Creating agency by research process – a reflection
By Mogens Lilleør

Abstract
In this study, I reflect on a 'research' process in an organization to get a firmer grip on how to practice research in a way that generates agency.

I start by identifying and characterizing three key concepts of agency: The capacity of meaning making involving many different sources, the capacity of reflexivity implying metareflexivity, and the capacity of action fostered by self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Then I analyse a service checkout process of the elderly sector in an organization with a focus on leadership, organization and values. The analysis is lending perspectives from 'interventive interviewing', 'positioning theory' and of course the concept of 'agency'.

As a final reflection, I try to draw some systemic lessons.

Setting the context
The context is the municipal reform in Denmark, more specific the merge of 7 municipalities and a part of a County.

I want to improve my own research practice. My focus is on agency, i.e. research practice that mobilizes the participants. I use the idea of systemic social constructionist research (SSCR) as a mirror of my own practice. It is a part of the SSCR ambition, that developing systemic insight should always create agency (Barge 2006:33). Now, for some years working as a consultant in a merging organization, I consider 'creating agency' an ongoing challenge. Often research processes is designed and practiced, perhaps unintended, in a way that positions the researcher as another milkmaid milking the informants giving only a little attention in return.

I want to explore the 'creating agency' phenomenon by analysing an intervention process from my practice, which in fact was not intended as an SSCR but was just initiated to get certain key persons informed, and to communicate the need of a certain change to other key persons.

My guiding perspective is: What kind of systemic research lessons concerning creating agency am I to draw by analysing an interventive process that intended to inform certain key persons and to communicate the need of a certain change to other key persons by positioning all participants in a certain reflexive way?

Agency – meaning making, reflexivity and action

First, though, I would like to be a little more precise on the concept 'agency'. Kevin Barge argues that it is fostering agency and building the capacity for meaning making and action that distinguishes systemic constructionist research from other forms of research. Research designs should promote the meaning making potential of the participants by moving them to adopt an observer position reflecting on their participation in the research and the meaning of it for their working life (Barge 2006:32-33). To me, following but perhaps twisting Barge a little, the constituents of agency are: 1) Capacity for meaning making. 2) Adopting an observer position. 3) Capacity for action. Let me elaborate:

1. SSCR should stimulate and develop the meaning making potential. Now, 'meaning' seems to have several sources (Lilleør 2005:1): Employees make sense in various ways: Some create meaning through 'face to face' work; some through experienced agreement with colleagues on the objectives, methodology and frameworks; some by experiencing a joint spirit with the management about the task; some by the scope of influence; some by experiencing progression in the work process; for some the primary source is that the task is manageable and familiar; some need that the work promotes individual self-development; and some get meaning by experiencing firm balanced connections between frames (time, finances, physical conditions), the goals and tasks to be solved and the overall vision. And surely there are more sources …

My point is, that meaning making often happens through more than one source at a time. To me, elaborating the meaning making potential therefore implies research-process designs allowing the participants to connect both horizontally and vertically to the social- and organizational environment by facilitating a variation of encounterings and shifts of perspectives that generate the possibility of exploring different sources.

2. The SSCR is a form of action research (Barge 2006:14). This means that the 'I' of the research is positioned right in the centre of the research (McNiff & Whitehead:15). This kind of research emphasizes that the researcher should act with self-reflexivity, recognizing himself being part of the system he is exploring, and recognizing he is affecting and transforming the system as well as he is affected and transformed by it. Even his research position is co-created (Barge 2006:5).

Research therefore implies that the researcher when observing the practice also is looking into own practice, reflecting and learning. Inspired by Maturana, I will say that neither should the researcher just be submerged in his research-practice nor be a submerged observer of a practice, but he should be a reflexive observer of a practice or of own practice, i.e. also observe his own observation of a practice or own practice (Maturana 2004:36). What happens in this position is that the researcher attains the domain of metareflexivity, following Luhmann, implying quite a complex operation all in one inducing: 1) a horizontal distinction that bounds the observed and thereby denotes it. 2) a vertical distinction between observer and observed. 3) a reflexive distinction between observer and observation (Lilleør 2008:6). Observing own observation of a practice or own practice might either be an act of self-reflexivity working in cognitive terms of understanding (Shotter 1999:10) or a relationally responsive activity conjointly producing conversations (Barge 2003:3) operating in a participatory perspective emphasizing presence and relations (Shotter 1999:10).

Research is traditionally practised in cognitive terms of understanding either in a positivist sense objectively collecting independent data or sometimes in a social constructivist sense perhaps without being aware that data is not only being constructed through analysis but also during the process of collecting them. My point is, that metareflexivity implies, that it is the observer that creates the distinctions and thereby is creating the data, and if there are more observers participating, i.e. more sources of data, the data is co-created. This might suggest applying methods of 'seeing and thinking with another's words in mind' (Hornstrup, Barge, Johansen 2008:8), i.e. the Withness thinking of John Shotter.

3. Building the capacity for action is central to SSCR. An important source is recognition (Barge 2005:33). Research processes generating the capacity for action imply designs that allow for the confirming of participants. This means, following Axel Honneth and his 'moral of recognition', mainly working in three dimensions of recognitionl (Honneth 2003:83ff): 1) A Kantian-Habermasian universal perspective expressed as the 'mutual respect for all people' with the paradigmatic example of 'dialogue free of domination', corresponding to 'self-respect' as self-relation, the source of which is ongoing confirmed moral sanity. 2) An Aristotelian concrete perspective expressed as 'caring for the other' with the mother-child relation as role model. Following Honneth this corresponds to self-confidence' as self-relation, the source of which is ongoing care. 3) A Communitarian perspective expressed by the community's valuing performances of individuals. Honneth emphasizes that the corresponding human self-relation is 'self-esteem' implying confirming individual skills, efforts and achievements.

My point is that if research processes should generate the capacity for action it implies designs that, understood in an organizational sense, should allow for these spheres of legality, emotional recognition and solidarity by facilitating affirmation of the participants' self-respect, self-confidence and self-esteem.

To sum up: agency implies a potential of meaning making, metareflexivity, and action. In one sense these concepts refer to the single individual: The more of the three competences present the more being in control, being motivated, being focused, the individual is. However, a group of people may also exercise meaning making, metareflexivity, and action collectively. Depending on individual competences, but not reducible to a single such, agency might be understood as an emergent phenomenon (Barge 2006:17,35), perhaps belonging to the group only and sometimes just as a tacit, practical knowledge.

Case and analysis – the story

Starting in January 2007, the merge has in 2008 entered its second phase.

The Executive Board has selected a number of areas in which there, with a metaphor from the men's room, are to be conducted so-called 30,000 km servicing with a focus on leadership, organization and values. Among the divisions selected is the elderly sector, whose organization has suffered from a vacancy of several management positions and therefore had operated with very large units, with the impact that employees experienced leadership as very remote. 2007 was very much marked by problems concerning lack of leadership in front, stories in the press about some citizens who did not receive the benefits they were entitled to, and increasingly an elderly sector, which threatened to break into two in terms of leadership style.

In January 2008, the Executive Board asked the HR sector to prepare a process that would shed light on causes and generate the knowledge needed to handle the problems. The primary objective was leadership. It was expressed in slogans like "Leadership must be in the ranks!".

It was not neutral to ask the HR sector to provide for the process. Our practice in HR became a topic in itself. One important concern was to create a process that generated the relevant insight and simultaneously was conducted in a way that made it easy for all to cooperate afterwards. Our ambition was that the process should be accepted and recognized as useful by all participants. To begin with, however, we were quite focused on generating our own insight. We decided therefore to recommend a process consisting of a series of individual interviews with the elderly sector's manager team conducted by HR (a colleague and me), and a member of the Board. Unfortunately, the process consisting of individual interviews could too easily be interpreted as a matter of informing on colleagues. The kind of insight we hoped to generate, however, was contrary to reports on individuals, patterns comparable to the already generated insight. We needed an overall picture of the potentials concerning values, leadership, and organization. So, unintended we were initiating a 'milkmaid research process'.

The process proposal was presented and reflected on at a 3-hour meeting with the manager team. The team agreed somewhat hesitating, and expressed the wish that the service checkout should be expanded into a genuine development process involving more employees of the elderly sector.

The individual interviews were conducted during February 2008. Now, though the checkout as such happened in the domain of production and to some extent was conceived as a milkmaid process, following Maturana (Hornstrup et al. 2007:21ff), by the set-up we created a domain with a certain reflexive atmosphere: Each interview was conducted as a process into four phases: Interview, witnessing, re-witnessing, and common reflection and dialogue. So, reflexivity was built into the process as forms of mirroring. The whole process was all along 'witnessed' in written language by an HR consultant, who 'recorded' the spoken words on a laptop. Somewhat contradictory, one might say, as we were pumping the interviewee for information our process facilitated the reflexivity of the individual.

Our idea was to qualify solutions by letting views develop. We therefore had decided to plan the process according to the principle of 'so many management layers represented as possible'; we wanted to facilitate reflexivity by inducing both horizontal and vertical perspectives, to begin with by letting a member of the Board participate in the interview process. Unintended this design simultaneously supported developing the meaning making potential of the participants.

We further fertilized this by a straightforward positioning the managers as metareflexive observers of the practice in the elderly sector and of their own practice. The managers should be lead to focus their thoughts on their own leadership by the so-called 'effective' questions, some of which are exemplified here: 1) If you were to tell X-municipality on the elderly sector, what would you tell? Following Tomm (Hornstrup, Tomm, Johansen 2008:6), I consider this a reflexive, hypothetic question, perhaps explorative and engaging, because it directs the attention of the storyteller towards some choices concerning the sort of organization he or she wants to be part of and the story might point out some relevant events, problems and challenges. 2) How do you see yourself as a manager in the municipality? The question invites to reflexivity that it contains the possibility of different perspectives and stories, and to draw in the organizational context. 3) How does your staff influence your leadership? The question is relational and invites to reflexivity, because it invites to reflect on oneself as a leader related to employees.

Some of the other questions we asked were situation-clarifying questions; some were additional-perspective questions (Hornstrup, Tomm, Johansen 2008:12ff). We also posed some contextual situation questions. No questions were addressing the meta-level directly. The answers, however, did not label so easy. The one and same question were answered from very different perspectives depending on the context of the interviewee.

After having ended the interview series, HR met with the Board member to share and analyse impressions and interpretations of the voices heard. This analysis culminated in a sketch for the further process, which was presented to and received well by the managers; however, two points were made: firstly, it was repeated with emphasis that the process should not only be a service checkout, but also foster development and progress; secondly, the sector commander took the opportunity to announce that she found it reasonable to be involved in the process as something more than just a source of information, she wanted to be part of the process management and planning. Unfortunately but unintended we had bypassed the sector commander, perhaps because of too much focus on the intentions of the Executive Board, i.e. on the gathering information. Somehow, the Board's positioning of the HR might have worked all too well?

According to Rom Harré et.al., within any practice, positioning simultaneously constitutes the positioner and the positionee in a certain way. This might happen tacitly or intentionally (Harré & Langenhove 2003:22-23). When the Board asked the HR to do the process, the Board positioned HR as co-responsible for providing a solution, simultaneously positioned itself as energetic and the managers in the elderly sector as problems to be dealt with. The Board placed itself in a position with a right to command, and placed the HR as one with a duty to obey, and as we in HR did not question the command it remained a clear example of 1.order positioning (Harré and Lan-

genhove 2003:20). If we had questioned the positioning, it would have become a reflexive positioning. We did not.

But now the sector commander questioned the positioning and thereby turned a 1.order positioning of HR into a reflexive positioning. This might indeed be seen as a consequence of a so far successfully conducted process, i.e. the process of positioning the manager team as reflexive observers of own practice, but we did not see it that way at the time.

Instead, we focused on whether we were generating a counterproductive process, i.e. of what Kierkegaard called 'demonic'? Demonic is roughly when an action works against its own intention, i.e. the more you work to promote an issue the further away from it you get either because you use the wrong reasons or the wrong means (Kierkegaard 1964:126ff.). We might have been so blinded by our objectives that we self-sufficiently chose the wrong means disregarding other perspectives? This would be no good for the process, for the possibility of obtaining the intended results, and for the future cooperation. Then our focus shifted. Was this not a sign of agency? Analysing in a Honneth-perspective, one could easily imagine that the trouble of the elderly sector, the pressure, the announcement of the service checkout had lowered both self-esteem and self-confidence by the employees and the manager team. Now, perhaps the process as it moved forward were restoring the capacities, and we were experiencing sheer agency? As a result of our considerations, HR gave the sector commander an unreserved apology, agreed immediately on a planning meeting at which the rest of the process was co-created and decided.

It came to consist of a series of focus group interview processes, which explicitly had the dual purpose of insight and mobilizing the participants. The processes were guided by the intention to move the participants from an 'I' to 'we' perspective through three different types of interviewing workshops focusing on facilitating both self-reflexivity and relational reflexivity; i.e. leaving the 'milkmaid'-attitude behind operating in a participatory way facilitating conjointly produced stories of the future elderly sector. HR conducted some and then the elderly sector took office and boosted the process, planning and conducting several following the same model.

The manager team afterwards gathered all interview material and let it form the basis of their decisions about changes in management structure and organization. During August 2008, the proposals were presented to the participants in the process, and afterwards to all teams where the changes were presented and discussed with the employees. In September 2008, the Executive Board approved the proposals.

Final reflections – some systemic lessons to be drawn

What kind of systemic research lessons concerning creating agency am I to draw from such a process?

> "Systemic constructionist research is action research that is aimed at generating the capacity of the inquirer (I-search), the abilities and resources of the co-researchers (You-search), and the capacity of the inquirer and co researcher to work collaboratively (We search)." (Barge 2008:6)

We did not aim at generating the capacity of the inquirer as such; though no doubt some of the incidents described above actually have made us perform much better, concerning preparation of research processes and involvement. Among other things, to me, it has meant being very conscious of the importance of securing that the relevant participants are positioned as agents from the beginning.

We did to some extent aim at generating the abilities and resources of the co-researchers, though not strictly in focus from the beginning. But, no matter what intention, we succeeded in creating processes that promoted agency. Perhaps one important indicator of this was the fact that the elderly sector took office. Agency implies capacity for meaning making, reflexivity, and action. To me, there is no doubt that most of the participants myself inclusive, experienced stimulation of all three capacities,- and the sector commander as well. Perhaps there were plenty of potential in the elderly sector beforehand; plenty of will and desire, but what was needed was concurrent minds and the sight of a destination? I think the process made way for the co-creation of that.

I wonder, however, what was the role of the bypass? Perhaps it was experienced as a violation of self-esteem, i.e. lack of appreciation of skills, efforts, and achievements of the sector commander hitherto? And what was the role of the excuse in creating the agency? Perhaps it worked as a rectification, a recovery of self-esteem, and perhaps it also was experienced as an act of care, which together with the experience of the actual processes, how such processes might be done in practice, were fostering self-confidence?

We did aim at generating the capacity of the inquirer and co-researcher to work collaboratively. Right from the start, we were quite clear on the fact that what ever we did we had to continue our co-existence in the organization afterwards. We entered the task with the feeling that we ought to be more than just professionals when conducting the process and handling the mistakes, we surely would make. I think we did quite well after all.

From the start, the agent was the Board addressing the HR, and then the Board and HR together were addressing the Elderly Sector, but soon after the HR and Elderly Sector acted together, ending with the Elderly Sector as sole agent.

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