Towards a Future-oriented Interactive Research

The need for deliberating about future states and power consequencies

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The interactive researcher as a future-oriented advocatus diaboli

In this article we perceive the role of the interactive researcher as a *'future-oriented advocatus diaboli'[1]*. As such, the researcher does not only consider the past and present, but act vis-à-vis future actions. Concerning past events, the researcher act as a traditional advocatus diaboli in order to judge specific events, motives and actions. Respecting current and future events the researcher presents different courses of actions and the possible outcomes – will future actions in a specific scenario be useful or harmful as means to achieve specific ends? When presenting scenarios, the researcher should celebrate values considered as noble and condemn values considered as shameful, since they implicitly affect future actions. In this way, value-rationality becomes as important as instrumental rationality when future actions are to be considered (Weber, 1978). The challenge for the interactive researchers is thus to balance between the prescriptive status of expertise. While doing so legitimise their own voices, and put forward trustworthy narratives about social processes and what is likely to happen in the future that can contribute to the public debate. In this section we will argue for this way of looking by relating it to how other has described the role of the interactive researcher.

The point of departure in this article is the more or less obvious and since long established fact that roles are social constructions. Berger & Luckmann (1966) explain that the origins of any institutional order lie in the typification of one's own and others' performances. They continue to describe how typifications result in a linguistic objectification and an experience of roles. From the perspective of Berger & Luckman, a role represents an institutional order in itself. Institutions are embodied in individual experience by means of roles. The roles objectified linguistically are in essence ingredients of the objectively available world of any society. By playing roles the individual participates in the social word. By internalising these roles, the same world becomes subjectively real to him. Thus they argue that this is especially the case for some roles more than others are. Some roles, for example the roles of researchers and practitioner, represent the societal order of modernisation in its totality more than others and also represent the integration of institutional development. The typification 'interactive researcher' is however overall and vague, consequently the typification must be clarified and elaborated, which we now will do.

An increased interest by social researcher in researchers role and research utilisation began in the U.S. in the middle of the 1960's, and has continued to increase since then (Albæck, 1988). Weiss (1977; 1979) study research utilisation within public policy, and she is probably the researcher most referred to. Weiss doesn't explicit write about different role for the researcher but implicitly she does. According to Weiss, research has the following five functions for the user: (1) Instrumental - the actor uses research as a "manual" in finding solutions for arising problems, and the role of the researcher is implicit an '*expert*'. (2) Political - here the actor uses research selectively to support his/her own previous opinions. The role of the researcher is here understood as a '*passive agent*' ownerless of her own persuasive arguments. (3) Interactive - research is used together with other knowledge and are mixed together in order to give new knowledge. The researcher is here one of many '*dialogue partners*'. (4) Tactical – research is used to direct attention away from other problems, i.e. to start an investigation in order to win time. Similar to political, the role is also here a '*passive agent*'. (5) Conceptual – research is used in order to get a new perspective on the previous situation. The tacit role is more than a dialogue partner is; rather does the researcher '*inspire and educate*' the

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[1] Advocatus diaboli in the Roman church examines testimonies and other evidence in order to assess whether earlier practitioners of the faith should be regarded as sinners or saints.

practitioner. Weiss argues that it is difficult to define use in a concrete fashion. She states that it is more fruitful to view the social interaction between academic and practice as a communication process.

According to Weiss' empirical studies, a great majority of those interviewed used research consciously, but rather few could point out a pure instrumental use. The dominating usage was the conceptual function (Weiss, 1977). The reason that instrumental use is unusual is that such decision situations hardly ever occur in practice. Patton (1977) has come to a similar conclusion in his studies of evaluation research. A large majority of users felt that evaluations reduced their uncertainty, but few could report decided effects. The role of the interactive researcher is therefore often diffuse, subtle and indirect, more of an enlighten person than an adroit expert.

Donald Schön has described and analysed this diffuse, subtle and indirect role in his classic book 'The Reflective Practitioner' (Schön, 1983). The book describes the active dimension of knowledge in a number of professions – architects, psychotherapists, city planners and company managers – and from these cases have he theorises the 'knowledge-in-action'. His basic postulate is that our experiences are not consequences of something outside ourselves, i.e. the world, but that the world *as we experiences it* is a consequence of how we name and frame it, how we conceptualise it, and how we categorise it. The practitioner constructs the problems of their problematic situations through frames in which fact, values, theories, and interest are integrated, and the role of the scientist from this perspective is also to '*inspire and educate'*, to strengthen the reflective and reframing potential by the practitioners. Hereby the researcher help the practitioner to perceive, make sense, and act upon the process events that occur in the practitioner's environment in order to improve the situation as defined by the practitioner. How this sense making can be elaborated, especially in messy situations, has also been be developed by Karl Weick in a numerous of works (1979; 1995; 2002 – se also Lindblom & Cohen, 1979; Shotter, 1993)

In line with Schön, Weick is of the opinion that there is an intriguing interrelationship between reflection and sense making and that the two processes may be looked upon as complementary. In order to avoid the danger that practitioners may become overly dependent on their mental model to the extent that they fail to notice changes in their environment, sense making can facilitate the propensity for adaptation. Sense making can therefore be seen as a form of practical theorising, answering the question why are we doing this. According to Weick, sense making is about believing and doubting at the same time. The key feature of sense making is to retrospectively make sense. Sense making is both an input to and a product of the reflection process since reflection shape meanings and is also shaped by them. The role of the researcher is a '*sense giver afterwards'*

To the extent that these concepts - reflection and seesawing - are valid, they have important normative/prescriptive implications, namely that practitioners should periodically engage in processes of reflection and sense making, in order to challenge their otherwise taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions regarding the imperatives confronting their tasks, with a view to broadening their perceptions. The aim of such an exercise is to attain the requisite variety in examples necessary in order to anticipate the future and develop a strategically responsive sense.

In both Schön and Weick there seems to be little, if no, room for either power/conflict or prospectively sense making. What can possibly be the basis for resolving conflicts of frames

and sense making, when frames and sense making themselves determine what counts as evidence and how evidence is interpreted? How can the interactive researcher not only defend but also improve a value-based rationality and our way of living?

Bent Flyvbjerg (2001) introduces the concept 'phronetic social science' where power and consequences of relation of power constitute important constituents for the researcher. He argues, in line with Schön and Weick, that context and judgement is irreducible and central to understanding human action. In short, social science cannot produce reliable predictive theory because people do not exist in ideal settings; they cannot exist independent of context and time. Therefore social science should 'contribute to society's practical rationality in elucidating where we are, where we want to go, and what is desirable according to diverse sets of values and interests" (2001: 167), and the role of the scientist is to act in a *'prudential'* manner.

According to Flyvbjerg the practice of social science is vastly better at seeking practical and value-based insights about the fluid realm that is modern democratic society. This practice is derived from Aristotle's understanding of the role of scholarship, which can only be complete when one purposefully go beyond knowledge of the permanent nature of things – episteme - and the 'know how' knowledge derived from this - techne. Phronesis is practical wisdom, and refers to a reasoned, and capable of action with regard to things that is good or bad for mankind Flyvbjerg sees phronesis involving "judgement and decision made in a manner of virtuoso social and political actor (p.3). For a further discussion about the concept of phronesis (see also Beiner, 1983; Garver, 1987; Ricouer, 1978).

Flyvbjerg deals with the proposition that social science can matter when it employs a phronetic methodology that is informed by the understanding that power and its effects are ubiquitous in modern democratic society. The way of achieving this is to answer three value-based questions (2001: 60): (1) Where are we going? (2) Is it desirable? (3) What should be done? Flyvbjerg proposes that social science has the aim of holding up "a mirror to society thus encouraging and facilitating reflexivity, just as Aristotle wanted us to do in practising phronesis" (2001: 64). A reformed social science, however, must also incorporate an explicit consideration of power within a phronetic methodology. One other question must therefore to be asked, "Who gains, and who loses, by which mechanisms of power?" (2001: 145). Flyvbjerg's argument is that social science matters more when it acts "to contribute to society's capacity for value-rational deliberation and action" (2001: 167).

To sum up, Weiss, Schön, Weick and Flyvbjerg taught us that a value-free assessment would be literary worthless. Human systems become recognisable as more than machines only as they respect - or betray - valued norms like democracy or fairness, honesty or integrity, sense making or reasoning, or combinations of these. So all management and administration, all policy planning, all human action, depend not just on mechanical rule following, but on practical judgement too. In other words, the reflexive role of interactive researcher means to be aware that human practice is about construction in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty about what sense making really means. This, we mean, is manifested in the role of a 'future-oriented Advocatus Diaboli'.

The role of interactive research – front and backstage

In our analysis we use three themes in order to understand how we, as interactive researchers, act when participating in development processes. Inspired by Erving Goffman, we report our experiences made both on arenas open to public scrutiny, 'front stage', and informal dialogues

between individual practitioners 'backstage' (Goffman, 1963). Thus, we will organise our analysis in two sub themes - the interplay between groups of practitioners and researchers on 'front stage' as well as on 'backstage'. As a third theme in our analysis we make some concluding remarks on social science contributions in practical development situations.

'Front stage' – believing in progress

There are usually government initiatives and development programmes involved when interactive researchers are invited to "do research" and "contribute to the process". Naturally, taking such initiatives means being optimistic about the outcome – the current poor state of affairs will change and the initiative will lead to progress. As an academic counterpart it is nearly impossible to be invited as a pessimist, e.g. by referring to similar but unsuccessful initiatives in the past. Interactive researchers are not expected to solve the long term problems, but at least be optimistic, believe in and contribute to a successful outcome of the initiative. A variety of possible roles are waiting to be occupied – as evaluator, process supporter, researcher, catalyst, educator etcetera. The interactive researchers are expected to fill different roles depending on the counterpart, e.g. financiers want an evaluator, project members expect a process supporter and local government regard the researcher as an expert advisor. People outside academia are expected to fill other roles, as providers of infra-structural prerequisites, entrepreneurial activities, financing projects etc. Some of these people belong to Homo Developis - full time developers and professionals of different government supported development organisations – experienced developers on national, regional or local level, e.g. civil servants at the local or regional government development departments. Some are recruited momentarily – local businessmen, representatives of the civic society and university.

When the interactive researchers enter the 'front stage', the scene is already set. As a consequence, the problems are already defined and the solutions are taken-for-granted. All these people gather on the 'front stage' of the initiative – on seminars, in meetings, in steer committees and other arenas. Plans are presented and debated, actions and steps already taken are evaluated and new plans are created. Collective dialogues are arranged on these 'front stages', dialogues where the actors – as representatives of their organisations – get their legitimacy by acting according to their institutionalised roles. Alternative problems and solutions are suppressed.

There seems to be only room for *one future* on the 'front stage' and the controversies concern details how to make this future-of-formal-consensus come true in the best possible way. As a result, the front stage dialogue becomes monotonous and the pattern hard to change. In the end, the main task of interactive researchers is to give legitimacy to a project, even though they never really influenced or believed in it. As a 'dialogue partner' on the 'front stage', the interactive researchers normally act as storytellers of the past – what can we learn from history? As a result, they seldom give inspiration to conceptualise new ways of possible futures.

Backstage – doubting strategies in messy situations

Being the university part of a development process aiming at solving practical problems in society is a complicated matter in at least two aspects. The first is connected to the type of problem at stake. There are no simple solutions to the complex problem of organising development. As Weick (1995) argues, the character of the situations can best be described as ambiguous and changing, e.g. the nature of the problem is unclear and shifting, any one "problem" is intertwined with other messy and fuzzy problems. The development work can

seldom be guided by coherent and clearly defined goals, at least not in the long run. Hence, people involved are unsure what success in resolving the situation would mean. Collecting and categorising information becomes a problem in itself since information normally is incomplete, dubious and overwhelming. Actors develop multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations of data, relying heavily on personal or professional values. As a result, people use symbols or metaphors to express their points of view. In addition, people involved do not understand the relation between causes and effects. Even if they are sure what effects they desire, they are not sure how to obtain them. Therefore, the situation often develops to emotional and political clashes between actors. The mess becomes even stronger as key decision-makers constantly leave and enter the decision arena and thereby change what is to obtain, what goals to strive for etc.

However, this mess presents itself to the interactive researchers on 'backstage'. The doubts of what is presented on the 'front stage', with different views of problems and solutions, can only be discussed informally, in 'small talk' between individuals, e.g. an interactive researcher and a professional developer. Here, the dialogue can be more alive, filled with personal reflections of what have been learned, doubts of what happens front stage, insights of what causes the problems at stake and how little we know how to solve them. Sometimes we even get reports of bad feelings when self-reflecting on 'front stage' performance and occasionally also presentations of fragments of other ways of conceptualising the future. This is the second aspect of the intertwined problem in being an interactive academic counterpart when trying to contribute to development. 'Backstage', practitioners of development give researchers different and often conflicting views of what is going on, what the problems are and what causes them, what the goals are, what information is valid and invalid, which solution is desirable etc. Furthermore, practitioners can also report of hidden power-in-action agendas, where mighty constellations of power elites set the scene with the play and the plot, the players and the solution of the drama. Flyvbjerg (2001) tells us how he found out about the constellation that set the scene for Aalborgs inner city planning with the informal motto "the car is the king" and not the pedestrians or bus passengers.

On the 'backstage', situations can be compared, thus building a base for informed judgment as a kind of wisdom (Sakaiya, 1991). Continuous sense making is the result when actors mix guidance from the past with alertness to the non-routine in the present (Weick, 2001). Backstage, discussions guided by past events and the non-routine present together with comparisons of situations often take place. Thus, in 'small talk', and contrary to what happens on 'front stage', the interactive researcher can be helpful as a speaking partner, a co-reflecting sister or brother, where doubts of what the problem is and what popular solutions will lead to.

We argue that interactive researcher can play a more constructive role than just being speaking partners on backstage and historic storytellers on the front stage. How can we break the pattern where interactive researchers comment on the past while practitioners shape the future? How can interactive researchers take part in framing the future? Since researchers are far from being gods, we cannot look into the future and tell what will happen in the context-depending social world. But we can contribute in another way as presented below.

Concluding remarks

Finally, inspired by recent debate how interactive research can contribute to practical issues, e.g. the NFF Conference held in Reykjavik 2003, we will here argue for a new role for the interactive researcher when trying to contribute to progress in the society. In this concluding section we will return to Flyvbjerg's three questions and general recommendations that ended

our theoretical frame of reference. These three questions were (1) Where are we going? (2) Is it desirable? (3) What should be done? The fourth question added – about winners and looser – focus on the consequences of changing power relations, but it could be included in the second question and therefore we keep on discussing the three original questions.

The questions are related to each other in at least two aspects. First, the questions are related in a time sequence - question number one has to be answered in some way before number two can be dealt with and question number two is an input to question number three. Second, the more time we spend on one of these, the less time will be allocated to the others. Our experience is that we allocate too much time to prepare the first question "where are we going" by trying to answer the historic pre-question "what has happened?" We strive to give a scientific credible answer to that pre-question, but it takes a lot of time, since we need to understood the local history, the context and the processes and compare the insights with general knowledge. Not until the end of our engagements we start to work with the first of Flybjerg's questions "where are we going", but then time has run out.

The scenario method could be a way of helping us with the three questions. In contrast to traditional planning techniques, which seek to forecast the future in probabilistic terms, in an attempt to plan for a predetermined future, scenario method seeks to develop a series of stylized portraits of the future which capture what may or may not happen (van der Heijden, 1996). Thereby the method provides a basis for developing a capacity for dealing with the various contingencies so identified, and thus directly incorporate uncertainty and values within the analysis. With the help of two or more scenarios, future conditions can be anticipated – question number 1. Consequences are described and deliberated including changes in power relations – question number 2. Finally some ideas are proposed concerning what to do in the very near future to reach more distant and desired futures – question number 3.

Flyvbjerg recommends research to be based on thick case studies helping us to see the dynamics of power structures. However, it is a big step between understanding historical and present dynamics on the one hand and to make a prognosis of future dynamics on the other. Starbuck (2003) urge interactive researchers to be braver and make more prognostic research. Historical analysis, i.e. to understand how we arrived to a certain state, could be done accurately with several theories. However, first when we make a prognosis, we really have to select and explicitly exploit one theory of dynamics.

Leijon & Ohlsson (2001) has used the scenario method when evaluating research units. Instead of ending an evaluation report with recommendations, which were considered intellectually poor, three scenarios of possible future states were constructed, as well as their consequences and ideas of action in order to reach desirable future condition. This functioned as what Flyvbjerg regards as "a mirror to society thus encouraging and facilitating reflexivity" (Flyvbjerg, 2001:64). However, the scenario method is built on not one mirror but several mirrors. Just one mirror can be a tool which seduces more than reflects and the result will often be a superficial consensus. Two or more mirrors forces both researchers and other actors to reflect on which scenario is the most accurate and desirable. Each proposed scenario often ends in a dynamic and future state that differs from other scenarios. For instance, the actors will probably see realistic parts in different scenarios and thereby increase their abilities to overcome obvious obstacles. In this paper we call interactive researchers playing such a role future-oriented Advocatus Diaboli

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