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ARTICLE

Action research, practical challenges and the formation of theory

Bjørn Gustavsen

*Work Research Institute/Vestfold University College,
Norway*

ABSTRACT

It is a common assumption that action research exists in a number of varieties. In efforts to explain these varieties, the point of departure is sometimes sought in differences in practical challenges, sometimes in differences in theoretical outlook. Taken separately, these perspectives can, however, both be too limited. Drawing upon an action research tradition that has been in existence for four decades, it will be seen that one and the same tradition has passed through a series of different ways of combining theory and practice. The prime moving force has been success and failure in meeting specific practical challenges; the role of theory has been to deepen the understanding of these challenges and indicate what courses of action are open in each specific situation.

KEY WORDS

- critical theory
- learning from practice
- pragmatism
- social movement
- workplace development

Introduction

That action research appears in a number of varieties is a common observation. These varieties can be explained either in terms of differences in practical context or in terms of theoretical and epistemological differences (for an example of the last, see Cassell & Johnson, 2006). When issues such as epistemology and ontology were made subject to discourses in their own right, the point of departure was that these discourses were to set the scene for what was to be done in operational research. With the emergence of the historically oriented critique of conventional notions of science, associated with contributors like Kuhn, Toulmin, and Feyerabend, the notion of a one-way causal chain from theory of science to operational research was seriously weakened as was, indeed, any notion of a simple relationship between theory and research practice, whatever the direction of the causalities. What emerges in, for instance, Toulmin's analysis of Cartesianism as an intellectual escape from the breakdown of civil society during the Thirty Years War, is a complex process of interaction between theoretical reflections, the social role of the intellectual and the overall evolution of society (Toulmin, 1990). When even the most intellectually oriented of all theory of science positions has to be understood in the light of the surrounding society, what about the relationship between research and society when we talk about action research, where the explicit purpose is to enter society and perform change from within?

The best basis for studying the interplay between practical challenges and theoretical discourse, exists when action research has been working within the same practical context but where changes in theoretical orientation have occurred. With roots in a series of Lewin-inspired field experiments with new forms of work organization in the 1960s, a tradition of action research in working life now spanning more than four decades can be found in Norway. Within this tradition, theoretical perspectives have changed, not only once but several times. The purpose of this article is to present and discuss some of the main steps in the changes, with an emphasis on what factors were operative in bringing them about. It will be seen that the shifts were neither purely theoretical nor purely practical but based on a combination of factors. If one single dimension is to be brought forth as the most decisive one, however, it is the demands emanating from the practical context.

The point of departure

Being strongly influenced by Kurt Lewin, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations is generally held forth as a pioneer in action research (Cassell & Johnson, 2006; Pasmore, 2001). Action research was, however, not in itself the core concern of the first generation of Tavistock researchers; within the context

of the reconstruction and productivity challenges following the end of the Second World War, the core issue was work and organization. Through studies, in particular in the British coal-mining industry, it was discovered that the specialization generally dominating the thinking on productivity at the time, tended to drain the workers of the resources needed for active behaviour and problem-solving in the workplace (Trist & Bamforth, 1951). The main project on which Eric Trist and colleagues embarked was the introduction of forms of work that would make it possible for the workers to regain their subjectivity and become active, creative agents in the workplace (Miller & Rose, 2001). The underlying theory was based on descriptive-analytic studies, not action research. When action research entered the picture it was to handle the problem of how to bring theory to bear on practical development in working life.

When researchers approached managers and union representatives in the British coal-mining industry with the proposal that a broad campaign to introduce autonomous forms of work organization was carried through, the response was mixed. It was possible to gain acceptance by both sides in some specific mines, but authorities at a higher level, such as the National Coal Board, were negative. It was only when contact was made with research groups in some other countries that action research got under way. First out was Norway (Emery & Thorsrud, 1969).

The emergence of action research as the spearhead of the change process

When researchers from the Tavistock Institute, together with colleagues from Norway, approached the Confederation of Norwegian Employers (presently the Norwegian Confederation of Business and Industry) and the Confederation of Trade Unions, the confederations declared themselves willing to back the initiative, provided that the researchers could demonstrate in practical terms what ideas they wanted to promote as well as their ability to actually promote them in concrete workplaces. Action research became a must.

During the latter half of the 1960s, experiments with autonomous work groups were carried out in a wire-drawing mill, a mechanical assembly plant, a pulp and paper factory and a chemical plant producing fertilizers, where the last one was particularly successful (Emery & Thorsrud, 1976).

As membership organizations with a broad basis, both confederations were – and are – dependent on supporting initiatives that are acceptable to, and can be applied by, if not all members, then at least broad slices of the membership. However successful, the process could not be limited to four cases and the problem of diffusion entered the scene. From the beginning of the 1970s it was actually this problem that was the main one.

While the first experiments attracted a lot of interest among managers and unionists, most workplace actors had a tendency to initially reject the ideas on the grounds that they did not fit the specific local conditions. The research response to this challenge was to turn the action projects in a more participative direction. The underlying theory was assigned a more modest role and more issues were opened up for local discourse and settlement.

While making more issues subject to local settlement made it possible to launch a diffusion process, this move also posed problems. When the first field experiments were launched, they were expected to give rise to a snowball effect where broad change could be created with declining inputs from research in new cases. With a need to give much more attention to variable local conditions, this expectation fell apart and there emerged a need for more active research participation in a broad range of different workplace projects. How to meet this demand? A further major question pertained to the role of theory, the experiments emerged out of a general theory of work and organization: what did the turn towards increased local participation imply for this kind of theory?

The 1970s: The tension between general theory and local experience

Since the theory out of which the Norwegian experiments emerged was intended to represent universal reason, advances in Norway were not enough. The call was for a much broader development. In the beginning it actually also looked like this development was on its way. Projects to promote worker autonomy emerged in a number of countries, in particular Denmark, Sweden, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, the United States and Canada – at later stages in some other countries as well (for an overview of the global development of the ‘quality of working life movement’, as it generally came to be called, see Ejnatten, 1993). To promote international co-operation an international council was established.

While the original study by Trist and Bamforth (1951) had an anthropological orientation with a strong element of interpretation along hermeneutic lines of the specific situation under study, the late 1950s saw a turn towards systems thinking, influenced in particular by the kind of biological analogies promoted by, for instance, Bertalanffy and Sommerhoff (Emery, 1959, 1981). The theory formation process did, furthermore, not only aim at identifying universal reason, the aim was also to work out a theory of work and organization that covered all major aspects, from the workplace to the organization, from the organization to its environment and from organizational environments to global development.

While some of the major proponents of the movement saw what happened in practice as verifying these perspectives (e.g. Trist, 1982) there were those who

expressed another view. The most explicit example can probably be found in Elden (1983), where the notion of 'local theory' is introduced. To understand the challenges of each specific workplace, as well as how to attack them, there is a need, according to Elden, to understand this specific workplace. General concepts, such as steady state, directive correlations and other core notions within the kind of systems theory prevailing at the time can be useful in this kind of context, but what concepts to more specifically apply – their content, as well as the relationship between them – has to be settled in each case. This was actually a radical contingency theory, according to which differences between organizations do not only consist of different values on the same variables, but in the need to use different variables to describe different organizations. From such a point of departure it would hardly be possible to see not only different cases within each country, but cases in a number of different countries, as expressing and contributing to 'the same theory'.

What emerged was a split between general theory and local experience, a split that was first and foremost experienced among the researchers responsible for the action research projects, and during the 1980s the universal movement fell apart. What was left was a series of national and local processes with variable characteristics. When the links to a universal development towards a new reason and rationality in working life disappeared, it proved, in many cases, difficult to maintain even the local processes and by the late 1980s many of them were either gone or transformed into other movements with little resemblance to the original one.

This experience could be taken to indicate that action research is mainly a form of local constructivism. Action research can provide important impulses to local processes, but the choice and configuration of impulses are so dependent upon specific local conditions that each case produces little transferable knowledge, far less all the pieces needed for a total theory of work and organization (or for that matter any other topic). Research reports changed focus from the general characteristics of work and organization to the interplay between research and its local partners (an illustrative sample of cases can be found in International Council for the Quality of Working Life, 1979).

It is possible that action research in working life would have stayed content with this perspective, if it were not for the continued pressure to be general. 'The public mandate' facing action research in working life in Scandinavia continued to develop new and better ideas about how to organize people at work and make these ideas reach out broadly in working life. There was no new single move or theoretically defined position that could provide an immediate answer to this challenge. Instead, a long-term process, characterized by several initiatives over time, combined with a strong element of learning by experience, was triggered off. Remaining with Norway as the example, the first step in this process was an agreement between the labour market parties on workplace development.

The initiation of workplace processes

In 1982, the labour market parties made an agreement on development, as an addendum to the so-called Basic Agreement that had existed since 1935 (Gustavsen, 1985). The agreement did not express specific preferences as far as patterns of work and organization were concerned, but encouraged management and workers locally to develop an active relationship to this issue and offered some assistance to those who wanted to make an effort. Central in this context was a specific type of conference designed to promote broad and equal participation from all concerned in workplace development processes. In this sense the agreement followed up on the emerging process orientation. Action research helped create the agreement as well as implement it.

The conference was initially designed as a reversal of traditional negotiations: while negotiations are conducted in an adversarial atmosphere, over quantifiable objects and through representatives, the dialogue conference was intended to manifest a co-operative atmosphere, pertain to all kinds of issues and be based on direct participation. During the early years, research developed this conference pattern in several directions, introducing criteria for group composition, rotation of functions, criteria for good dialogue and more. Detailed presentations can be found in Gustavsen (1992, 2001) and Gustavsen and Engelstad (1986).

Throughout the 1980s about 450 organizations used this kind of conference, largely individually. Given the point that the resources that could be offered in support were limited, this development was seen as successful by the labour market parties. Compared to the theoretically founded imperatives of the early Tavistock approach, dialogic forms of work could be seen as opening up for critical-reflective processes with a stronger element of local constructivism (Cassell & Johnson, 2006). On the other hand, the turn to more participative forms of action research processes that had emerged already in the 1970s, had in practice introduced several forms of work with strong elements of dialogue, for instance, search conferences (Emery & Purser, 1995). In certain respects the shift was more dramatic on the ontological level than on the operational. There was, consequently, a need to look for more than the dialogic forms of work. A further characteristic of the development was that although most conferences were organized and run by single organizations for their own purposes, the organizations knew about each other. A special news magazine issued jointly by the labour market parties with a broad circulation carried information about, and examples from, what happened under the agreement, and conferences and other events where people from different user organizations could meet were organized. It was possible for each user to see themselves as part of a broader movement in working life without, however, losing their own autonomy or having to wait for a 'star case' to be established as a leading light to be followed by everyone else.

The possibility of being part of a movement, without being asked to ‘copy the success of others’ seemed to be of critical importance to the success of the agreement.

The success in achieving scope was, however, not combined with the same degree of penetration in each specific organization as the one that had been reached in the field experiments. Altogether less than 10 percent of the 450 organizations that participated in at least one conference went on directly from this platform to initiate a long-term and deep-going process of change (Gustavsen, 1993). It was obvious that as long as each organization worked on its own it would generally not be able to furnish the process with sufficient impulses to achieve depth in the efforts.

The emergence of links between local processes

When the agreement was up for renegotiation – in 1990/1991 – there emerged a discussion about change processes and their time horizon. That changing working life was a long term task had been taken for granted but it was assumed that the demands for time had to do with reaching many organizations, one after the other. Perhaps this was a faulty view. Perhaps each organization had to be seen as embedded in a larger whole where it was this larger whole that had to be made subject to change? If this was the case, the limited in-depth advances of the projects under the agreement could have to do with the lack of a sufficient number of such broader environments rather than with shortcomings on the level of the individual organization.

The outcome of the deliberations was to put more emphasis on the co-operation *between* organizations. A major move was to initiate a new action research programme. Given the name ‘Enterprise Development 2000’, the main purpose of the programme was to make research resources available to organizations who wanted research support not only for internal processes but also to develop co-operation with other organizations. Compared to the Industrial Democracy Program of the 1960s the new programme represented a shift in several important respects:

- Instead of unfolding within single organizations with networking across organizational boundaries as an addition, the projects would now have network building as the prime target.
- While the Industrial Democracy Program had been based on research inputs from one – later two – research environments that were intended to cover the national scene, the idea of supporting networks that were assumed to have strong local–regional dimensions was interpreted to call for the involvement of research groups with local–regional anchoring.

- With local–regional networks as the point of departure, diffusion became identical to the expansion or replication of such local–regional actor configurations. ‘The general’ had to be reached through practical link-ups, not widespread deductions from theory.
- From this point of departure the core challenge for action research would be to help initiate a growing number of network type relationships through making existing networks grow, or through using existing networks as impulses in the formation of new networks.
- With research contributions emerging from a number of mutually independent research organizations, rather than from fewer but more specialized national institutions, co-ordination and growth in the research establishment appeared as tasks of co-ordination across institutions rather than as internal relationships within each institution. In a sense it also meant the end of the notion of ‘theoretical centres’, even on the national level.

After a slow start with a number of difficulties associated with making research come to grips with the actors in working life, seven projects spread all over the country – called modules – were established. In the beginning advances were modest and some of the projects lived a precarious life. Rather than dying out all did, however, survive. After a year or two, processes of consolidation and growth started to emerge. They came to follow different paths leading to different types of local–regional actor configurations, but when the programme came to an end – in the year 2000 – there was a clear growth in terms of number of participating organizations as well as in terms of number and scope of network type relationships (broad presentations of the programme can be found in Gustavsen et al., 2007, and Levin, 2002). With around 10 network configurations, several still in an early phase, and 40–50 organizations showing a more deep-going impact (Bakke, 2001), the programme was never more than a modest actor in working life and was, even at the end, very far from having achieved anything even remotely resembling national diffusion. However, it had succeeded in reversing two trends that had characterized previous efforts: first, the tendency towards lock-ins on the level of the single organization associated with the Industrial Democracy Program; and, second, the tendency towards growth in number of projects being associated with a reduced impact in each project, as experienced during the first phase of the agreement. In Enterprise Development 2000 the growth in number of participants and networks was associated with a continuous deepening of the impact of each of the participating organizations. What scope could be achieved was dependent on how many nodes could be established and how fast each network could be brought to grow, directly or through the spin-off of new networks.

Although resources still constituted a problem, the development could be interpreted to indicate the possibility of broad change based on realistic resources since resources external to the organizations could concentrate on the structuring,

or orchestration (Haga, 2007), of the process in terms of the establishment of nodes and support to the development of relationships. Again, dialogue conferences became a core element but now organized for network-building purposes and with representatives from a number of different organizations participating each time. Focus shifted, furthermore, from the individual conference to the relationships *between* conferences. To promote networks, conferences had to be organized in time and space in such a way that they could create ‘ripples in the water’ effects.

The challenge of reaching many people is, in certain respects, radically different from working with a small group of actors. The notion of dialogue to be developed in this period had to be able to draw the attention of a broad range of actors in working life (Gustavsen, 2001). Such a notion of dialogue cannot fit and guide all the aspects of specific development challenges emerging in face-to-face situations, nor answer all existential questions associated with dialogic relationships. The aim was to provide the actors with some clues concerning how to communicate in new ways. The expectation was that when set on a new course the work life actors would themselves experience the advantages of this course and themselves continue and deepen the dialogue. It was, furthermore, a point that the criteria should not only be reasonably easy to grasp, they should make all the actors apply the same criteria. A call for dialogue will hardly bring the actors together if they harbour very different notions of what a dialogue may be.

The regional turn and the need for pluralist environments

When the networking between organizations was made into the core thrust of Enterprise Development 2000, the main reason was the belief in mutual support between organizations as a main element in change. As experience with networking was deepening, a further element started to appear: an element that had to do with trust.

It was – and still is – a common assumption within work reform, as indeed within ‘organization development’ in general, that change is dependent upon trust between the parties involved. When the issue is to change work roles from specialized to autonomous, this gives rise to a problem: a high degree of specialization in the work role is generally in itself an expression of mistrust; management does not trust the ability of the workers to themselves find out how to best perform the job; the workers do not trust management to develop and maintain a managerial regime that makes it worth while for them to invest in learning and competence in work. From where, then, is to come the trust that is to function as a pre-requisite for change? Obviously, dilemmas of this kind are sharper in theory than in practice; through stepwise development it is possible to gradually change work roles and gradually increase the level of mutual trust. However, even when

the degree of trust is growing between specific actors in specific organizations, what guarantee do they have that the process will continue? The reality of this problem can be seen in the point that practically none of the work reform star cases on the level of individual organizations that have been created (or discovered) over the years have survived specific managerial regimes.

When organizations enter into network relationships with each other, it means that several management groups are involved as well as several local unions. There emerges a system with an element of checks and balances that makes it more difficult for any single group of actors to change the overall course of the development. This is in particular the case if the organizations develop more specific forms of co-operation. If the overall trend is to develop quality systems along a production chain based on worker autonomy and initiative, it will be difficult for one single organization to break out of this pattern and base the supervision of quality on, say, automatic controls. There is, in other words, a positive relationship between autonomy and pluralism.

This relationship grows in strength if the network is expanded to include more actors than organization level parties. In Gustavsen et al. (2007) there is a description of a regional development that started with internal processes in one single chemical plant, went on to acquire network characteristics through co-operation with some other chemical plants in the region and from there to include local suppliers and eventually regional political actors. This is the kind of formation that seems to provide the most fruitful arena for the development of autonomy in work. To assess the number and strength of such configurations even in a small economy presents a number of difficulties and no specific figure can be given for Norway. What is fairly certain is that the number of pluralist, regionally based 'development coalitions' is growing, and in all the Scandinavian countries (Gustavsen, 2006). The same kind of process can probably be seen in a number of other countries as well, but this author is unable to make assessments of developments outside Scandinavia.

This perspective also explains why the notion of learning through autonomy in the work role is not lost as a result of the loss of a general theory where autonomy is emphasized. Since the willingness to grant each other a certain degree of freedom is a core aspect of relationships able to generate trust, mutual trust cannot, as a point of departure, be developed in an organization unless all members are offered a reasonable degree of autonomy in their work roles. To the extent that management, local unions and employees want to operate in a climate of mutual trust rather than distrust and distance, they need to provide each other with an element of freedom in each others' roles. Autonomy is an existential condition for trust and only secondarily a job design principle. This does not mean that all management and all local unions, even in the Scandinavian countries, are automatically committed to work autonomy because they want to develop trust. The point is that there is an interest, in a sufficient number of organizations, in

making labour–management relationships in general based on trust, to make drives for the mutual development of trust and autonomy quite widespread, a point reflected in the European work organization surveys where the Scandinavian countries (Finland included) – together with Holland – appear with the highest scores on autonomy in work (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2007; Lorenz & Valeyre, 2005).

The need for a pluralist environment with possibilities for democratic checks and balances throws further light on the relevance of dialogue as the chief generative mechanism. The kind of communication to be applied in the context of work reform does not only need to handle ‘job design information’, it must be able to create and sustain broadly framed, regional coalitions of actors where a broad range of themes, ranging from shop floor issues in specific organizations to the economic and social future of whole regions, are on the agenda.

To the extent that broad coalitions are needed to make autonomy-based forms of work organization real, it follows that it is the advance of the coalition as a whole that becomes decisive for how well and rapidly each participating workplace can advance. Change is, in other words, not a question of moving an endless row of single organizations, one after the other, but of moving larger slices of organizations (and related actors) in a pattern based on equality and mutual support. Time has to do with the coalition as a whole, not each part of it.

While the programme that was launched in 2000 was intended to last until 2010, the recognition that change needs to be seen as processes of evolution in pluralist environments of some size, led to a major change in programme strategy from 2007. Rather than running several different programmes that all aim at specific, local combinations of researchers and user organizations, the Research Council of Norway decided to bring the programmes together in a bigger package called ‘Measures for Regional R&D and Innovation’ and make ‘the region’ the core actor in the use of this package. By ‘the region’ is understood a geographical territory of some size which is represented by a so-called partnership. A partnership is a body made up of representatives from the regional authorities, the regional branches of the labour market parties, research and education in the region, other possible interest groups and the regional offices of the state programmes in support of development and innovation. Support from the new programme is dependent upon the existence of such a partnership and upon the ability of the partnership to develop a credible regional policy where the use of research as a development resource is one of the elements.

The interplay between theory and practice

It is possible to see the development indicated above as falling into phases, each phase characterized by a specific set of relationships between theory and practice.

In the first phase, the main theoretical framework was in principle analytic-descriptive with a strong element of systems thinking. Action research was intended to provide the bridge between theory, with claims to universality on the one hand, and specific practical situations on the other. Its role was not unlike 'applied research'; the learning to come out of the action research projects was intended to pertain in particular to how to turn the theory into practice.

In the second phase, the tension between general theory and local experience as gained through action research projects was increasing. Rather than broadly framed theory about work and organization, the need was felt to be for theory that could clarify how to act under local conditions in terms of relating to other people, developing joint agendas, designing processes, and similar. Furthermore, local relationship building should be seen as the core activity, not as an outlet for views and perspectives developed on the basis of many different sources. To put issues of local constructivism 'up front' in the research process was, however, a theoretical break more than a practical one. Even the earlier, Lewin-type experiments could not be performed without local relationship building. What occurred can be seen as a change in figure-ground relationships, from using action research mainly to diffuse theory to using action research to create theory.

When focus turned to theory about local relationship building, the assumption was that this topic could in itself be made subject to general theory. This may look like a paradox: how come theory that stresses the need to be local can be general? One answer is that while patterns of organization are local, the mechanisms through which they are generated can be made subject to generalization. Just because this assumption is very widespread in action research, it is necessary to emphasize that when, in the third phase of the development indicated above, the issue of 'the general' reappeared, it was for another reason: the observation that it was possible for one single mechanism to trigger off a substantial number of local development processes on the practical level.

In the last and most recent phase, focus has been on how to make a number of (initially) local projects interact with each other to constitute broader waves of change. This is not done through superimposing general theory on broadly framed clusters of local processes. The core strategy is to establish dialogues between the different local processes of such a kind that each process can be enriched by the other processes. Enrichment in this context can sometimes imply a form of copying but it can equally well imply learning from differences. The notion of 'hybrid' (Latour, 1998) is perhaps the one that catches the characteristics of these transactions in the most adequate way: each local process makes itself subject to renewal by mixing internal with external impulses, the external impulses often emanating from different sources. Each hybrid represents a mix of traditional and new elements; often it is the way in which the elements are put together that constitutes their force rather than what elements are present.

This part of the process can in itself be divided into different phases; for

instance, in terms of a development that started with a main focus on networks between organizations, but it has reached a stage where issues of regional partnerships and governance are attaining more weight.

The difference between the phases is, furthermore, reflected not only in what is thought but also in who is doing the thinking. Along with the movement from a point of departure in one grand theory of work and organization and to the present focus on making social change out of initially scattered local developments, there has been a successive shift in the formal and informal patterns of organization in the action research establishment itself. While in the beginning all activities were thought to emanate from one theory with one intellectual centre, the present pattern is built on a substantial number of research groups, each group relating to its own set of local actors and running its projects and building its theories on an autonomous basis. 'The general' has to emerge out of this process, as a part of the process of practical link-ups. The point is not to make general theory out of limited local experience but to make limited local experience interact with other limited local experiences to constitute broader waves of development.

Theoretical impulses

In the story recounted above it is the ability to learn from what actually occurs in practice that constitutes the core. If practical development is seen as shaped by pre-structured theoretical perspectives, this kind of learning would not be possible. Action research cannot, consequently, work from a position where the main flow of impulses moves from general theory to local action. Rather, it is what emanates from the practical context that constitutes the basis for reflections on what action research achieves. But what kind of role are theoretical impulses to play in this kind of context?

That there is a one-way process from theory to practice has been under dispute for as long as efforts to catch the salient features of the world in theoretical terms have existed. After reading Hegel the role of theory was, for instance, questioned by Kierkegaard, who saw the kind of theory promoted by Hegel as a hindrance to understanding rather than a help. Instead, he argued a more direct relationship between understanding and the practices that are to be understood, thereby providing one of the impulses for what later came to be known as phenomenology. This was questioned by Peirce, who argued that theory and reality are not directly comparable, and that the quality of a theory cannot be settled by comparing it to reality. The ability of a theory to adequately catch the salient features of reality can be tested only through acting upon it and seeing what happens. With roots in Marx, critical theory saw the formation of theory as an activity in need of absolute freedom from the constraints inherent in the practical

world, but the ultimate test of the fruitfulness of a theory is its ability to reach out in society, mobilize people and give rise to new practices.

If we take the research expressions of a phenomenological perspective to cover efforts to build strong and close links between theory and practice, these expressions constitute the main area of theoretical development in action research, at least since the late 1970s. Notions such as grounded theory, the reflective practitioner, the researcher willing to learn by doing, and many more, belong to this field which has, in general, been strongly dominated by the learning theory of Argyris and Schön. The background is the need for action research to turn local and explore in depth the ways and means of relating to specific local situations. While this development has undoubtedly provided many impulses to action research it has, however, little to say concerning how to link different practical situations to each other. The main diffusion mechanism seems, in fact, to be theory in the conventional sense, since practically all studies in the Argyris and Schön tradition deal with the establishment of general theory on the basis of single cases, while practically none deal with the issue of how to link different cases to each other in practical terms.

The pragmatic notion of testing theories through acting upon them and seeing what happens, seems to be tailor-made for action research and clearly inspired Lewin in his development of the field experiment. The challenge is how to find out what happens when reality is set in motion on the basis of a theory. The challenge appears manageable when experiments or experiment-like procedures can be applied. There are, however, at least two problems associated with this. First, social research deals with many issues that cannot be made subject to experiments. Second, even when a theory seems to work because it gives rise to effects according to experimental criteria, these criteria are often derived from the same theory as the one which is tested in the experiment. The danger of moving in circles is obvious. For reasons of this kind, pragmatists like Dewey and James argued that the framework to be used in finding out what works has to be much broader than experimental criteria, ultimately it has to be views on what constitutes the good society, in general, or within large fields like education. But how to generate views on what constitutes the good society? If such views are generated through research-based theory, and verified through action launched on the basis of the theory, the danger of moving in circles is again acute. Something more needs to be inserted into this process and this something more has to do with public, or democratic, sanctioning of the views on 'the good society'.

As interpreted above, phenomenology as well as pragmatism have both provided points and arguments of critical significance to action research. These sources of impulses seem, however, to fall somewhat beside the point from the perspective of the issue of scope, or magnitude. In recent years there has emerged a turn towards critical theory to find impulses for attacking this challenge (Cassell & Johnson, 2006; Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986; Kemmis, 2001).

Even between action research and critical theory there are historical links. When, for instance, a collection of papers by Kurt Lewin was published in German in 1953 (Lewin, 1953), it was with a foreword by Max Horkheimer, one of the founders of the Frankfurt school. However, the more direct and operative relationships appeared when Habermas's notion of free communication was brought to bear on the tasks associated with local constructivism, a development that largely occurred in the 1980s (e.g. Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986). In one sense, critical theory came to replace the more psycho-dynamically oriented type of theory characterizing the phenomenological school. However, there was another shift implied in this, of equal, or perhaps greater, importance. The core concern of critical theory is not the establishment of small islands of emancipated actors in an otherwise irrational society but to influence the evolution of society taken in a broader sense. But how is this influence expected to take place? The historical point of departure was what can be called the notion of *social movement*. From Marx to Marcuse the success of ideas was linked to the ability of these ideas to initiate movements that could grow in scope and strength until they could wipe 'the old society' off the map and put something new in its place. While the revolutionary aspect is largely gone, the emergence of public spheres for open communication is held forth by Habermas as a possible way to the revival of a free dialogue (Kemmis, 2001). It is within spheres of this kind that people express their views on a better world and on what is needed to create it. They do, in this sense, represent a democratic version of the pragmatist's 'good society' at the same time as they transcend the notion of critical theory to become critical practice.

The challenge lies first and foremost in linking different spheres to each other so that they can reinforce each other and each contribute to a 'mass effect' on society. This calls for a reawakening of the notion of social movement in the form of mechanisms that can cut across 'islands of change' and make them become parts of a joint cause. This does not only underpin the current ideas of the action research school described above, but pertains to far more of the action research establishment. In fact, if we look at what action research actually does, an involvement in social movements is already strongly present on a broad front: the women's movement, the movement for democracy, the movement for fair trade, for peace, for a sustainable world. Action research is, to a large extent, an insider in such movements already (Gustavsen, 2003) the main challenge is to make the movements gain in scope, strength and ability to influence the evolution of the world in which we live.

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Bjørn Gustavsen is Senior Research Fellow at the Work Research Institute in Oslo, Professor Emeritus at the Swedish Centre for Working Life, and Visiting Professor at the Vestfold University College. He has participated in the development of action research programmes in working life in a number of countries and has written extensively on action research, theory and practice and strategies for change. In recent years his main focus has been on how action research can transcend face-to-face contexts and become an actor on the level of society. Address: Work Research Institute, Oslo, Norway. [email: bjoern.gustavsen@afi-wri.no]