

WHEN INNOVATION, CHANGE AND FLEXIBILITY BECOMES THE PROBLEM

Sustainability through social research and through action research

Paper* presented on
THE ACTION RESEARCH CONFERENCE SEPTEMBER
2007, OSLO

Kurt Aagaard Nielsen, Lise Drewes Nielsen, Eva Munk Madsen og Katrine Hartman
Pedersen

Department of Environmental, Social and Spatial Change.
Roskilde University.

* The paper is based on a Danish article published in the journal Tidskrift for Arbejdsliv (2006, volume 8, nr. 2)

Superficial and volatile relations in working life become increasing subjective problems in modern flexible organisations. Among others Richard Sennett (1998 and 2003) and Ulrich Beck (2002) have lifted up that issue in social research (case studies and in general studies). From those studies it becomes clear that flexible work in the long run seems to have problematic subjective effects. Action research has played an important role in creating development organisations (Pålshaugen1998) and in strengthening participatory procedures in modern organisations. Action research has in other words been a part of the process towards modern flexible organisations driven by motives like dialogue, creative learning organisations and network based development. Recent Social and humanistic science delivers documentations for sustainability problems in the same dynamic transformation. Social exclusion, stress-symptoms new expression of illness (Nadja Prætorius 2007) can be seen as problems coming up in the wake of flexible specialisation and dialogue based organisations. Here we face a challenge to action research. How can action research become better to a) bring in the results from social and humanistic science in order to obtain sustainable innovations and b) to create arenas and dialogues that open up for deeper subjective dimensions in social learning connected to practice?

In two case-studies we run an action research project dealing with working environment for bus drivers and working environment for social servants working with disabled people. Work relations in both case studies can be characterised as extremely superficial and excessive. The employees experience as well a high degree of individuality and dialogue in their work functions as strong subjective strain related to constant change and to a working environment characterised by fluidity and contingency. In the case studies we combine survey analyses, discourse analyses and action research. The surveys and the discourse analyses give material and data about density of strain and about openings and closings in the institutional and personal language used in the interpretation of strains. We use that material in the action research dialogues to become aware of items we should give space and time and encouragement. We also find that the

action research can give a message back to other social science methods and guide screenings used in relation to occupational health and safety. We do not see the survey and the discourse analyses as contradicting action research – but as a partner for mutual learning. We think that social science and action research can cooperate in overcoming that challenge. Social science should be more involved or addressed to the specific dialogues about practical change in order to establish a more long-sighted mentality and orientation in the dialogue localities.

Introduction

This article comes out of research from a project called ‘Flexible and volatile relations in working life – an action research project for an improved and healthy working life’.¹ The project focuses on subjective adjustments to flexibility in working life, or, in other words, on how social learning in managing and opposing flexible and volatile relations in working life is developed.

The empirical field of the research project is ‘work with people’. More specifically two “branches” are investigated in the project, namely care assistants working with the handicapped and bus drivers. Within the framework of the project, a range of research questions are formulated as guiding points in the research process. In this article the following two questions are the most important:

- Are there forms of resistance against volatility and boundlessness at the subjective level?
- Is it possible through action research methods to improve limits to volatility and boundlessness?

This article primarily focuses on the conceptual and methodological discussions of the research project. We draw our attention to social science research which in our opinion challenge actual innovations and we try to design an action research which learns from a critical social science theory about flexibility.

The new strategies of flexibility (flexible working time, working places and work tasks) are, no doubt, here to stay. The strategies are a new common condition in modern working life. Based on a quantitative survey from 1999, the Danish researcher Agi Csonga estimated that approximately one quarter of all Danish companies were using ‘concepts’ of flexibility in their organisations (Csonga 1999), and it is likely that the share of com-

¹ The project is financed by The Danish Work Environment Fund and is carried out on Institute of Environmental and socio-economic planning on Roskilde University of Denmark. The Project is running three years starting from 2005. f

panies using flexible concepts has increased since then. Furthermore flexibility strategies also are used without being expressed in formalised concepts.

This brings us to a discussion on how flexibility influences social cohesion or 'the common good' (Daly & Cobb 1991). More specifically our ambition is to connect the influence of flexibility on working life (and companies) with the classical sociological question concerning social order. This article is a humble step towards developing that connection.

The article is structured as follows. Firstly the debate on flexibility is introduced, paying particular attention to Richards Sennet's sociological research on the matter. There then follows a presentation of how the conceptualisation of flexibility is developed further in the research project both theoretically as well as in empirical design – containing a model of action research. Finally, the concepts of flexibility and innovation through social learning, is placed in a societal context by relating to the concept of sustainability.

The debate of flexibility and innovation

Flexibility in working life is often related to the processes of constant change of time and space that companies face. Companies seem to be constantly changing. Hardly has one development process started when new changes are introduced. The consequences are increasing staff changeovers and lack of continuity and of social learning in the concrete work tasks. Explanatory reasons are that companies are reacting to social uncertainties such as continuing changes in management, changes in cooperating partners, changes in organizational structures, changes in business owners, outsourcing and changes in concepts of production.

Flexible adaptation in companies is understood as responses to externally generated social uncertainties. These uncertainties are closely related to other and more superior social trends such as globalization, the network economy, outsourcing systems and production chains relations. With regards to everyday life, the uncertainties reflect a more mobile and adaptable society. Theoretically, these assumptions are based on two main sources.

Flexibility is often interpreted as an organisational form as well in social science as in action research. In most of the literature flexibility represents changes in old organisational bureaucratic hierarchies and routines towards more flexible and adaptable organisational forms (Csonga 2000, Murphy 1996). However in this project, flexibility is interpreted as a more fundamental social trend. Flexibility is understood as a way – often dialogically - of handling externally generated social uncertainties in companies. We

consider that social uncertainties are a distinctive feature of flexibility rather than seeing flexibility as a chosen organisational form. Certainly there is no ambiguous relation between structural changes in the companies' environment and specific strategies for change. On the other hand, the ongoing process of adjustment to unpredictable changes in the environment in companies furthers the need for flexible strategies (Csonga 1999). Thus the concept of flexibility employed in the project is connected to theories about *the risk society* (Beck 1997, Giddens 1994, Luhmann 1993). This approach connects the working life aspects of flexibility to social problems, and in that way, improvements in working life involves more than business organisation as strategic actions. *Working life is becoming more political, meaning that flexibility is connected to the discourse on sustainability* (Nielsen 1996). If action research does not reflect those new conditions it will fail construction sustainable and democratic innovations. We return to this later in the article.

In most of the society-oriented flexibility research, flexibility has been studied in relation to time and space. The study 'Parents at the workplace' carried out by Helle Holt (1994) focuses on the gender related issues of working time flexibility. The study concludes that work time flexibility is more prevalent among men than women and that there are significant differences in the way the two genders use work time flexibility. Men more often than women uses flexibility to spend more time at work, more time on themselves and more time on each other. On the contrary, women are primarily using flexibility to improve care giving and domestic tasks in relation to the family. As we see it, the study shows gender specific potentials in relation to life outside work, but it is not yet very clear about more general trends in society.

A later study conducted by Agi Csonga (2000) focuses on the effect of flexibility on, among other things, the connection between work and family life. The study shows an interesting correlation between flexible working conditions and the hours actually worked: the more flexibility workers have in their employment relationship, the more time they spend at work. According to the study, this trend is true for both men and women. Csongas conclusions follow those of the work of Arlie Hochschild presented in the famous book 'The Timebind' (2001). In this book Hochschild intensifies the critique of the greediness of the new working life and its fatal impact on the kind of reproduction of cohesion in society that is constituted by family life.

The prevailing consensus is that the impact of new working relations on the creation of subjectivity in modern working life has been transformed within the last decade. Several researchers have attempted to conceptualize the social aspects of this transformation. The sociologist, Bauman, describes the trend by the concept of 'Liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000). According to Bauman's analysis everything is becoming liquid due to the melt down of the solid rhythms, structures and institutions in society. Traditional social institutions such as the family and work are dissolved and transformed. This

breakdown of the old patterns and communities leaves us to create and recreate human relations individually. We are, in other words, flowing through life by creating new social relations and by breaking down old ones. However Bauman also emphasises that the era of liquid modernity is only a temporary phenomenon. The liquidity and fluidity of social institution will become solid again, but in what form is still unclear.

Other social theorists have stressed that the speed of the changes in society differs from earlier eras of social transformation and at the same time the transformations are profound and thorough. It means that we as humans are 'on the move' or in rapid movement from place to place. Anthony Giddens (2000) sees this as a positive movement from community to community. Other social thinkers like Ulrich Beck have another and more pessimistic point of view: "*The standard biography becomes an elective or do-it-yourself biography, a risk biography. Work is 'chopped up' by time and contract. And there is also an individualization of consumption: that is individualized products and markets emerge*" (Beck 2000, 75).

In terms of research, theories on social trends in relation to business forms and development are however only slightly connected to flexibility and working conditions. Only social thinkers such as Beck (1997, 2000) and Sennet (1998) have in broad and not very empirically based terms investigated these social trends. Thus there is need to develop theories and concepts on flexibility understood as boundlessness, volatility and risk (see below). These concepts have neither empirically nor theoretically been fully developed yet.

In our opinion action research has not been able to improve a flexible innovation processes that could overcome the problem of fluidity and liquidity. So we must address "deeper" social science in order understand the sustainability challenges from flexible innovations. R. Sennett has a good approach that could inspire us in that challenge.

Sennet's views on flexibility

In the book 'Corrosion of Character' Richard Sennet introduces a new perspective on the relation between flexibility and social order (Sennet 1998). Sennet describes how trends in society transforms work itself and thereby influence societal cohesion. According to Sennet, the main influences on this process are:

First of all, organization of work has been managed by ideas about *flexible specialization*. The concept is a collective designation for the radical changes in work organization that is arising in the wake of the end of the Fordist and bureaucratic organizational structures. New, more elastic ways of adjusting work to the changing organizational

forms in capitalistic production is reflected in the demands for flexibilization of production.² The rapid changes in the organization of production and global restructuring are based on information technologies, but also originate in the changing principles for organizing production as concepts such as just-in-time, outsourcing, supplier base management, team work, human resource management etc. gain grounds.

According to Sennet, the constant changes organisations principles create waves of restructuring of production and work. Some concepts and principles become of practical importance for the development and transformation of work itself. Others are generated as management rhetoric with no actual importance for day to day work. In relation to the latter, specific changes or the managements' ability to create dynamic processes of change become an aim in themselves and thereby an expression of the managements' skills to create dynamic, drive and efficiency. Sennet's purpose is to stress that such management controlled transformations of organizations by itself creates ruptures that promote inefficiency in work. This is true both in the process of restructuring as well as in the following phase of implementation.

Furthermore, Sennet adds a *concept of power* to the analysis of the restructuring. Two types of power relations are in focus. *Firstly* the power relations in the specialized production unfolded in asymmetric power relations between contractors and sub-contractors. The power relations constitute the sub-contractors dependence on contractors' demands for supply security, keeping deadlines, prices etc. Often the outcome is that time pressure and uncertainty is pushed down the ladder to sub-contractors in the production chain systems, meaning that work at the sub-suppliers is exposed to strains of time and efficiency. *Secondly* the focus is on the power relations unfolded between the company and the workers. In the end, the problems surrounding flexibility often are individualized as a matter of each worker's capacity to deliver the flexibility demanded by the new forms of organizations. In particular, it is clear that power relations are questioned in relation to day to day work time. The individual time adjustment to the flexible organisations is organized on the terms of production and only seldom on the terms of the individual worker. Sennet leaves the perspective open on whether some types of work can be transformed as an advantage for the individual worker. There may be a division of workers into two groups; one benefiting from all the advantages of the flexible specialization and one suffering from all the drawbacks. In other words, the transformation can lead to a social polarization of the labour market.

² Sennet uses a metaphor for flexibility by describing the trees' capacity to both yield and recover. The lesson is that the tree gets stronger and more robust when exposed to the flexibility of the weather. By using this metaphor flexibility is defined positively as a sustainable type of concrete work. However Sennet's analysis of flexibility in today's society is focussing on variations of flexibility which contributes to weaken "the capacity of the tree to recover and restore after being exposed to windy weather".

The overall effects of flexibility are according to Sennet, that the subjective creation of work identity is suffering because changes are made from the perspective of demands rather than from the perspective of work. The reality of work is dominated by volatility and inconstancy making it difficult to give the creative function of work the same status as the demand. Work simply follows the rapid changes of demands, which can be understood as a response to a society putting the speed of change and constant satisfaction of new needs highest in the value hierarchy.

In this way Sennet looks for societal explanations of how flexible specialization has developed, he also looks for explanations of the personal consequences of the flexible transformation on workers and on their work. Altogether he has a critical view on the restructuring.

From an action research perspective, the debate on Sennet's critique of the flexible organizations however tends to be deadlocked. It almost invariably focuses on the individual organization, the company or systems of companies, and on how principles on organization develop through adjustment processes between workers and management. Flexibility becomes a matter of adjustments. *We want to turn the question around and ask if resistance to flexible innovations could be positive. Is it possible that lack of and resistance to flexibility also can be interpreted as a healthy sign that can be positively incorporated in relation to assessments of sustainability of flexibility?*

The following reflection on flexibility is based on Sennet's views on the transformations and focuses on the consequences on work, the relations in work and the impact on the subjective creation processes individually as well as collectively. But in contrast to Sennet we shall turn our attention to methodological – action research strategies to face the challenges from flexible innovation.

Flexibility understood as volatility and boundlessness

On an individual or subjective level Sennet's analysis is an essential contribution of inspiration to the conceptual perspective on volatility in our project. Sennet is not only emphasizing that flexibility creates inequalities between workers benefiting from the advantages and workers suffering from all the drawbacks. He even goes one step further and points out that flexibility creates ruptures in relations and rhythms in work, meaning that our experiences on creating permanent and stable communities in work gets ruptured. When work and work relations are simultaneously dominating many people's lives in terms of emotions and time, it has severe consequences for our development as human beings. Humans that do not live in permanent and stable communities are losing their personality. They lose a 'linear and cumulative narrative' that makes sense in life because it gives shape to the forward movement of time, suggesting reasons why things happen and showing their consequences (Sennet 1998, 30). According to Sennet's analysis it means that:

'The conditions of time in the new capitalism have created a conflict between character and experience, the experience of disjointed time threatening the ability of people to form their characters in to sustained narratives' (Sennet 1998, 31).

Our aim is to follow Sennet's arguments in a Nordic context by developing concepts that – inspired by Sennet – can include new aspects of flexibility such as workers' subjective perceptions and experiences in relation to the transformation of flexible work. *We trace the question how 'those affected reflect upon their affectedness'.*

The term 'affected by' is used because most people experience not being involved in reflections of that kind of issues when they are – dialogically- involved in innovation processes.

Flexibility interpreted as constant changes, is in the context of work transformed to *volatility* or lack of stable and permanent relations in working life. These can be relations to co-workers or family, where volatility is preventing long term planning leading to experiences on lack of clearly defined references and of professional capabilities. Like this it is reasonable to assume that volatility more fundamentally is affecting workers hopes and dreams for professional pride and knowledge. In addition it must be expected that volatility also influences health.

Sennet stresses that it is the past experiences and the emotions that suffer from the lack of relations or the lack of stability in the relations. It makes it necessary to introduce a new concept including an *experience category* that makes it possible to define sequences of adjustment processes. In our project, we refer to this concept as *volatility*. With regards to the empirically based research we furthermore add a dimension of time and rhythm by asking how often, how rapid and how profound volatility influences our working lives.

The field of frequency, speed and intensity of changes and adjustments is rather unexplored in relation to the objective conditions as well as the subjective categories of experience. It is obvious that the *frequency of changes* can be measured objectively. However, it is equally important that changes on a subjective level can be experienced as intrusive even before earlier changes have been adopted. They become intrusive in the sense that the individual is not able to adjust or even is given the opportunity to evaluate the implications of the changes. The *speed of the changes* likewise includes an objective and a subjective category. Thus we are not only investigating or comparing the speed of changes between companies or job-types. The focus is also on the experience of the changes or whether the changes are coming in a rhythm or by an intensity that makes it difficult for the individual to keep up. Again, the research question is: how are the changes experienced on a long term basis? Finally, the *intensity of the changes* refers to the force and profundity of the changes. In this case attention is brought to whether the

individual is experiencing the changes as adjustments within the internalized profession or as a revolution where 'truths' and certainties are turned up side down.

Above, the concept of boundlessness has been used together with and parallel to volatility. In the literature the concept of boundlessness among others has been used to describe the blurring of the identity of companies in relation to nationality and ownership (Kristensen 2003). This perspective can easily be transferred to the concept of volatility because this kind of boundlessness expresses the liquid character of the processes of change that often makes it difficult to localize actors and negotiated conditions. In these situations, we use the concept of boundlessness as a special case of volatility and the boundlessness is referring to the liquidity of the negotiating relations (agreements) in work. Traditionally the term of relations in work reflect 'bonds' and 'interdependences', but as the things one depend on or is bonded to becomes liquid it causes problems of boundlessness in work.

Hochchilds description of the 'greedy' working life can be interpreted as this kind of boundlessness, meaning that it is not the individual employer or manager that decides that work is going to be a predominant feature in peoples' lives, it is the relations in work such as demands and expectations from often changing actors (co-workers, customers, technological changes etc.)

Our initial outline of the concept of boundlessness as a special case of volatility will be further developed and clarified through the future empirical studies. For the present purpose, the concept represents a dimension of volatility that is not referring to the speed and intensity of the changes but as the distinct character of the bond of authority in the working conditions. In the rest of this article, volatility will be used as a superior concept that includes boundlessness.

We will now turn our attention to methodological impact of the above results from critical social science. Can action research learn something from the reflections? Our empirical project is still running and here we shall draw up the implication in the way we have designed our research project.

Flexibility as an experience category – methodological challenges

The intention of our project is to follow some of Sennet's tracks and openly discuss the uncertainties that exist with this analytical approach. We would like to raise the question of whether we by other approaches are able to rediscover the trends and expressions that are described and analysed by Sennet. As we see it, research in this field is only

preliminary. Empirical studies give some first results and action research seem to be too little aware of the “dark side of flexibility and innovation.

The conceptualisation of the key variables in the project is an ongoing process and consists of a continuing dialogue between the researchers and the empirical field. Following activities will be included in the process:

- Development of concepts to define the character and extent of flexibility and its meaning for working life and health.
- Development of methods to identify the character and extent of volatility and boundlessness in selected cases.
- Development of methods to create dialogues among workers and researchers on how to manage and oppose flexible and volatile relations on a subjective level through exchange of experiences and participant involvement.
- Development of methods to improve sustainable working life in flexible organizations through exchange of experiences and participant involvement.

In the project, action research is used systematically as an overall guideline to ensure an action oriented approach. It means that we use experimental methods in the involved companies and cases in order to develop, suggest, test and promote resolution strategies on a general as well as at the local level (new forms of local agreements on employment conditions, new forms of worker participation when managing and opposing to flexible and volatile relations in working life etc.). In particular it is necessary to search for new and network based strategies to organize health and safety work across companies. For this reason, the project is developing and testing methods to improve communication and solutions on work environment problems across companies and by involving different regulation institutions.

In the project, we combine different methods in a *triangulation approach*. Firstly the method of triangulation consists of a survey aiming to expose “how bus drivers and care assistants experience flexible and volatile relations in work” understood as externally generated ruptures in the working conditions. Thereafter we establish dialogues and do discourse analysis based on interpretation of various qualitative interviews with bus drivers. The objective of this analysis is to expose how uncertainties created by society are causing volatility and boundlessness in working life and how they influence employees, management and companies. The analysis will decide how flexibility is substantiated, carried through and managed in working life as it is today. The theoretically and methodological inspiration for the discourse analysis is Fairclough’s realistic discourse theory (Fairclough 1995) that specifies how such text interpretations can be carried out. In particular, the analysis is supposed to give answer to questions such as: is there a common understanding of the meaning of the concepts? Is there a common un-

derstanding of how volatility is influencing working life and health? Do opposing strategies on managing work environment and health in flexible relations exist?

These two empirically based analyses constitute, together with the theoretical conceptualisation, the foundation for the third part of the triangulation: establishing future creating workshops, research workshops and a network conference addressing the theme “*Opposing strategies to volatility and boundlessness in our work with humans*”. In the future creating workshop workers construct utopian ideas of a sustainable working life. In the Research workshop the utopian ideas are developed and made concrete in a dialogue with researchers (knowledge from the survey and the discourseanalyses is also brought in) (Nielsen & Nielsen 2006). In the network conference we follow the Scandinavian dialogue research tradition (Pålshaugen 1998, Gustavsen 1992) but we add a future-oriented utopian element in the creation of actionable knowledge in partnerships between unions, companies, institutions, health and safetyinstitutionens and last but not least: political bodies responsible for bustransport sector and handicap care sector.

We consider the triangulation method used in the project as a premise for defining flexibility as an experience category that can be discussed, acknowledged and transformed. The systematic search for different transformations and changes *over time* in the survey is the first step towards defining the concept of *experience with flexibility*. We lean on Oscar Negt’s and Alexander Kluges’ classical concept of experience taken from the book *Public Sphere and Experience* (1974) that distinguishes between immediate experience and mediate experience (unmittelbare Erfahrungen and mittelbare Erfahrungen). Immediate experience is influenced by the present worlds’ predominance and single responses on what happens – a kind of ‘trial and error’. On the contrary, the mediate experience is about the creation of experience itself (experience on doing experiences) (Negt and Kluge 1974, 26). In this way, the concept of experience contributes to the dynamic and action-oriented dimension of the analyses as a new reflexive space for action-strategies are created by focussing on the employees mediate experiences on flexibility. However it is not possible to express the mediate experiences right away. The linguistic expression of mediate experiences is formed by alternating thematization of immediate experiences and applied dialogue methods that constitute a point of departure for bringing forward mediate experiences and making them a starting point for new action-orientations. This methodological approach to experience oriented dialogues is described in detail in the so-called critical utopian action research cf. Birger Steen Nielsen and Kurt Aagaard Nielsen (2006).

We have chosen to start the analyses with a survey which gives a specific methodological angle on the project. The survey is based on approximately 170 respondents from the two sectors of work: care assistants and bus drivers. By taking our point of departure in the concept of volatility, we wish to investigate whether the respondents are experiencing volatility in the working relations, how it appears and the scope and impacts. For

this purpose, we have developed a range of questions that together designate a *volatile-index*. We see this survey as a prototype and consider our volatile index as an indicator of how volatility appears in a given sector of work or profession. *We do this in order to create a public attention to volatility as a working environment problem. We can stimulate public awareness – and thereby awareness by employers and employees at the same time.*

The dialogues on flexible innovations (based on qualitative interviews, focus groups and dialogue arenas) will contribute with additional aspects of volatility. In these analyses, the employees' subjective experiences of volatility will vary and deepen the categories and answers from the survey as well as add new and different dimensions of experiences with volatility. It is also through these analyses that a more precise distinction between boundlessness and volatility will be developed.

One of Sennet's main points is that relations in working life are getting unstable as a result of flexibility. In the volatility index we attempt to define flexibility in different work relations. It includes relations to co-workers, relations to work itself (length of service in the profession, identification with the work, expectations for the future), relation to the work place (length of service at the workplace), relation to management, relation to union, relation to authorities and relations to everyday life (time pressure, control over planning of time off and holidays). We have tried to construct the questions in a way that makes it possible to identify whether flexibility in these relations can be characterized as volatility or stability.

It has been decisive for the project to define the relations from a perspective of time. By looking at the different forms of flexibility through a time dimension in the survey and the qualitative interviews we try to understand and promote the necessity of looking on flexibility as an *experience category*. Only by encouraging the employees' to reflect flexibility in the working life relations over a period of time is it meaningful to interpret it as an experience category. For this reason most of the questions include a time dimension by way of asking for the frequency, speed and impact of changes on working routines and working patterns.

The two chosen sectors of work represent two very different forms of flexibility. The care assistant workers' are directly employed by a single user/handicapped person and therefore subjected to a kind of flexibility that is dictated by the everyday life of the user. The flexibility reflects an adjustment that can be described as a mirrored image of the late modern society where individualised life activities and satisfaction of needs are in constant and searching change – or in Bauman's words "a liquid life". The care worker is in the employment relation "the users arms and legs" and there by completely excluded from the work reality of the Fordist era with standardised work tasks (cf. Eva Munk-Madsen 2006). Detailed descriptions of work routines do not exist and the daily

work tasks are only described on a meta-level. Flexibility is condensed in movements or patterns, and subsequently the users' needs evolve or changes constantly. In this case flexibility in work is better described by the concept of boundlessness because the care assistant is bonded diffusely to the users ever changing needs. Examples of an outcome of the subproject with care assistants until now (middle of the project period) is proposals to establish new forms of working communities in the sector and to involve a kind of local ombudsmand (neutral third person) in the work planning between care assistants and the disabled people.

The working life of the bus drivers is characterised by another kind of flexibility. Like the flexibility of the care workers it is also individualized in the work duties, but in contrast it is a late modern work activity that is strongly embedded in a system of logic. Thus the work of the bus drivers is rooted in a complex organisation and is involving many different and often opposing co-operative relations as well as it includes submission to functional demands from a complex whole. At the same time, it is a part of the rapid growing service sector and there by subjected to structural changes between the state and the market including outsourcing, market adjustment, self management etc. Like the care assistant work, the organisation and the network of the bus company are a reflection of a the changing pulse of society or, in other words, the mobility and continuous development of demands for new movement patters of the late modern society (cf. Katrine Hartmann-Petersen 2005). Examples of an outcome of the subproject with bus drivers until now (middle of the project period) are proposals for specific strengthening of drivers communities and for new principles for planning of the bus transport system in the east part of Sealand (Greater Copenhagen).

In the survey and the following focus group interviews and dialogue arenas we work on improving and strengthening the mediate experience by encouraging reflections on learning processes over a longer period of time. In this way, we will examine to what extent the employees have the opportunity together with other co-workers to gain common experiences over a longer period of time.

The premise for the study is that flexibility is experienced as volatile and boundlessness in the two selected professions and not only as 'natural flexibility' in working life. This is stressed because we have observed an important difference compared to Ulrich Beck's understanding of the individualized flexibility as *braziliation*. Beck sees the individualization caused by flexibility as releasing and as a temporary phase towards a new modernity that does not include working life as a fixed centre for sustainable development of the future society (Beck 2000 p. 71 and forward). This perspective differs from Sennet's critique of the new flexibility as an experienced problem in relation to the quality of working life and includes other implications.

Flexibility as an experience category – sustainable flexibility

Flexibility in working life is biased in relation to social order and sustainable development. Newer sociological research shows that the concrete expression of flexibility influences the employees' social creation of identity (see below). For this very reason employees' individual and collective coping strategies on risks and problems in the work environment connected to the concrete expression of flexibility is of great importance for a sustainable development or for societal cohesion. We consider this approach as a paradigm shift in the flexibility (action-)research as we enrol flexibility in the concept of sustainable development. The demand of the paradigm is to produce new knowledge on the opportunities and conditions for working life actors to internalize and reproduce questions about societal cohesion in concrete social coping-strategies on handling flexibility and volatility. Once employees and other actors incorporate these themes when thematizing and handling flexibility in everyday life, we designate it "social orientation" (Aagaard Nielsen 1996, 336 and forward).

Within other areas of research, studies on internalization of the sustainability or of social considerations in company strategies have already been carried out (e.g. Lund 2002; Hagedorn and Kamp 2004; Mac 2003, B. Aase Sørensen & Watne 2007)). However, the conditions for *social orientation* in relation to flexibility and working life research have never, as far as we know, been conducted. In this respect we consider the volatility concept as a core concept.

We regard the research program described above, as a starting point for a working life research combining sustainability studies and diagnoses with action research.

The challenge when discussing sustainable flexibility is not only to assess risks in the local working life or to investigate how flexibility influences working conditions and working environment. The challenge is also to study the consequences of flexibility on the cohesion of society in the future as well as study how these consequences can be internalized as social orientations within employees, management, relevant authorities etc.

Another important feature of the sustainability concept is that it contains an aspect of time as well as an aspect of social relations and communities in work. By focusing on both aspects we wish to develop sustainability research that, on one hand, contributes to uncovering new risks in working life such as strains and burn out caused by flexibility, and its impact on societal cohesion and sustainable development. And on the other hand contributes to investigating (and encouraging) opposing- and coping strategies, so that the risks are not only portrayed as individual problems, but as part of the social identity of the late modern working life. Only by looking at both aspects, it is possible to thematize the sustainability, i.e. the impact on societal cohesion.

One can attempt to investigate sustainable flexibility by objective descriptive measures of positive and negative impacts on society. However, this approach is weakened by the risk of overlooking the actual potentials of flexibility. Like this, the objective descriptive measures might pin down the objectified problems, but the potentials of flexibility are eliminated by the negative side effects. These kinds of studies rapidly produce a negative scenario that shocks the politicians and calls for institutional solutions.³ They can at their best pull the alarm and show that the new flexible work organisations are pathological. Sennet's concept of volatility intensified in the title of the book *Corrosion of Character* also, at first glance, has this kind of effect on societal planning and regulation.

Analytically, sustainability is presented as a contrast between the immediate rationality (the potential of flexibility) and the observed unintended consequences of this rationality that can lead to regulation of e.g. the work environment reflected in better conditions for the professional prevention schemes. It is a well known difficulty in the expert-oriented research approach to sustainable working life that it easily misses its target, because it lacks sufficient social and cultural legitimacy in the local contexts. Put in a different way, it misses its target, because the employees and managers in the companies are not familiar with the problem formulation and subsequently put more effort in to following the statutory requirements than on implementation (Svensson, Ellstrøm and Brulin 2002).

For this reason, we are, in our project, approaching the transformation to sustainable forms of development and regulation from another angle. That is by interpreting *flexibility as experience*.

If it is possible, we see a new way for assessing sustainable flexibility. A way that from the start is in harmony with potential and realistic solutions, including law and institutional regulations as well as local agreements or more informal procedures on the single work place or cross companies. For this purpose we need a cooperation between different kinds of research and research models. It requires an objective risk analysis of the affectedness, an organisational assessment of effectiveness of the flexible work, and information on the users and customers needs. But even when these different types of knowledge are provided for, it still has to comply with the subjective experiences on the flexible work (action research) and the subjective experiences needs to "take in" the diagnostic research results. Only then is it possible to assess whether solutions and preventions are sustainable.

³ A successful example on this kind of research is Nadia Prætorius' study on flexibility. It is based on clinical therapeutic registration of the kind of health risks that can be observed among employees, who are so deeply affected by the lack of continuity and coherence in the new flexible organisations that they are getting sick (Prætorius 2004).

References

- Argyris, Chris (2003): *The corrosion of character: Capitalist and socialist economics*. I Argyris (ed): *Reason and Rationalisation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt (2000): *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Beck, Ulrich (2000): *The brave new world of work*, Oxford, Polity Press
- Castells, Manuel (2000): *The information age: economy, Society and Culture*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Csonga, Agi (1999): *Nye organisationsformer i danske virksomheder*. I Helge Hvid (red): *Ressourcer og velfærd i arbejdslivet*. København: Frydenlund.
- Csonga, Agi (2000): *Ledelse og arbejde under forandring*. København: Socialforskningsinstituttet.
- Daly, Herman og Cobb, John B.(1991): *Det fælles bedste*. Århus, Forlaget Hovedland.
- Durkheim, E. (1964 opr.1873):*The Division of Labour in Society*. New York, Free Press.
- Fairclough, Norman (1995): *Critical Discourse Analysis*, London, Longmann
- Giddens, Anthony (2000): *The Third Way and its Critics*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Gustavsen, Bjørn (1992): *Dialogue and Development. Social Sciences for social action*. Assen: Van Gorcum
- Hagedorn, Peter og Kamp, Annette(2004): *Mangfoldighed på danske arbejdspladser – byrde eller styrke*. I *Tidsskrift for Arbejdsliv*. (6) 2.
- Hartman-Petersen, Katrine (2005): *Mobilitet, Flygtighed og Fællesskaber – ambivalenser i buschaufførers mobile liv*. Paper til Metodekursus. Roskilde: Institut for Miljø Teknologi og Samfund, RUC.
- Hochschild, Arlie (2001): *The Time Bind. When work becomes home and home becomes work*. New York:OWL-Books.
- Holt, Helle (1994):*Forældre på arbejdspladsen – en analyse af tilpasningsmulighederne imellem arbejdsliv og familieliv I kvinde- og mandefag*. København: Socialforskningsinstituttet.

- Kristensen, Peer Huul (2003): Et grænseløst arbejde. Frederiksberg: Nyt fra Samfundsvidenskaberne.
- Lund, Henrik (2002): Integreerede ledelsessystemer og arbejdspladsdemokrati i et bæredygtighedsperspektiv. I Tidsskrift for Arbejdsliv. (4) 4.
- Mac, Anita (2003): Institutionalisation of new business values: changing internal and external business relations, values and legitimacy. NFF-conference paper. Roskilde, Roskilde Universitetscenter.
- Madsen, Eva Munk (2006): "Verdens bedste hjælperordning"? Et arbejdslivsperspektiv på brugerstyret hjælp, i Tidsskrift for Arbejdsliv (8) 1
- Negt, Oskar og Kluge, Alexander (1974): Offentlighed og Erfaring. Grenå. Nordisk Sommer universitets Skriftserie.
- Nielsen, Birger Steen; Nielsen, Kurt Aagaard (2005): Kritisk Utopisk Aktionsforskning. I Bechmann Jensen og Gerd Christensen (red): Psykologiske og pædagogiske metoder. Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.
- Prætorius, Nadja (2004): Livet som undtagelsestilstand. Psyke og Logos (25) nr 2
- Pålshaugen, Øivind (1998): The end of organisation theory? Amsterdam: Benjamins Publ. House.
- Sennett, Richard (1998): The Corrosion of Character, W.W. Norton & Company.
- Svensson, Lennart og P. Ellström og G. Brulin (2002): Innovations- og lærprocesser i den nya ekonomin. I Svensson Lennart m.fl (red): Interaktiv forskning – for utveckling av teori och praktik. Stockholm, Arbetslivsinstitutets Serie nr 7.
- Sørensen, Bjørg Aase & Watne, Thea (2007):
- Aagaard Nielsen, Kurt (1996): Arbejdets sociale orientering. København, Forlaget Sociologi.
- Aagaard Nielsen, Kurt & Nielsen, Birger Steen (2006): Methodologies in Action research. In Nielsen& Svensson (ed): *Action Research and Interactive Research*. Shaker Publishing. Maastricht.