CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

Emancipation or symbolic participation: How can we 'do' action research as a democratic process?

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Abstract
Background: Action research is a democratic research process characterised by collaboration. There is a commitment to change that is emancipatory to the research participants in the practical field.
Aims and objective: Explore how action research can be developed as a democratic process following the theoretical perspectives of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas by discussing: 1) mutual understanding and communicative competence; 2) critical reflection and emancipation.
Conclusions: The researcher needs to facilitate a dialogue that opens up established assumptions and interpretations to question the validity of claims to 'truth' that facilitate a critical reflexivity among the participants. The ideal position of the researcher is that as an interpreter, she goes into the research situation without the aim of change, and is only interested in achieving an understanding of the meanings of the actual situation through the judgment of claims of validity.
Implication for practice: Researchers need to implement an action research approach with an emancipatory intention, as research guided as a democratic process allows for an extended understanding of the facilitator's role in practice development. Both the researchers and participants need to be sensitive to power relations and make reflexivity explicit, while conducting the learning process in a Socratic manner that encourages participation and self-reflection.

Introduction
There has been an increasing interest in action research in practice development within healthcare over the last two decades (Holter and Kim, 1995; Ward and McCormack, 2000; Fontana, 2004; Borg et al., 2010). An assumption in action research is that practice development building on knowledge generated through practice experiences becomes possible as a result of emancipation through participation in research (Wilson and McCormack, 2006; Reason and Bradbury, 2006). Systematic approaches in practice development therefore place an equal emphasis on the processes and outcomes among the participants, with skilled facilitation of the process representing one of the many factors influencing practice development (Harvey et al., 2002; Dewing, 2008). The primary goal of transformation driven by the research participants makes collaboration a central topic, in which the core characteristics of collaboration between researcher and participants are seen as a democratic process. Even so, there are challenges and dilemmas concerning the question of power

in the research collaboration, and important issues are the role of the researcher and the balance of power between the researcher and the participants (Löfland et al., 2004; Ladkin, 2004).

In order to realise the emancipatory intention, participation must be based on democracy and participants' involvement as equal members. Participation is purely symbolic if the participants are invited to collaborate but underlying interests do not serve democracy and a balanced power between the researcher and participants (Borg et al., 2012). Hence, it seems necessary to carefully and systematically reflect on the preconditions of research collaboration as a democratic process. The objective of this essay is to explore the context and aspects of collaboration aimed at being a democratic process embedded in action research. We will investigate how action research can be guided as a democratic process following the theoretical perspectives of Jürgen Habermas. The pluralistic landscape of action research will not be treated from a methodological perspective in this essay. We will explore the ways in which the democratic research process is approached, rather than the methods of data collection that define critical studies.

The philosophical position of Habermas
Habermas' philosophy offers an internal congruency to action research in the emancipatory position in theory development (Kim and Holter, 1995).

The philosophical position of critical theory is in the hermeneutic and humanistic roots of science. For its part, positivism attempts to explain and control the social world, and pays little attention to contextual issues. From Habermas' position, the humanistic approaches seek to gain an understanding of the context-specific nature of the patterning of the empirical world and its meaning, and also reveals the importance and influence of political-ideological contexts. This contextual, relational approach to science moves beyond explanation and creates opportunities for empowerment and change. The participants' self-reflection is integral to critical social science, as it focuses on the participants' own meanings and interpretations, while reflexive methodology is concerned with the importance and role of interpretation and reflection during the research process. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) reject positivist assumptions about a single reality and the possibility of objective knowledge. A reflexive approach also recognises that research findings are the result of the complex interaction between the researcher, the research process, contexts and the empirical material.

The need for emancipatory research within healthcare
Healthcare is typically carried out in contexts that are essentially value based and political (Warner, 2003), and nurses' understandings of their caring mission are challenged by today's political contexts in health delivery systems that are rooted in New Public Management. New Public Management is typically defined as a neo-liberal thinking and practiced in the modernisation of public care provision. This policy emphasises productivity and organisation of services in a more efficient and cost effective manner (Bjornsdottir, 2009). The dominance of economic issues and discussions in healthcare influence healthcare practices, and even has the potential to increase unintended patient harm (Heggen and Wellard, 2004). The nurses in clinical practice have the overall responsibility for care, but maintain a limited control over the various administrative procedures and financial budget, and are usually not in a position in which they can act as agents of change. Although they do not have the power and control, they are still expected to be ethical, and there is a growing recognition in the literature that moral distress is a significant issue for nurses (Bakken et al., 2002; Elpern, 2005; Rose and Glass, 2008; Sumner, 2010). In action research, the researcher attempts to support and guide the practitioners in identifying and making explicit fundamental problems, by first raising the collective consciousness (Holter and Schwartz-Barcott, 1993). By understanding the impact of New Public Management, nurses can better focus their practice in order to meet the diverse needs of patients and their caregivers (Bjornsdottir, 2009). Action research is therefore useful in studying the

socio-political context of health and healthcare, together with highlighting ethical ways to practice healthcare (Borg et al., 2012).

Habermas' perspectives of the democratic process
Critical theory aims to produce a particular type of knowledge that seeks to encourage emancipatory interest through a critique of consciousness and ideology (Habermas, 1971; Carr, 2000) The democratic process is the way collaborators make democracy happen in realising the emancipation of its participants, and Habermas described emancipation as a process achieved through mutual understanding, communicative competence and critical reflection (Habermas, 1984). In the discussion on how we can 'do' action research as a democratic process, we will now emphasise two aspects: 1) mutual understanding and communicative competence; 2) critical reflection and emancipation.

Mutual understanding and communicative competence
Action research is based on participants' involvement and influence, and accepts that the transformation of social reality and knowledge development cannot be achieved without engaging the understanding of the participants (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000; Borg et al., 2012). Communicative action is the type of social interaction that is oriented towards understanding, and as Habermas sees it, anyone acting communicatively must do so by speech, thereby raising universal validity claims which suppose that they can be vindicated or redeemed. Thus, within Habermas' position, a condition for understanding is that the researcher is drawn into the process of assessing validity claims through discourses. In other words, the researcher must engage in a dialogue that opens up established assumptions, is open to the plurality of meanings and interpretations, and questions the validity of single claims to 'truth'. It is essential that the researcher understand the validity claims of the participants in the sense of making clear the implicit reasons that enable participants to take the positions that they take. The researcher does not take for granted what the other participants do, and views her/his perceptions as a possible mirror to encourage reflection among the participants. In this way, the researcher encourages discussion with the participants of the underlying assumptions and values, hence inviting the practitioners to critically reflect on their practice.

Ideal speech can be described as a discourse in which there is a genuine symmetry and reciprocity among the participants involved, and where one attempts to equalise domination. The ideal position of the researcher is that as an interpreter, she/he enters the research situation without the intention of change, and is only interested in obtaining an understanding of the meanings of the actual situation through the judgment of validity claims. The ideal situation of course is not the 'real situation'. According to Habermas, power issues may interfere with communication, and he draws a line between self-reflection/communication and causality/technical rationality. We hereby acquire a distinction between two separate and irreducible forms of human action: a) communicative action, which is understanding -/other-oriented, and b) strategic action, which is successor -/control oriented (Habermas, 1971). The causality/technical rationality is in focus when Habermas discusses the researcher's power in a strategic position. If there is a predominance of strategic action, the researchers are primarily interested in the consequences or outcomes of their actions, and the values of control therefore become dominant. In this position the researcher's own success will be the ultimate aim, as the researcher will try to influence the participants' definition of the situation, using her/his perceptions as a battering ram to force her/his perceptions on the participants. The researcher's making a judgment in the discussion may bring forth a situation of unreflectively imposing an alien standard, thereby eclipsing the values of understanding and missing the point of a practice.

To emancipate means to free oneself from the power of someone else, and is closely connected with the concept of participatory democracy (Boog, 2003). The relationship between the researcher and the participants is therefore crucial for the success of action research as an emancipation activity. Participation can only be deemed democratic if the collaboration has the potential for emancipation; otherwise it is only symbolic. The critique of action research collaboration has been seen as 'masking subtle exploitation' (Hart and Bond, 1995; Löfman et al., 2004).The danger of symbolic participation and exploitation arise as researchers view others as the objects of their change, rather than having the participants' needs and concerns as a starting point. If not, the emancipatory vision guides the project from the beginning; symbolic participation and exploitation can be seen if the researchers use the project for their academic achievements, implementing their own agenda and not being genuinely concerned about the participants' work situation (Löfman et al., 2004). Involving the participants from the beginning of the process is a prerequisite for achieving an equal balance of power between participants and researchers. The claim in this paper is that involving participants is by no means a matter of sharing information with the participants or applying theory in the change process in a technically strategic manner. Participatory research engages in empowering processes that transform the subject-object relationship of traditional science into one of subject–subject. There are several challenging aspects associated with the researcher's role in relation to different tensions in the 'outsider' and 'insider' models in action research (Titchen and Binnie, 1993). One reason for the lack of harmony and equality in real situations may be when the researcher enters the field as an 'outsider' with expertise in theory and research, but with no embedded knowledge of the concrete field, and this expertise usually reflects a specific field of study or a particular theoretical perspective. The researcher can typically be seen as holding the power because of a knowledge base, membership in the intelligentsia and by being in control of research agenda (Löfland, 2004). Consequently, this may contribute to the participants feeling threatened, thus making it difficult to establish the precondition for the process of interpretation. We need to be aware that action research is ideally democratic in the sense that conditions for investigating validity of knowledge claims are also the conditions for democratic participation in critical discussion (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Emancipation of the participants also involves using knowledge and dealing with feelings about oneself. Reflection enables the participants to explore and understand their actions and collectively emancipate and act on new perspectives (Borg et al., 2012).

Critical reflection and emancipation

In order to understand critique and how it is guided by an emancipator's interest, we will turn to Habermas' discussion of the psychoanalytic model of therapeutic interpretation. Habermas accepts that all understanding involves prejudgments. In Habermas' meta-theory, the inherent goal, however, is to reach beyond the interpretation to the level of emancipation. The emancipatory approach is concerned with revealing and overcoming oppressive cultural practices, with the emphasis here being on bringing to the surface the underlying value system, including norms and conflicts that may be at the core of the problems identified. In Habermas' systematic attempt to articulate and justify critique as a distinctive form of knowledge with its own epistemological integrity, he goes to Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis (Habermas, 1971). Psychoanalysis incorporates methodological self-reflection, and its interpretation is directed to the various ways in which the patient fundamentally and systematically may possibly fail to grasp the significance of the symptoms from which she/he suffers. Psychoanalysis goes beyond the art of hermeneutics insofar as it must grasp not only the meaning of a possibly distorted text, but also the meaning of the text distortion itself. The success of therapy ultimately depends not on the analyst's understanding of the patients, but on the extent to which by her/his own self-reflection, the patient can appropriate this analytic understanding and dissolve her/his own resistance. The analyst is concerned with helping the patient to overcome suffering, and can only achieve this by helping to raise the patient's consciousness. The psychoanalytic model illustrates a form of knowledge that exhibits the essential features of critique, which is a form of knowledge guided by an emancipatory interest that requires a

depth interpretation achievable only through an analysis of self-formative processes leading to a transformed consciousness (Bernstein, 1976).

In action research, the researcher needs to offer a process of in-depth self-reflection among the participants. The success of change does not simply depend on the researcher's understanding of the situation, but on the degree to which the participants can raise their level of understanding by their own self-reflection to help dissolve their own resistance. In the context of critical reflection, reflexivity is argued to be a deeper and broader dimension of reflection (Finley, 2002). Reflexivity is a hallmark of excellent qualitative research that entails the ability of researchers to acknowledge and take account of the many ways they themselves influence research findings, thereby affecting what comes to be accepted as knowledge. In critical reflexivity, the researchers engage in an explicit, self-aware analysis of their own role, as well as that of the participants. In so doing, the researcher evaluates how intersubjective elements influence data collection and analysis (Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity in action research can be understood as an epistemological issue, but is also a question of a researcher's facilitation role in action research.

Conclusions and reflections

In action research, the researcher and the research process are both essential parts of the transformation effort. In the process of developing an action research project, it is crucial to reflect over and understand the researcher's role as an integrated part of the overall design (Creswell, 2009). We have explored the question of how can we 'do' action research as a democratic process by discussing: 1) mutual understanding and communicative competence; 2) critical reflection and emancipation. The conclusion is that democratic processes require a free and rational communicative action that is as free from manipulation and rigid frameworks as possible. The researcher needs to facilitate a dialogue that opens up established assumptions, is open to the plurality of meanings and interpretations and questions the validity of single claims to 'truth'. The researcher needs to understand the validity claims of the participants in the sense of making clear the implicit reasons that enable participants to take the positions that they take. Furthermore, we claim that the researcher must facilitate a critical reflexivity among the participants. Research conducted from a critical perspective poses two challenges to researchers: 1) the validity of the research must be ensured; and 2) the emancipatory aims of the research need to be realised and communicated. The traditional view of reflexivity as a means of ensuring validity in qualitative research limits its potential to inform the research process (McCabe and Holmes, 2009). We consider reflexivity not only as a concept of qualitative validity, but also as a 'tool' for the research process to achieve the goals of emancipation and change. Many researchers use the concept of 'facilitator' to capture all of the practical, methodological, theoretical, analytical, pedagogical, and teaching skills of the researcher (Boog, 2003). Action research is an organised effort aiming at emancipation and needs a facilitator to challenge presuppositions, explore alternative perspectives and transform old ways of understanding. For this purpose the facilitator needs strategies and skills to go beyond symbolic participation and a rhetoric way of doing action research (Borg et al., 2012). This paper may offer a theoretical contribution to the discussion of the facilitator's role in emancipatory practice development. The Promoting Action on Research Implementation in Health Services framework represents the interplay and interdependence of the many factors that influence practice development within healthcare (McCormack et al., 2002). This framework proposed that facilitation has a key role in guiding the participants' understanding of what and how they need to change (Harvey et al., 2000). We claim that action research which is guided as a democratic process allows for an extended understanding of the facilitator's role in emancipatory practice development. In order to advance emancipation for both professional development and the research process, it seems necessary to make reflexivity explicit in emancipatory practice development.

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