orientation had roots in the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885-1977). Bloch understood the history of society as being a materialistic history, but at the same time as a history of utopian culture – as flows of dreams which have always characterised modern societies. Those dreams are essential to understanding conditions and methods for social change. For Bloch Marxism had been too occupied with material history and too little with mental history or the history of imaginations and dreams. To create knowledge about modern societies is also to create knowledge about the utopian flows, only the utopian flows in everyday life can open up the possibility for social change. Jungk

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12 Robert Jungk organised before he died the establishing of the “Bibliothek für Zukunftsfragen” in Salzburg. This library coordinates a lot of action research activities inspired from Robert Jungk from all parts of the world. See also Lise Drewes Nielsens article in this book.
saw the rise of new social movements from the 60’s as a new progressive utopian idea of
democracy (utopian flows in history are not necessarily progressive). He encouraged the new
utopian ideas and developed methods to strengthen the social imagination in social movements.
Without a democratic utopian future horizon, the future will be dominated by technocratic planning.
Jungk was critical of change and planning as something dominated by expert culture. In industrial
and post-industrial societies future planning has increasingly become something defined by experts.
In the future planning made by experts everything becomes too realistic. Qualitative change and
renewal of basic social structures never occur in planning discussion.

To overcome this “reality power” (Marcuse 1941) Jungk has a practical ambition of
developing a future oriented action research. He does not use the concept of action research – but
rather normative future research, in which systematic work with social imagination and utopian
sketches prepare experiments. But social imagination and the development of utopian sketches are
not the goal of the normative future research. They are the heart of the reorientation of possible
actions in every day life and in organisations. The future creating workshop is an arena for the
development of utopian sketches. In the future creating workshop, you find space for the
concretisation of utopian ideas in terms of action. If actions should be part of more extensive social
change you have to prepare and create social experiments. Without social experiments it becomes
impossible to improve radical change. ”The greatest advantage of social experiments compared to
traditional methods for social change, is the reduction of fear of social change. The fear of
uncertainty about the consequences is always an important part of discussion when things you have
never seen before are proposed. A social experiment followed by researchers cannot remove the
fear, but it can reduce it importantly.” (Jungk 1975).

The social experiment is an instrument for creating reversibility in processes of social
change. Such reversibility is, in itself, a part of opening up your mind for the critical understanding
of reality and encouragement to change. Through the experiment you gain new knowledge or
experience with the existing reality. Systematic change in a reversible experiment can be useful in
researching a field – not only for an instrumental change but for a critical understanding of
problems and inertia.

For Robert Jungk development of social imaginations and utopian sketches as well as
initiation of social experiments were a kind of solution to the unpractical bias of classical Critical
Theory. Jungk allows a start on “the wrong issues” and “the limited understandings”, playing with
them and opening them up for new experimental ideas and actions for a less authoritarian and instrumental world.

The normative future research can take place as activities in social movements or among members of institutions and organisations. But they can also take place as something supported by researchers. The researcher is a moderator of processes in workshops and in running social experiments. The researcher also has an obligation to discuss and make theoretical challenges to grassroots’ proposals and sketches. And, first of all, the researcher has to support the awareness of the emerging *common* – general and universal – dimensions of the proposals and sketches, thus encouraging a break with the dominant narrow interest groups’ perspectives. Such a break is, at the same time, a precondition for and a result of *social imagination*. For Jungk, the results of normative future research were a scientific and a political contribution to understanding future societal development as manifold – the more futures you can see as possibilities the more knowledge becomes democratic. The researcher is not seen as a guarantee for truth in living experiments, but as a cooperating partner with all kinds of actors in order to open up the possibility for democratic knowledge creation.

Researchers and experts are not privileged in knowledge creation; they are collaborators. Here we are back to basics in the definition of action research, but we have reconstructed methods and epistemological concepts inspired by Critical Theory. In Critical Theory the intellectuals or the critical researchers are a kind of advocate for a critique of general wrong (reified) social structures. In critical utopian action research this negative role is supplemented by advocating the creation of proposals and constructions of new democratic common structures in society. Such constructions can only be born out of democratic co-operations in concrete fields of actions and experiments. In contrast to the mode 2 paradigm of knowledge production the role of critical utopian action researchers is to go beyond the local truth and local change – but to do it in co-operation with practitioners in shared projects. Practically it starts with strengthening public spheres around action research projects, asking for national and global implications and involvements in the local projects and movements. To ask for the general in the local is a special duty for action researchers.

Conclusion
In contrast to Habermas and pragmatic action research, the critical utopian action research inspired by Adorno, Horkheimer, Oskar Negt, Ernst Bloch, Regina Becker-Schmidt and Robert Jungk points
to social imagination, experiments and sketching “alternative futures” to be discussed in public as the important elements in knowledge creation. Habermas and the pragmatic approach point out the dialogue and language as the primary medium for construction of new knowledge. In the two traditions, we find different concepts of critique – a strong and society based one in the heritage from Critical Theory and a more procedural and methodological concept of criticism in action research in the pragmatic tradition. Both are answers to an all too weak concept of criticism present in the socio-technical tradition. In a more technical or practical performance, the different approaches to action research have similarities and are able to cooperate. But in epistemological assumptions and reasons behind the tools and procedures you find different logics and perspectives. The discussion on epistemology is important for qualifying action research today. It is a way to bring in democratic values as a procedural and substantial element in the research process.

In spite of differences in basic methodological assumptions action researchers share the idea that knowledge creation is not something exclusive for scientists or experts. Scientists and experts contribute as humble parts in a cooperative knowledge creation process. The idea of a knowledge society is – in contrast to actual conceptions of a knowledge society – a utopian idea of democratically cooperating people. The action researchers have a special task in creating of critical awareness about the necessity and possibility of democratic knowledge creation.

Literature:
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