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## Action research in the field of societal entrepreneurship. Building participative relationships.

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**Action research in the field of societal entrepreneurship.  
-Building participative relationships.**

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**1. Introduction**

One november evening in the year of 2006, I was invited to a meeting within a project called "Culturehouse without walls" (my translation). The event was organized by the network organization "Societal change in Practice" (SIP). I was invited as a member of the board of a local non- profit cinema association, in which I had been an organized member for a couple of years. In this cinema, organized as a cooperative, we showed independent movies three times a week trying to create a local alternative to the more established cinema chains. I decided to accept the invitation although I did not know who arranged it, what the exact purpose was or how it potentially could benefit me or my association. I went to the meeting together with a friend. We both had no or little expectations.

Me and my friend participated together with about 30 people representing different non- profit associations in the community. During the two hours meeting we were all engaged in a dynamic knowledge- exchange activity where we explored our own visions and the possibilities to cooperate in order to develop our operations and activities. We were encouraged to get to know each other personally and together we explored the possibility to develop our associations by discussing our visions, needs, problems, perceived opportunities for future development, and how we could strengthen each other by cooperating.

When returning home I was excited. I remember that me and my friend made fun of the fact that we could now call ourselves "cultural entrepreneurs", a label that was used when the

arrangement was presented. However, I recognised that this label did affect me in a certain way. It was a signal to me that my engagement was important and worthy of attention and recognition. I recognized that the event could be understood as an act of empowerment. I also became interested in process that SIP used in order to get us participants active. Comparing it with my, at the time very brief, knowledge of Action Research (AR) I saw a parallel between my experience and the methods used and described by pragmatic action researchers. What I had experienced resembled a sort of search conference, where the focus was on cooperation and collaboration in order to transform our visions into actionable plans. I could see that SIP in fact was organizing a kind of research and development activity that evening, involving a group in society that seldomly is connected to those two terms.

When I, two years later and in the role of a doctoral student, got the opportunity to write a thesis on the subject of social/ societal entrepreneurship, I connected with SIP again. This time it was me that invited them to partake in a research project exploring entrepreneurial processes in the third or civic sector. I had a firm belief that AR would be an interesting and promising method to employ together with SIP. My ambition was to build a participative research relationship with SIP, where our different competencies could be combined in an interesting way.

This paper is about how my relationship with SIP has developed based on those ambitions. As we shall see AR is a highly uncertain process, where flexibility is needed in order to act in a constantly changing and dynamic process, where the risk of misunderstandings and misinterpretations is great, but where the potentials at the same time seem to be substantial. Beginner mistakes and cultural misunderstandings in the meeting between different logics makes the need for reflection great. This is an attempt to reflect over the research process, conceptualized as a set of relationships between people with different ideas and conceptions about knowledge and knowledge creation.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Next I briefly discuss how the event described above could be understood in terms of social entrepreneurship. I then discuss AR and how the participative relationship in AR processes can be conceptualised in different ways. In section four I present an ongoing research project that is built on the aspiration of creating a participative relationship between researchers and community members. Finally, the

participative relationship is discussed in terms of a paradoxical situation in need of attention and common reflections.

## **2. Societal entrepreneurship**

There are different ways to react to the presentation of yet another term for entrepreneurship. One way is to see it as a problem or a sign of scientific weakness. The question asked is; why introduce yet another definition of a subject that is already fuzzy and lacks a clear understanding? This kind of critique seems to be based on a view of science as a mapping-enterprise (Gergen and Gergen, 2008).

Another approach is to say that new definitions have the possibility to bring about new perspectives and that this is the key to how we keep a research field vivid and relevant in an ever changing world (Steyaert and Hjorth, 2003). This line of reasoning is built upon a view of science as a constant dialogue, aiming at developing new perspectives on a phenomenon that is impossible to give one all-conquering and true definition. If we subscribe to this view, let us for a brief moment reflect upon what kind of perspectives and dialogue the concept of societal entrepreneurship can bring forward. Let's ask not what the concept is, but what it can do or perform in terms of dialogue and richness in perspective and understanding.

By heritage the academic field of entrepreneurship has developed in the departments of business administration and economics. As a consequence the business setting has become the dominant empirical context. At the business schools, entrepreneurship as a research field has prospered. The number of researchers active in the field as well as the number of journals covering entrepreneurship as a subject has increased steadily over the last decades (Johannisson, 2002). The happy marriage between the subject of business administration and entrepreneurship is understandable. The form of creativity/creation that is expressed in the act of starting a business is highly valued in our society. This in turn makes it a valuable task for researchers to provide society (and policy makers) with knowledge about small business creation and its effects in terms of economic growth.

On the other hand there are forces that problematize the dominating relationship between entrepreneurship and business start-ups and growth. Researchers interested in understanding the phenomenon have come to emphasize change and creativity and the way that established

structures can be and are transformed or contested by groups of people in orchestrated action. The business community is only one of many transformative forces in society (Spinosa et al, 1997). In this view, Gartner (1988) suggests the more inclusive definition of entrepreneurship as a set of activities involved in organization creation, making it reasonable to study the creation of any formal arrangement (e.g. cooperative, non-profits) as an entrepreneurial act (see for example Gawell, 2006). Going one step further, the definition of entrepreneurship as creative organizing (Johannisson, 2005) even makes it possible to let go of the idea that entrepreneurial processes has to be connected to a formal organizational structure at all. Hence, the preconditioned link between entrepreneurship, business creation and the logic of Business Administration can be seen as an obstacle that clouds the eyes of the researcher and hinders him/ her from getting to the core of the matter (Hjorth et al, 2003). In this respect, societal entrepreneurship can be seen as a liberating concept that makes it possible for the researcher to indulge in the study of change processes and creative organizing in all the possible areas of society, enabling a cross- fertilisation between business administration and other fields in the social sciences.

Another argument for societal entrepreneurship is found in the overall belief in the importance of diversity and multiplicity (Bjerke, 2005; Grant & Perren, 2002; Spinosa et. Al, 1997; Steyaert, 2007). From this point of view, society must be conceptualized as an intergrated whole. A vital business community alone does not lead to economic growth (Johannisson et al, 2002). It is dependent on other factors as well, such as a rich cultural life and a vivid civic sector where all inhabitants have the opportunity and right to develop their interests and abilities (Spinosa et al, 1997). The importance of handling multiple perspectives at the same time is also illustrated by the current need to balance economic growth with democratic rights and ecological concerns. Sustainability seems to be dependent on our ability to handle many and sometimes conflicting objectives and perspectives at the same time. The inclusive concept of societal entrepreneurship promotes an empirical and theoretical richness that has the potential to make visible the interplay between different logics, concerns and ambitions in entrepreneurial processes.

As the discussion above indicate, societal entrepreneurship implies less focus on the organisational form and more focus on the entrepreneurial process. According to the creative process view (Steyaert, 2007) in entrepreneurship, this implies that entrepreneurship is seen as allways emerging. Entrepreneurship is inscribed into a social ontology of becoming. In this

respect, the work of Sarasvathy (2001) is important. She sees entrepreneurship as an effectual process where alternatives are generated or fabricated in a contingent fashion over time.

If possibilities are created over time in change processes it seem reasonable to focus the everydayness of the process (Steyerat, 2004), as there are no 'light- bulb moments' for the researcher to discover (Fletcher och Watson, 2006). Instead, the point of departure is "the belief that the everyday is the scene where social change and individual creativity take place as a slow result of constant activity. Innovation is not the Great Renewal but the daily effort of thousands of small steps which- after all- makes a difference. This implies that one acknowledges the importance of everyday speaking where people talking with each other are as much authors as novelists" (Steyaert, 2004: 10)

A creative process view makes the question of research method important. As stated by Steyaert (2004; 19); "it is a social process, that requires study in such a way that the approach does not kill what it tries to study, and respect the eventness of the events through which it proceeds". His suggestion is to approach entrepreneurship "as lived experience, as story, as drama, as conversation, as performance, in all its everydayness".

In the next section Action Research (AR) is presented as a method used to explore societal entrepreneurship. The argument is that action research is suitable in order to approach entrepreneurship as a creative process. As Gergen and Gergen (2008; 169) notes; "action research practices chart the many ways in which people can work together to create change" and more importantly "action research commences with problems or challenges in the world of everyday life." (Ibid; 167)

### **3. Action Research**

Action research differs from both basic and applied social research in terms of people's involvement in the research process. Participation is the main defining character of action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001: 9) as the world consists "not of things but of relationships which we co-author". The participatory action research relationship has both a functional and a political element. It implies that community members or practioners can and should be active participants in the entire research process, carryng out functions and activities that have often been reserved for researchers. On the other hand, it is a democratic

relationship in which both researchers and community members exercise power and control over decision-making and interpretation. (Arieli et.al. 2009)

As we can see in the description above, participation in AR often implies the involvement of community members in processes of research/ reflection. The participative dimension can however be described the other way around. The researcher could participate in action as knowledge can be seen to be enriched when the researcher intervenes, is involved or inserted in processes of social action. The ambition is to arrive at a subject/ subject relationship with the ones being “studied”, combining different kinds of knowledge in the research process. (Fals Borda, 2001) With this involvement follows an integration of action with research, and a practice-based nature of the knowledge that is entailed (Park, 2001). The concept of participation in AR is complex since the question is who is supposed to participate in what, and to what extent. Different orientations in AR conceptualise the participative dimensions in different ways.

In many descriptions of the AR- field a separation is made between classical or pragmatic AR and a more critical tradition (Johansson, 2008; Mattsson, 2004; Hansson, 2003). The orientations unite in an interest in participative and change oriented initiatives. Both orientations acknowledge the importance of action in research processes but they emphasise different aspects. Pragmatic researchers want to fuse action and theory/ practice and see practice and doing as more important, critical researchers see theory as guiding emancipation and focus on the importance of reflection in this process. (Johansson and Lindhult, 2008) The differences between the two orientations are summarized below.

<b>Issue</b>	<b>pragmatic orientation</b>	<b>critical orientation</b>
Purpose	Improvement in workability of human praxis	Emancipation
Action focus	Experimental, cooperation	Resistance, liberation
Orientation to power	Power as ability to do, collaborative relation, practical agreement is striven for	Dominant interests, coercive, conflict is acknowledged
Role of researcher / related knowledge	Closeness, practical knowledge	Distance, episteme reflective knowledge
Research focus	Action, dialogue	Reflection
Development focus	Experimental learning learning by doing	Consciousness raising, reflexivity
Type of dialogue	Cooperative, experience- based Action- oriented	Promote openness to the other
Situation	Fragmentation, compartmentalization	Asymmetrical power relations, invisible structures that are restricting

(Figure 1 Comparison between a pragmatic and a critical orientation to AR, Johansson and Lindhult, 2008: 102)

A critical orientation easily leads to a traditional research role where the researcher is no longer participating in the process. A consequent application of the pragmatic orientation can lead to a situation where the output is hard to legitimize as research at all. There is obviously a



need in AR to balance action practice and research practice. (Johansson and Lindhult, 2008)  
In the next section two AR projects are presented where this balance act is explicitly discussed and reflected upon. One of the projects, in my interpretation is more critically oriented and the other could be described as pragmatic in its orientation.

### **Building participative relationships in AR processes.**

Ospina et al (2004) report on an action- research project in which a group of award recipients are invited to be co-researchers in a national, multi- year, foundation- founded research project to study leadership for social change. The article focuses on the initial implementation phase of the research, in particular the design, the invitation to do research and the early co- research encounters. The original motivation of the researchers was to offer the participants an opportunity to think about the future of their communities, articulated in their own voices. They decided to invite a group of leaders so that they as co- researchers could do research with leaders on leadership. They used action inquiry with the goal to generate new knowledge to inform action in a way that seems to have a critical orientation.

Their first contact with the practitioners was characterized by distrust, frustration and conflict. One problem was that the foundation asked the researchers to develop a research plan in advance of meeting the practitioners. This left them without influence over the research agenda and made it difficult for the researchers to talk about co- research at a later stage of the process. The researchers had to work hard in order to overcome this, pressing on the fact that the research tools was in service of the recipients. The researchers felt anxious that the recipients would not embrace their research design and they feared that they should not be able to communicate their approach effectively to the communities. The researchers hoped that by meeting some of the communities demands for action they would be able to make research more appealing to them. The researchers realised that, in order to make room for voices traditionally lost in research, they for a while lost their own voice. They felt a need to underplay their role and their privilege as members of the academia. The community members on the other hand experienced anxiety that stemmed from a lack of clarity about roles and the task proposed by the researchers. They also had a sense of being observed.

We see a situation where the initiative and the power to define the situation is negotiated between members from very different worlds. Starting with a situation where the researchers

feel that they dominate the practitioners, their response to this is an over reaction where too much influence over the project and its activities is undeliberately given to the practitioners. In both situations, the result are feelings of anxiety and perceived misunderstanding. The small world of the project ended up being divided “into action, valued as good and useful in this context, and inquiry, devalued as bad and not useful in this context” (Ospina et al. 2004: 63).

Arieli et al (2009) describes a situation where two researchers from a university in Israel work together with members from a civil society organisation in an action research project that has a more pragmatic orientation. The relationship building process is described in detail and potential stumbling blocks and paradoxes of creating a participative action research situation are discussed. The problems experienced by the participants were due to e.g; gaps in power and resources between researchers and community members, different orientation towards action and inquiry and differences in the cultural repertoires of researchers and the community. Until these gaps and cultural differences were discussed, there was little learning on either side. The authors of the article (the text is a joint product between researchers and practitioners) see a lot of things in retrospect that wasn't obvious or even intended at the time of the actual event.

The first thing they see is that the researchers focused on explaining action research ideology and methodology, advocating an inquiry process and asking for support. They promoted a process of thinking and planning together- rather than running to action as suggested by the community members. In this way, they unintentionally ignored suggestion and ideas from the community members who clearly experienced a feeling of being ignored. The community members wanted the College researchers to do something that actually could have a concrete impact. They wanted “things to happen” and did not care for any particular process. They never managed to satisfy their desire for action and felt they were going around in circles. When nothing concrete happened the community members started to distance themselves from the project. The researchers experienced this as a lack of commitment and foot-dragging from the side of the community members, whom they felt they had to push in order to get things to happen.

When reflecting upon the situation together in the article, they also see the situation as a meeting between unfamiliar people, and as a consequence as governed by politeness and avoidance of open conflicts. No- one felt confident enough to directly express his/ her

thoughts and opinions. The result was that the relationship continued, but that the irritation and frustration between the parties grew. This frustration was not allowed to come out during the two years, leading to a ritualistic situation. The relationship continued but no side felt that they got what they wanted. A subtle game of domination- submission led to a feeling of going in circles rather than moving forward. Not until the gaps in power and cultural differences became discussable in the form of a jointly written text, did anyone feel any progress.

In the next section I will present a research project in cooperation between the well established and hierarchical institution of the university and a small, entrepreneurial and network like non governmental organisation. The overall context of the research project is discussed as well as the relationship between researchers and practitioners and the activities that in an early stage of the project was performed. In the last section, important reflexions and experiences are summarised in what could be described as a local theory describing the specific action research project and the relationship building process that resulted from our activities. Experiences from our local project are also related to the existing literature focusing on building participative relationships.

#### **4. Empirical presentation- Situating ourselves**

The project described in this section of the text is a collaboration between researchers and active societal entrepreneurs. The researchers involved are part of the research initiative “Organizing Societal Entrepreneurship in Sweden” (OSIS) which organizes a larger group of Swedish researchers interested in societal entrepreneurship. Within OSIS a variety of different research projects are included, many of which are designed and conducted in collaboration between researchers and practitioners. The Knowledge Foundation funds the initiative. In this section one of the projects in the overall initiative of OSIS is discussed in more detail. This particular project is performed in collaboration between researchers from Linnaeus University in Växjö and active societal entrepreneurs from the non-governmental organization “Social change in practice” (SIP).

The author of this text is Erik Rosell. I am the researcher who has been most involved in the project described, although other researchers from the OSIS initiative have been active in the process. I contacted SIP as a PhD-student, writing my thesis in the area of societal entrepreneurship. My background is important in order to understand the situation that is

played out in the process presented below. In the year 2000 I took a Master degree in Business Administration. After that I immediately got a position as a lecturer at the faculty. My experiences of working with and developing a study program in entrepreneurship called “Enterprising and Business Development” has been important to me. Here, I have had the opportunity to reflect over my own role as a “organizer of entrepreneurship” and how I conceptualize the relationship between action and reflection. By now I have been working in the academy for 10 years. When I reflect upon my actions in relation to SIP, I can clearly see how my background has influenced me. I am an academic by culture, and no matter what I say, when it comes to spontaneous action I can clearly see how the meaning system and logic of the academy is (unreflected and unintentionally) guiding my actions. I am also an unexperienced project leader, in the sense that the type of development project that SIP engage in are new to me. I must also add that I only recently have become familiar with texts on AR. I have no previous experience of employing the method. By stating this, I want to make clear that my meeting with the practice and world of SIP as well as the principles of AR, has been a new, exciting and thrilling. I went in to this project with curiosity and an eagerness to learn. I had little preconceptions about my partner, and I entered a situation that to me in itself was some sort of experiment or exploration.

My partner in the project, SIP, presents itself in this way on its website ([www.natverketsip.se/omsip.php](http://www.natverketsip.se/omsip.php), 2009-08-11, my translation): “*Right now there are a lot of social changes going on, new thoughts are blending with established ideas (...). To many people these changes seem intimidating. For us in SIP they mean endless opportunities to build a smarter and funnier society. SIP is always democratic and includes a great deal of cockiness and love. We DO and ARE what our name says*”.

It all started back in the year 2001/ 2002. A group of young people got together to organize what they all agreed was “funny projects”. Among other things, art exhibitions and so called LAN (Local Area Network)- parties were arranged. The informal group of youngsters soon draw the attention of the politicians in the region. “If you start an association, we can support you” was the conclusion from the politicians when they visited a LAN- party at the new years eve 2001/ 2002. Soon after, the association Tech Group was established, the name signalling a focus on digital media. From the beginning, there was a focus on developing areas in society where the members felt was in special need of rethinking/ renewal. For example the project “computer support at home” was launched, where young people helped elderly people (over

55 years old) to solve computer problems at home. Another project was “Grrl Tech”, from the beginning focusing on supporting the use of digital media by teenage girls and later broadening its activities to include such areas as supporting entrepreneurship and leadership among young women, with the overall aim of promoting equality in society.

Lately the name Tech Group was changed to “Social Change in Practice” (SIP) in order to better reflect the activities of the association and its area of interest. As the development of Grrl Tech illustrates, the focus of the association gradually took the form of changing society at large, often taking a standpoint in social issues of immediate interest in our time, such as equality, sustainability and integration of social groups in some way left outside. At present time SIP is among other things running a study program for Social entrepreneurs and the project “Funkibator”, an incubator for young people with physical and mental handicaps, has been granted funding from the state.

As the short description above show, the initial intention was not to create an organization, but to have fun. When young people indulging in their interests and having fun came together, an unintended consequence was that they had to organize themselves in order to better fit into the structures of society. By time SIP started to organize societal entrepreneurship in different ways and contexts. This organizing is however performed in a variety of different ways, many of which doesn't fit the traditional image of what is meant by the term organizing.

*Advising.* Members from SIP works as advisors to other organizations and individual persons. In this way SIP can be understood as a consulting organization in the field of societal entrepreneurship.

*Mobilizing, promoting, emancipating.* Members of SIP themselves work as initiators of undertakings. This is done in a number of ways.

- Members of SIP can act as role models to other groups in society, i.e. by showing and discussing what has been accomplished by other members in other project or by acting as entrepreneurs themselves.

- Members of SIP constantly engage in new projects and involve new people and new associations in the existing organization.

- Members of SIP create arenas for their “target groups” and promote sharing of experience, network building and development of shared visions on how to best promote a specific interest in society.

*Creativity.* The objective of SIP is in a basic sense to stimulate creativity by others. This is one of the desired effects of the mobilizing, promoting and emancipating activities mentioned above.

*Pedagogy.* SIP also has a pedagogic role. By producing information material to target groups in society they create and communicate knowledge on subjects like entrepreneurship (for example a “do-it-your-self” booklet), equality between the sexes (for example “bevisboken”, a booklet that critically discuss the gender roles), and other topics. The material produced is often provocative, and designed to make a reaction by the reader.

The activities of SIP (briefly described above) has in a sense a lot in common with the activities performed by actors in the sector of higher education. Like the members of SIP, a member of a university faculty is typically engaged in creating new knowledge (research) and communicates this knowledge to the surrounding society (teaching). Equally important, a member of university faculty is supposed to actively interact with society in other ways (the so called third task) in order to contribute to the development of society. When SIP and I first met and discussed the possibilities of collaborating in a common project, the similarities that we saw between our practices and the differences that we equally easy could see, became a natural point of departure.

### **Designing the project**

Our first common activity consisted of us together writing a project plan and an application for funding. I met with persons from SIP on two occasions. The main communication was performed by e-mail. The logic behind our project design was that we both felt that we were working in related areas, but performing our work in very different ways. The project plan was based on the differences and similarities that we at an early stage identified between our two organisations and the way we worked.

We defined one area of collaboration that was more related to the practice of SIP. By combining research and action we wanted to perform, document and reflect upon the process when a new initiative is formulated, planned and carried out. The purpose was to develop knowledge about how an initiative is organized and how SIP as an organizer of societal entrepreneurship is working. The initiative was to be formulated by SIP, thus making it an example of what SIP normally works with in relation to its target groups in society.

Representatives from the academy was invited to participate in the activities and assigned a special responsibility to document the process and engage the actors in a reflection process. The possibility for the researcher to be actively involved was however clearly stated in the project plan.

Secondly, we found a common interest based on our respective education programs in entrepreneurship. Differences and similarities concerning for example the structure of the study program, the visions and objectives of the program, the conception of entrepreneurship and the possibilities to stimulate entrepreneurial activity by others, where by us seen as potentially interesting paths of enquiry. We also saw an opportunity in the geographical proximity between our environments. It would be both interesting and possible for us to exchange experiences and stimulate communication between the students of our programs. Another objective of the co- production was to build bridges between our environments in order to stimulate learning.

An interesting but difficult question is which one of us who was taking the upper hand and the initiative in the project formulation process. It was I who contacted SIP and engaged them in the project, and it was I who translated the ideas and thoughts of SIP in to text. I was however open towards the ideas and suggestions from SIP, promoting the idea that we could undertake concrete action within the project. The project plan can be described as a joint product, where the more action- oriented and pragmatic orientation of SIP were mixed with my ambitions that rather pointed towards a critical action research orientation. In the discussions it was me who pressed the need for joint reflection and the writing of scientific reports and papers. In this way a tension or conflict was built into the project plan. The meaning of action and research was left unspecified and ambiguous. My role as a researcher was in the same way defined in an open way. I could be understood in terms of an ethnographic researcher allowed to follow some of the projects of SIP, or as a more active participant in activities concerning both SIP and the university. During the initial project time I struggled with my own role. At different times I had different pictures of how I best should act in relation to SIP and the project.

Today the project has been running for one year. Our activities so far can be summarized in three partly different areas. 1) Based on our respective activities in relation to education in entrepreneurship, we have created joint lectures for our students. Those activities consisted of

common guest lectures followed by joint reflection sessions. University students in entrepreneurship have been invited to activities arranged by SIP and student from SIP has been invited to activities on the entrepreneurship program on the university. I have conducted lectures at SIP and together with personnel from SIP we have created joint education in entrepreneurship for other groups in the community (in this case a folk high-school). 2) I have participated in two projects that SIP has conducted. In the first one a magazine was produced and distributed in the local community. The magazine reported on ongoing activities in the community related to societal entrepreneurship. I participated in the project from start to completion and took part as one of the writers that produced the articles in the magazine. In the second project, I participated on the same basis as two members of SIP in a study of how disabled persons experience public websites serving people with information on medical care. 25 interviews were conducted and analysed in a report that was delivered to the local authorities working with medical care. In this project I conducted the same tasks as the SIP-members in all the steps of the project, from initial planning to the writing of the final report. 3) During this first year I have followed the activities of SIP in a general sense. By having a continuous conversation with members from the organisation through spontaneous meetings and by using social media, my ambition has been to document and understand SIP in terms of a network organisation. The various projects that SIP conducts are interesting in relation to the overall activities in the network and they can be understood as parts of a historical development.

In the next section I will discuss our relationship as it developed based on the project plan described above.

### **Implementing the project plan**

The first couple of months was characterised by us having more formal meetings where we presented ourselves and our organizations. We also discussed our project in terms of our roles as participants, its administration and the kind of activities we could launch at the beginning and later on. I was working closely with two persons from SIP, Stefan and Sofie, who both were experienced project leaders. Stefan was one of the founders of SIP and he had been active during the whole 10-year lifespan of the organization. Sofie was employed by SIP some five years later. In SIP people come and go as projects are started, developed and terminated. Stefan and Sofie however are among the persons who have stayed in SIP for a



longer time, thus taking a greater responsibility for the development of the organization as a whole. Later on I came to work with other people in SIP, but Stefan and Sofie have so far been my main conversation- partners.

From the very first meeting, Stefan and Sofie showed a great responsibility for and commitment to our project. They later explained that they felt they could influence the project and that there was something in it for them. This supposedly follows from the fact that they had taken part in the formulation of the project plan and that they together with me had funding from the project. The project plan however had another problem built in to it. It was highly unclear in terms of concrete goals, activities and concerning the roles of us as participants. The initial condition described by Arieli et al (2009) was highly present in our situation, the agenda was left ambiguous so it could speak to everyone's aspirations.

This circumstance was problematic in the very beginning, since there was a lot of discussions needed to clarify the project before anyone of us felt secure enough to take action in either direction. My immediate reaction was to start a discussion over the project plan, trying to talk our way out of the somewhat paralyzing situation. The strategy from SIP was different; they relatively fast took the initiative to perform practical activities, in this way starting out with the parts of the project plan that seemed most interesting, appealing and natural to them. They started to do things in the project, and they invited me to participate. I realized that I could abandon my unreflected and spontaneous strategy built on meetings and discussions. Considering my interest in entrepreneurship I started to see the point of engaging in action relatively fast, without planning ahead. If entrepreneurship is about spontaneous and creative organising in a certain context, I saw the opportunity to engage in this kind of spontaneous activities together with SIP. Thus, the project at an early stage took an action- oriented turn under the lead of persons from SIP. I was invited to participate in the activities of SIP and I willingly and deliberately took that invitation. At least I *said* so.

An important circumstance was my reactions when I accepted this invitation. In one way, I had an openness towards action, I saw the point of taking action and in our discussions I promoted the idea. On the other hand, when we started to act my immediate reaction was one of hesitation. I had left my own territory and now entered unknown grounds. I slowly realised that I had to take responsibility in a situation that was new and unusual for me, where I had little previous experience, and where I felt having no or little control. I also imagined that I at

a later stage would have to account for my actions in terms of research and from such a point of view I had a hard time understanding the activities that SIP suggested. I did not see a clear purpose and the logic was difficult for me to understand since it was highly different compared to the one I had gotten used to during my 10 years in the academy. I also felt that the actions had to high ambitions and that SIP wanted to much and pushed the limits to hard. When I talked about this with Stefan and Sofie they did not seem to understand my point of view. To them we where engaged in normal development work and they explained that SIP allways try out new things and deliberately tries to push the limits with every new project. SIP continued to work along and I continued to support the activities in conversations, but in the same way continued to reluctantly take part of the concrete actions.

My spontaneous reaction when engaged in the project work was that we had to think things through befor rushing along. Instead of engaging in action and showing a commitment to action I unintentionally worked to slow the project down and to redirect it back to a for me more familiar logic, that is into more of an research project. I talked about my process as a doctoral student and highlighted the importance of us being able to report our project in my terms, that is in scientific reports and papers. I also backed from responsibility by taking a more passive role in the project, working with documentation tasks and reflecting over the actions that took place instead of engaging in them. I flead back in to the role of a researcher.

For both me and SIP the situation got more and more frustrating and after a couple of month we where asking eachother questions about what we, coming from different organisations and cultures, wanted whith the project. Luckely, our process was more complex than that. I experienced the project as highly interesting. SIP fascinated me, as well as the different project that SIP was working with. I allways experienced the communication with people from SIP as honest, open and positive.

A key moment in the project was a meeting that I appointed with SIP five month in to the project. At the meeting I noticed that Stefan seemed restless and more silent than usual. After endless discussions over how we should plan and conduct our student exchange activities, we where standing at the same point as in the beginning. We had different and vague ideas from both sides, but we could not seem to unite on one agenda or vision. My sense of Stefan and Sofie being frustrated was strong and in the end of the meeting I said that I really would want

to know how they experienced the situation. After a couple of days I got an email from Stefan.

*Hi!*

*You said you wanted to know what I am thinking right now. Here comes some thoughts from me to you ☺*

*Our cooperation is developing a lot slower than other processes and projects that we/ I have within SIP. My standard operating procedure is that I rush along pretty fast, with tempo and I trust my feelings when I make a decision. You can work in that way if you know each other very well in a small team, and if you trust each other to a full degree. To work in that way doesn't apply in what we are trying to develop. One explanation is that there are other persons involved. And also that we have not been working together previously so we are still in a phase where we are getting to know each other, although we have come quite far.*

*I feel that you want to take things slow and careful and that you often have had to put in the break when I present different concepts and ideas. The reasons to this can surely be many. You have other colleagues around you, and you have superiors that you have to answer to. You yourself maybe does not know exactly what you want with this project and maybe you feel that you can't trust that it will be good in the end. Maybe you feel that a ketchup- effect is coming up. That if you let go and loose control and let everything develop in a free way, it will be like a tsunami rolling in, and that you in that moment loose control, and at a later stage have to take responsibility for this and that you have to account for it.*

*However, I am used to standing on top of that tsunami wave, having control over it and at the same time pushing it even more; ) But I have had the opportunity to develop this habit over many, many years. Something that is new and unusual to many when it comes to development work maybe everyday life and obvious things for me. I don't know, but maybe it is so... maybe not. So of course I seek challenges and try to do things a little more exciting than I am used to.*

*Then, during a couple of meetings we have been talking about the same things over and over, going around in circles. We have been talking about the purpose of the project, what we are going to do and about the administration and economy. I feel as if we are talking around over and over again, without starting from what we already have achieved. This is to a*

*large degree a question of documentation, to be prepared of what has already been said when a new meeting is decided, to be disciplined and to work with concrete agendas of what is going to happen in terms of decisions and activities. Also, from time to time I have felt as if we suddenly change direction despite what we have decided earlier. It is problematic for me when the vision is suddenly changed, but then again it has not happened a lot of times. (...)*

I soon responded to Stefans mail.

*I felt good reading your email. You seem to be good at understanding people and you certainly understand my situation (...) and I understand you.*

This in my view productive conflict between us continued for a while. We openly discussed our ambitions, our roles in the project and how we could continue with our work in a more relaxed way where we all felt comfortable. Although we never definitely solved the problem, we engaged in a discussion concerning our cultural differences. This text is one result of this discussion. Below some implications of that discussion is presented from my point of view.

## **5. Discussion. The paradox of participation**

Action research takes the integration of action and research (or reflection) into explicit consideration. In this integration lies a great potential for learning and reflection. With this integration follows a blurring of roles between researchers and practitioners, and a need to acknowledge and respect different forms of knowledge (Park, 2001). In other research tradition the two types of activities are usually divided and separated. Reflection is seen as an activity exclusively carried out by the professional and formally appointed researchers and action is seen as the responsibility of someone else (whoever it may be).

The participative relationship in AR is however a difficult one, that tend to result in a paradoxical situation. In the example presented by Ospina et al (2004) one problem defined was that the researchers alone wrote the project plan, before having talked to or invited the change leaders. This was perceived as a paradox since it led to a less democratic situation where the researchers were allowed to define the problem and orientation of the research. The practitioners did not have a say at this stage of the process. In order to compensate for this, the researchers silenced themselves in the following process. This led to a new paradox; how do

you open a democratic process to invite new voices without letting your own voice be silenced? (Ospina et al, 2004; 62) A similar situation is described by Williams et al (2006) who conclude that, in order to be accepted, action researchers sometimes take on roles that has little to do with what they perceive as research. This can lead to a situation where researchers feel that they are used as resources by organizational members in ways that blur their identity and make it hard to focus on research.

In the example presented by Arieli et al (2009), based on action inquiry methods, the researchers wanted to start with an inquiry process before rushing in to action. The practitioners however suggested immediate action and showed less interest in the method or process. They felt that the researchers did not listen to them, and they did not see the point of the process suggested by the researchers. This was by the researchers interpreted as a lack of commitment to the research process. Another way to describe the situation is to say that the community members said that they would engage/ participate in research, but acted according to another logic when the concrete research activities were taking place. This reaction was based on cultural differences and misunderstandings as well as on a feeling of being dominated by the researchers. The paradox of participation is in this case defined as a situation in which action researchers, “acting to actualize participatory and democratic values, unintentionally impose participatory methods upon partners who are either unwilling or unable to act as researchers” (Arieli et al. 2009; 275).

As we can see the paradoxes seem to be related to questions concerning who is given the power to define the project, and on whose terms the project is conducted.

My own project is interesting in contrast to the two examples discussed above. In this text I have been able to reflect about my situation. The project plan was written in collaboration between us and thus became more of a joint product. In this way the end result was an ambiguous project plan, but the process was democratic in the sense that no party alone got to define the problem and the activities within the project. When the project plan was implemented, the project took a pragmatic and action- oriented turn. I was invited to participate in action. I communicated a willingness and an interest in doing so, and I clearly saw the point of letting the project begin with action. I also saw my own participation in action as a valuable way to get knowledge about the subject under investigation. When it came to performance I showed a hesitation and a lack of commitment. I said that I was willing

to engage in action, but I kept suggesting calls for reflection and more traditional research approaches. I also had a strong feeling of losing my own voice. The paradox is played out again.

Below the paradox is summarized from the perspective of the researcher and the practitioner, based on experiences from the three examples presented above.

**Researcher participating on practitioners terms**

**Practitioners participating on researchers terms**

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Initial condition

See the value of action as part of the research process

See enquiry/ reserach as an important part of the development of practice

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Paradoxical consequences

Researcher feels like a pawn in the game of the practioner, performing activities that has litte to do with knowledge production as defined by the researcher (William et al, 2006)

Practioner feels like a pawn in the game of the researchers, performing activities that has little to do with knowledge production as defined by the practioner (Arieli et. al, 2009)

The voice of the reseracher is silenced or self sensed (ospina et. al, 2009)

the practitioner feel he/ she is ignored by the researcher (Arieli et. al, 2009)

Dont understand the point or purpose of the activities

lack of clarity about roles and the task (Ospina et. al, 2004)

Feelings

Feel unexperienced or uncapable of taking responsibility for action

Feel unexperienced or uncapable of taking responsibility for research

In a situation with a different and unusual logic

In a situation with a different and unusual logic

Lack of control

Lack of control

Sense of being observed

Common reactions

Anxiety and hesitation

Lack of commitment

Foot dragging

Frustration

There seem to be ways to overcome the paradoxes that can result from a situation where different logics or meaning systems are combined in a research process. One alternative is that one party (researcher or practitioner) distance him/ herself from her own cultural setting in a radical way. This however seem to imply a separation of action from research. This seem to be the case when a practitioner break with their professional identity and get a research position in the academy where he/ she gets the opportunity to reflect upon her/ his previous actions (see for example Johansson, 1997). Another alternative is for the researcher to break with the academy and totally engage in action. Johannisson (2002) suggest this method and he performs it in a project that he himself initiates, aswell as take full responsibility over (Johannisson, 2005). Only afterwards, after the project is terminated does he engage in reflection over the process. This method seem however to be possible only in a situation where the researcher can distance him/ herself from the academy in a radical way. For me as a doctoral student such a distance was hard to uphold. For example, I was expected to hold research seminars on my text. This invited me and my fellow colleagues to reflections over action. I could not rest with the notion of knowledge in action alone. Thus for me, the paradox emerged.

To my relief it seem to be possible to embrace the paradox as something productive and interesting. It can be seen to be an important part of the AR process, a part that deserves attention and reflection. A part that should be discussed, not silenced or avoided. By confronting the paradox I get to know myself and 'the other' (my partner), and we can discuss our respective contribution to the process. The combination of our different logics seem more interesting to me, although it produces paradoxes, than the domination of one logic over the other. My conclusion is thus the the paradox of participation in AR is something productive and good, and that it takes extraordinary measures in order to avoid it. If it is avoided the explanation seem to be either that one part is dominating the other without bringing up the subject to open discussion, or that one party have the ability to distance him/ herself from his/ her own cultural context in a radical way.



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