Developing knowledge through participation and collaboration

Research as mutual learning processes

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Developing knowledge through participation and collaboration: Research as mutual learning processes

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Abstract

This article examines a general question about how we in research develop the knowledge we write about and present as 'results of research'. It scrutinizes research processes as a social practice, where several parties participate, collaborate and learn from a process where researchers involve themselves in exploring specific problems across societal contexts. In this way, the presented discussions can be seen as a critique of tendencies to approach research as an isolated endeavour, where results are produced by applying special methods and techniques that prevent influence from the social world and, in this way, creating knowledge about the world by 'leaving it'. The article argues for approaching the development of knowledge as a social practice in itself. Research processes transcend different contexts, involve different perspectives, and the researchers seek to analyse connections in a common world by exploring how an explicit problem is connected to social conditions and interplay, thereby achieving a deeper understanding of the problem. In the article, we build on 25 years of practice research projects and involve a specific project as an example in a general discussion of the development of knowledge. Among other things, this project inspired these thoughts because of the following exchange between a researcher and some professionals from the family centre where we were conducting our research (a residential institution for families and children in trouble)

Keywords

research collaboration, co-research, practice research, theory of science, participation

It is asked how Dorte actually observes, and Dorte talks a little about participant observation, where she tries to participate as well as possible as the family's guest: "It is not a particular method – if there's anything I can help with, I do it, otherwise we chat casually. When you know the family a little, you can usually follow up on things: how are things going with this and that...? I also make appointments for interviews, where there is more time to follow up a little more systematically on things. Much of the material I use is obtained when we talk to each other in everyday situations, like while standing and stirring the pot!

The excerpt is from a transcript of a project meeting, where professionals and researchers discussed a joint research project. The professionals ask how the researcher is actually conducting her research. Their surprise and curiosity typifies the mystification that often exists around what is thought to be the specific methods and techniques of research. Similarly, the researcher's answers raise some key questions about how the researcher participates in the field, and how empirical material is developed. These are themes we will pursue in this article.

We take our point of departure in a tradition of practice research, where the research is organized as a collaboration between researchers and various professionals working with the inclusion of children in difficulties (Højholt, 2005, 2011; Højholt & Kousholt, 2014a, 2014b). Our approach to practice research is anchored in social practice theory (Axel, 2011; Jensen, 1999; Lave, 2011, 2012) and Critical Psychology (Dreier, 1997, 2008; Holzkamp, 2013; Motzkau & Schraube, 2015; Mørck & Huniche, 2006; Nissen, 2012). The research is based on the assumption that children's problems take place in a coherent life, while the professional efforts to help the children are divided into different places, professions and responsibilities (Højholt, 2006; Højholt & Kousholt, 2018). How can different professional efforts be organized to strengthen children's possibilities for participation and learning across the children's life contexts?

We consider our collaborators in the research process as co-researchers, and this article is particularly about the interaction between researchers and professionals, and what this collaboration can mean for both research and practice development. The discussions are thus aimed at raising questions about research processes and their significance for and use in broader social changes.

Furthermore, it addresses questions we receive about what concepts as 'practice research' and 'co-researchers' might entail and how we think about the relationship between concepts, analysis and results.

The basis for the discussions is a theoretical understanding of children's difficulties connected to their life circumstances. We therefore talk about children in difficulties and emphasise understanding their personal circumstances and challenges linked to social dynamics and conflicts in societal life (Dreier, 1997, 2008; Højholt & Kousholt, 2018; Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013). Many dilemmas in the professionals' work concerning the relationship between the users' personal problems and their social possibilities, and thus what the professional work should address, is echoed in research. Basically, it is the same conceptual dilemmas that we work with, each in our own way. That is precisely why it makes sense for us to organize a research community in which we mutually learn from each other's approaches to dealing with common problems in a common world.

In research texts, the theoretical starting point, methods and analytical practice are often presented separately. It is in a sense artificial to present the creation of empirical material, analysis and dissemination of results as distinct phases, each with their methods or techniques, but at the same time, the researcher cannot do everything all at once. Here we will discuss the various aspects of research, precisely as aspects that merge into each other and influence each other. Still, the researchers focus differently during a research project.

The article begins by presenting discussions about the creation of knowledge and how research can be perceived as collaborative development of knowledge and mutual learning processes. On the basis of such general considerations about the theory of science, we will discuss the design and organization of our research collaboration. We then discuss how the researcher's participation, curiosity and way of focusing, in addition to varying her attention, is also intertwined in a problem-focused and theoretical search for general connections in social practice. This leads to a discussion about how methodological differences also relate to different conceptualizations of the 'research object' and why a practice research approach emphasizes theoretical considerations and collaborative organization instead of universal techniques. In this way, the article discusses the connections between the research problem, the researcher's theoretical approach and the organization of research designs and methods. Through concrete examples, research processes are discussed as a social practice in which different parties interact and thereby influence knowledge, learning and development of both theory and professional practice. At the end of the article, we clarify our analytical approach and discuss how practice can influence research.

The discussions above are also about a scientific ambition for 'transparency' i.e. to highlight and discuss the basis and genesis of the research presented (Hiles, 2008; Olsen, 2003). Such transparency is important in relation to understanding what kind of knowledge is being contributed by research and to inspire reflections on general issues relevant to research practice (see also Haavind, 2000). Still, the challenge is to describe a research practice without making it 'the right method' or a 'recipe', but linked to a specific epistemology. The focus of our methodological discussions will to a large extent be on collaboration in research and the mutual learning that the collaboration may entail.

About creating knowledge – and doing science

Our way of organizing and understanding research collaboration as a mutual learning process is based on a specific approach to knowledge, and how to develop knowledge about human actions and common life. We will therefore present the theoretical positioning of our work and explain the understanding of social practice from which we take our point of departure.

The concept of social practice alludes to the fact that people must be understood through their interplay with other people in social and historical organizations, i.e. as participants in structures of social practice (e.g. Chaiklin, Hedegaard, & Jensen, 1999; Chaiklin & Lave, 1993; Dreier, 1997, 2008; Holland & Lave, 2001; Jensen, 1987, 1999). This understanding is important for the focus of the research. Erik Axel stresses that research must be based on an understanding of subjects, who relate productively to their living conditions together with others in a common practice (2002, p. 204). Hence, it is not the individual in isolation that is the focus or starting point of the research, but this individual's activity with others. In this sense, the practice concept shifts the focus from individuals to their common life together. This does not mean that the individual 'disappears'. It is essential to seek out the subject's perspective on the world and to learn about the social world through how it appears to the individual (Holzkamp, 2005 (1985); Schraube, 2013). Thus, we simultaneously take our point of departure in people's common life and seek knowledge from people's personal perspectives, i.e. from the way the individual becomes involved, takes part and develops perspectives on what is happening. A perspective is not 'free-floating', but localized, i.e. it is a perspective from a location in a structure, from a certain position in social practice and connected with concrete conditions and participation together with others (Dreier 1997, 2008).

The concept of social practice also concerns our conception of knowledge. The presented approach to practice research can be seen as part of a move away from philosophical standpoints, where the world's true nature can only be understood by breaking away from it, and where creating knowledge (and science) must therefore be done by separating oneself from social life and uncovering universal validity (see also Brinkmann (2012); Schraube (2015). In such an understanding, concrete circumstances become sources of error to be limited. A practice philosophy, on the contrary, suggests that general knowledge is found in the concrete and variable circumstances (Jensen, 1999, 2001). Thus, we do not see local knowledge as tied to local conditions, but as aspects of a specific practice that can teach us about general connections. This forms the basis for a fundamental break with the idea of creating knowledge divorced from practice.

Knowledge (for example about children) is generated by being involved in the world, from commitments and experiences of participating in a specific practice (Højholt, 2005; Højholt & Kousholt, 2014a). Knowledge is linked to action, to being able to do something in a certain context (Bernstein, 1971; Jensen, 1999; Lave, 2012). You could say that I get to know the world through my actions in it, and my knowledge about it and my familiarity with the world affects what I do. The researcher's understanding of the world is also developed through participation in practice. The researchers themselves are a part of the research process and must be understood as one participant among others. In this way, the research itself is a social practice with special conditions (e.g. Mørck, 2000; Nissen, 2000; for the same point in a more historical perspective, e.g. Danziger, 1990; Foucault, 1972).

The research thus creates no objective knowledge, in the sense of universal knowledge, regardless of time, place and subjective conditions. Instead, the researcher's task becomes to explore complex connections in social practice, and in relation to this, ways of analysing become central. In the analysis, the researcher conveys these connections and includes the contradictions and limitations that participants in the field emphasize related to their reasons for doing as they do.

This approach to knowledge is both part of a broad movement in philosophy and social science, and a specific theoretical proposal for overcoming the abstract and universal concept of knowledge, which is broadly criticized. For example, Michel Foucault (1972) criticizes the perception of knowledge as something universal and argues that knowledge is historically produced as part of (and for the benefit of) certain societal interests – see also Burman (2017) or Rasmussen (2003), where these discussions are raised. Uffe Juul Jensen (2001) explicates a practice philosophy approach, taking his point of departure in

Bourdieu's critique of the 'scholastic reason'. The term scholastic alludes to the idea that learning is linked solely to education and the idea of the scientist "freed from the urgencies of the world, that allows a free and liberated relation to those urgencies and to the world" (Bourdieu cited in Jensen, 2001, p. 197). Jensen suggests that the answer to this widespread critique implies a new understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, and in relation to this the theoretical discussions appear to go in separate directions. According to Jensen (2001), Bourdieu argues that the scholastic position may be exceeded through a specific type of reflexivity and alertness to the researcher's position. Jensen criticizes this solution and argues that:

> a transgression of the scholastic position requires a practice in which the relationship between theory and practice is organized differently than in the forms that have been dominant in modern society. (Jensen, 2001, p. 205, translated by authors).

Jensen thereby points out that you cannot simply reflect your way out of the problem, but in a more far-reaching way must reorganize the practical relationship between those who research and those who are being researched. Thereby, we aim to go beyond understandings and organizations of research practice, where those who are researched become objects of a research that sets the agenda from 'outside' and 'from above' (Chimirri, 2014; Holzkamp, 2005 (1985)). In a practice research approach, the question of reorganizing the relationship between theory and practice leads to an understanding of research as collaboration.

Research as collaboration

When we fundamentally perceive research as collaboration, it is based on a theoretical understanding that people are exploratory in their lives, in the sense that lived life, and thus also professional work, involves exploratory aspects. It can be formulated in such a way that all participants in the research process are seen as subjects in their own lives (Dreier, 2008, 2015; Holzkamp, 2005, 2013; Højholt & Schraube, 2016).

In a sense, you could say that the traditional laboratory experiments, where the starting point is that the informants or subjects do not know what the research is about (because it will contaminate their responses and reactions), can also be considered a cooperation. There are people who willingly make themselves available and try to provide the effort the researchers need, and although this is not the intention, most research participants will consider the research question,

what their efforts will be used for, and the best way for them to contribute. Participants reflect on what is happening and work together to achieve results. In practice research, we want to engage in and learn from such subjective interplay rather than minimize it.

Striving to organize research as collaboration and to involve those who take part in the research as co-researchers, is not just related to research ethics. 'Co-researching' or research collaboration is intended to ensure that research is better designed to deal with issues relevant to the practice explored, and that it can benefit from the co-researcher's knowledge and curiosity. It is an effort to provide the researcher with opportunities to achieve a broader insight into human experience (Holzkamp, 2005). The concept of co-researchers is more generally an attempt to transcend the 'othering' that may exist in research, and to develop the relationship between the researcher and the researched from 'they' to 'we' (this links to critical discussions in feminist and/or postcolonial research of the construction of 'the other', e.g. Spivak, 1988; Staunæs, 2004). Still, the co-researchers are 'subjects in their own right' with different perspectives, standpoints and lives. It is an attempt to challenge a tendency to approach the 'researched' as belonging to another category and not as part of and engaged in the same problems and social world as the researchers. Such a tendency may lead to objectifying those researched as the problem to explore, rather than involving them as someone with perspectives on and experiences with the problems the research concerns. Research collaboration is not about achieving agreement, but about learning from differences.

Thus, practice research is an effort to democratize the research, where multiple parties should have an opportunity to have their say and become involved. Multiple voices being involved in the research is hardly something new. Research cannot be considered as an isolated or neutral process, since the research is dependent on both funding and the outside world's interest in and use of research results. Currently, there are demands for research to cooperate more systematically with and involve stakeholders from the world around it. This raises pertinent questions about who will have a voice in relation to this? Who will influence research questions, and who will have access to use the research results and in relation to what? Frequently, research results are included in terms of how they can be used in political or managerial processes such as control, efficiency promotion, targeting or evaluation of other people's efforts.

In the kind of research collaboration, we are suggesting here, the research findings should not be involved as a kind of judgement in relation to social disagreements but should rather be viewed as a way to gain an insight into the basis for the disputes and what they are connected with. By involving different perspectives, the research can *analyse* relationships between a field's task

distribution, positions and social structures. This does not happen by raising itself above social interests and perspectives, but by exploring their reasons and grounding in social practice. In this way, the research can develop theoretical concepts and thereby develop new understandings to use in practice.

Through collaboration on related problems, it is possible to achieve a unity between knowledge development and practice development. This does not mean that researchers and other participants will perceive issues and opportunities in the same way, or that the research will take (over) the responsibility for the development of practice. Research understood as collaboration is a collaboration concerning different tasks, which have different meanings for researchers and co-researchers. It is from the differences that we can learn.

A research approach in which knowledge is developed in and through collaborative research also constitutes a critical perspective on the understanding of research as a means to change practice, where research results are regarded as a primary driver of changes in practice. Jensen formulates the criticism as follows:

> Change happens in practice and not by attempts to transmit abstract knowledge gained behind scholastic bastions to the social practice. (Jensen, 2001, p. 217, authors' translation)

Research can contribute knowledge to practice and take part in changes in practices – but social practice is continuously undergoing change. Attempts to contribute to these processes of change must be relevant for practice and must be connected to an interest in development. How and to what extent new understandings can lead to development in practice depends on many aspects other than the specific research project. For both researchers and professionals, the collaboration is part of a wider practice, where the insights gained from research collaboration will be incorporated and put into action. The research results will have different meanings for different professionals and researchers and will be further developed and 'put to the test' in different contexts.

Based on these more general considerations about how research can be perceived as collaboration and a kind of collaborative development of knowledge, the following sections will provide examples of what research collaboration can lead to. We have been repeatedly surprised to find that the importance of research increasingly seems to follow its activities and the researchers' participatory methods, rather than the 'results'. One can say that the researcher's theoretical concepts and curiosity are reflected in types of action and not just in speech and text.

The organization and design of research collaboration

Research can be organized in many ways, and the following presentation is not intended as a dogma for practice research, but as an example of collaboration and reciprocity in a research project.

A significant part of starting research collaboration is to create an organization that gives the researchers the opportunity to explore the issues they are concerned with. It may take time to find the most appropriate way to hold meetings, the most relevant parties to meet with, and the most appropriate places to conduct the research. In the project discussed here, we had a long preparation process, where we met with many parties from the field and heard about the initiatives they had developed to create inclusion and to integrate the family work and inclusion efforts in the school. Through this process, we learned about the field's problem areas, including the difficulties of working across different institutional contexts, e.g. with the children's common interplay in the school's general classes, when the professionals are placed in special education arrangements with individual children who are taken out of the class. The research similarly had difficulty in working across the special education area and the general school. We also learned about how different parties wanted to use the research for different purposes, for example in connection with documentation of the efficacy of interventions and selection of standards for family therapy. This preparation is thus a key part of the research itself and involves important insights into the empirical field.

Research collaboration can be conducted in many forms. For example, children, parents and professionals will usually be involved differently, depending on what is relevant to them, and what possibilities they have to use the research. We seek to involve the professionals who work with the research's problems on a daily basis, in a systematic reflection on preliminary analyses and results. We do this both because these parties have relevant knowledge about the problems and experience of dealing with them, and because they have possibilities to develop practice (in a different way than parents and children), and because research often confronts the professionals with critical questions and feedback, precisely by investigating the perspectives of the children and parents. If knowledge from the perspectives of the children and parents is to have a constructive significance for professional practice, it requires that the professionals themselves are involved in the analysis, and that they take part in discussions of e.g. which contexts and conditions the research has overlooked. In this way, we prioritize working to ensure possibilities for the co-researcher to also experience influence and recognition in relation to the research process.

However, there turned out to be specific challenges with regard to the organization of the collaborative research: The professionals in the different municipalities had different professional starting points and different working hours and conditions for participation in the project. As a consequence, we were unable to gather entire staff groups at the same time and had to find other ways of involving the staff who were not taking part in the project's meetings. We find that it is a general and continuous challenge to organize research collaboration in relation to different kinds of research problems, working conditions and the perspectives of those involved.

In the mentioned project, we organized a joint project group, where representatives (mainly heads of the involved institutions) from all sub-projects (the various family classes, a family institution where families were placed full time, the general school and the psychological counselling etc.) met regularly during the project period.[1] In parallel, we conducted our fieldwork and provided feedback to practitioners involved more locally. The project group met about once a month, where development processes and special circumstances, events and changes in the work of the professionals and the researchers were reviewed. At these meetings, we discussed different themes (e.g. children's communities and working with parents) and we always started by conducting a round, where everyone could talk about what had happened 'since last time'. The significance of these rounds was often discussed, as they could be very time-consuming. However, the conclusion each time was that the specific examples that were presented in these discussions, created opportunities to learn about concrete dilemmas that appeared particularly significant for both everyday life in the professional practice, and also for the research's preoccupation with situated meanings and problems from practice. The minutes of these discussions have been an essential part of our empirical material. We understand the importance of these rounds in relation to the circumstance that the discussions here were more concrete and based on pressing challenges. In this way, possibilities for generalizing knowledge through concrete variations seemed anchored in these kinds of shared explorations. Discussions based on selected themes tended to be more principled and characterized by promoting solutions and 'answers' instead of curiosity and wonder. Still, focusing on selected problems created opportunities for presenting empirical material and involving co-researchers in

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[1] During the project, we became increasingly aware of the importance of having employees who were more directly involved with children and families, and we therefore expanded the project group during the process. Finally, it should be mentioned that at these meetings, the project was continuously developed and reorganized. For example, new types of meetings (typically local feedback meetings, management meetings or sub-group meetings), a conference and a book were planned (Højholt, 2011).

the analytical work. In addition, the researchers get opportunities to listen to the co-researchers' perspectives on hypothetical understandings, and how their collaborators in the professional practice find these understandings relevant – or not – and how they may have meanings or be used in practice.

In this article, we have linked knowledge to action and participation in social practice and we have emphasized that the investigation of general conditions occurs through concrete and variable circumstances. That starting point accentuates that the researcher follows the concrete and variable circumstances of the people, whose life conditions (s)he is concerned with. In other words, the researcher must *take part* in order to explore what is at stake in the specific practice, and how it develops over time.

However, the fieldwork must also be prepared by working on how to gain access to relevant situations and events in practice, where you can participate, and how to be present (Højholt & Kousholt, 2014a). In other words, it is about establishing a position from which to explore the specific practice. It concerns working with access to different situations in practice, as well as working with the participation possibilities as a researcher. The researcher's position is in many cases not a position that exists in advance. It must be developed as part of the research collaboration, and both parties can experience confusion and uncertainty. For example, the researchers may be concerned with how they, as researchers, might be present and take part here, and the co-researchers may be concerned with what it means for them that there are researchers present, and what they are observing. This work to create opportunities for e.g. observations and interviews, conveys something about practice structures. When you negotiate and investigate your access and presence, it is precisely in relation to the practice you are entering into, and such processes can therefore provide an understanding of the field's social structure and organization (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

The actual collaboration between researchers and co-researchers can often be confusing in connection with practice research. In one way, this confusion tells us something about how research is traditionally placed 'outside of practice'. The researcher thus becomes an uninvolved expert or judge, whose knowledge is simultaneously abstract, mysterious (and thus not as directly applicable) and supercilious, even in relation to professionals who have worked in the field for a long time. In the kind of research collaboration, we present here, this organization and hierarchy is challenged, which initially involves some uncertainty. Our experience is that it is precisely by 'shaking up' and breaking with the widespread way in which professionals and researchers engage with each other, that we achieve a form of collaboration that can contribute to mutual learning processes.

An observation day

In the following section, we will provide an example of an observation process that leads to a discussion of the involvement of the researcher as a basis for mutual learning processes. It is an example that has been singled out several times by the professional (e.g. in meetings with the rest of the staff) as 'what made the greatest impression', as something that made a difference and provides a starting point from which the family workers can talk about their work.

The example is taken from a research project that explores the everyday life of children and parents in a family centre where they live for a period (see also Kousholt, 2012). The researcher is present at the family centre and participates in daily life in the house where the family lives. The family consists of the mother, Rikke, and the daughter Sara (4 years) and son Ole (1 year). Tove is the family worker on duty that afternoon.

> *At approximately 5 pm, I go over towards house 2, since I expect that Rikke must have arrived home with the children. I meet Tove on the way, who suggests that we should see if Rikke would offer us a cup of coffee. Rikke has come home. She is playing a game on the computer in the living room. Ole is playing on the floor. Tove comments that Rikke is playing on the PC. Rikke answers that she has otherwise not been playing today, since the computer 'was down'. Tove sits down on the couch. Camilla (another mother from house 1) is sitting in a chair and watching television. Her little boy lies sleeping in a carrycot on the table.*
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> *I go out into the kitchen with Rikke, who starts preparing dinner. She has some meat in the oven, which she has prepared during the day. Rikke tells me that she has not managed to peel the potatoes today. She normally does that before she goes to collect the children, so that she only needs to turn on the pot when she comes home.*
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> *Ole whimpers a little and hangs onto Rikke's leg as she stands at the stove. I pick him up and stand with him in my arm while I talk to Rikke. Sara comes out from the room. She is wearing a red straw hat and says that it was given to her by her father. She wants to try the straw hat on Ole, who does not like having anything on his head and complains. I sit on the floor with Sara and Ole and try to help them through a game of honking the horn of a big plastic car. Sara is a little too forceful towards Ole, and I have to intervene several times to 'shield him'. Rikke and Tove go out and smoke a cigarette together.*
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> *Tove and Rikke come back in and Rikke continues cooking. Tove sits down again on the sofa. I talk a bit with Sara, and we read a book until it is time for them to eat. Occasionally, Ole sits on my lap. Tove and I leave as they are about to eat.*

> *When we go over to the staff room together, Tove is very preoccupied with the way I interact with the family and get involved in what is going on. Tove says that if I and Camilla had not been there, she would have withdrawn from the situation. Then she would have 'taken up too much space'. She says that her contact with the mother can 'harm' the mother's contact with the children, in the sense of her [Tove's] presence entailing that there will be less attention for the children because Rikke engages with her instead. The situation leads to a long conversation between us, and Tove reflects on being present as a professional person contra as a fellow human being. She explains that it can sometimes be difficult to be present without interfering with what is happening, but that what she thinks is her professional task, keeps her from interfering in the situation.*

The example shows a typical observation day, where the researcher takes part in what is happening in the family's daily life and talks to the children and the parents in the meantime. The example presents an opportunity to discuss both the involvement of the researcher and the family worker's understanding of her professionalism. The researcher's way of being present in the situation gives rise to a long conversation about how to be present with the family, and the significance one's presence has. In this situation, the researcher and family worker together explore questions of shared interest, questions that relate differently to their professional tasks and questions about which they have different perspectives.

The way in which the researcher participates in what is happening is different than that of the professionals. It is initially the 'breach of expectations' that initiates questions and curiosity for both parties and the possibility of joint exploration of what is at stake in the situation in question (Kousholt, 2016). The researcher must engage in what is going on, in a way that is both appropriate for the situation and what is at stake there, and which also offers the opportunity to pursue the purpose of the research. This means that the best possible way to engage will *vary* (for example, it is quite different to observe in a classroom and in a family during the 'hour before dinner, when the children are tired'). In line with this, Darrin Hodgetts et al. (2016) write about taking part in everyday life "in a more flexible manner where we try harder to fit into everyday events" (p. 141).

In this sense, the example shows us something about the researcher's working conditions. The researcher is not required to assess or address the specific family's problems and is therefore able to explore what is happening and what seems to be its significance for those involved. The researcher has the opportunity to focus on the children's and parents' perspectives and engagements.

At the same time, the example provides us with an insight into the family worker's working conditions. She is tasked precisely to assess and assist. She has a duty to seek answers and find solutions. The family worker's tasks are defined, inter alia, by others' concerns, and she has a duty to work with the mother's parenting skills based on this concern. The different tasks of the researcher and the professional allow them to engage in different ways. The professional's tasks are defined by, among other things, the municipality who pays the family centre and evaluates their work with the families.

The researcher's participation and curiosity

The researcher's task is, among other things, to develop an understanding about this particular practice. This means that a researcher encounters practice with some humility and respect for those who are part of it on a daily basis and therefore know it from the 'inside'. In this respect, the researcher is 'ignorant' and must engage with practice openly and curiously. This approach draws inspiration from an ethnographic open-ended and explorative approach (e.g. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The researcher cannot know in advance. However, the research process does not stop at the co-researcher's experiences, but their perspectives set the researcher on the trail of contexts, contradictions and dilemmas that must be pursued further in the research work. The researcher is 'new' in the practice she explores. It is a practice she is not required to take responsibility for, or, as a consultant, to change. Rather, it is something she has the privilege to be curious about. In many ways, curiosity is a key word for this research approach[2]. The researcher's curiosity and wonder affect how she creates material and participates in the field.

Research texts often operate with divisions between theory and the production of empirical material, but when the researcher acts in the field, a choice is also made about where she places herself and what she focuses on. These choices are connected to a theoretical search for connections through continuous analysis of examples in the empirical material. This sets the researcher on the trail of something important, which she therefore pursues in subsequent participation and analyses. The researcher's curiosity, experiences and theoretical understanding – the questions she asks and the way they change during the process – guide this process. In that way, theory is not only a tool for reflection, but an embodied practice, and a way of directing and modifying one's participation in the field. At the same time, other more practical considerations

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[2]   According to an etymology dictionary 'curious' mean 'eager to know'. https://www.etymonline.com/word/curious

(e.g. the researcher's working conditions, staff issues at the participating schools/institutions) will have a bearing on what it is possible to do. The methodological choices are therefore based on both knowledge, interest and practical conditions for research practice. The researcher must therefore be able to shift her attention and her participation during the research process (Hodgetts et al., 2016; Kousholt, 2016). This may relate to both seizing the opportunities that appear 'here and now' in specific situations, and persistently working to achieve precisely the interview or observation that will illuminate the research problem from a perspective that seems important to explore. This implies *varying one's participation* – not in a coincidental way, but in a theoretical and problem-focused way.

The research practice we are discussing here often entails overlaps between different research methods. As illustrated in the introductory excerpt from the minutes of a project group meeting, a conversation in an everyday situation is sometimes valuable interview material. Depending on the specific circumstances, it may prove useful to follow some people's concrete life practice by being present with them, and this may involve a greater or lesser degree of interaction and conversation with them (Huniche & Jefferson, 2009; Kousholt, 2016). At other times, it may be more appropriate to talk in a more structured manner. Participatory observations, interviews and meetings are different social situations, where the matter under investigation plays out in different ways. Different social situations give the researcher access to knowledge in different ways (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003). There will be different aspects of the research problem present in various contexts, and sometimes it takes time to identify them. The researcher may need to approach the problem from different angles and in different ways.

When we are concerned with participation, perspectives and reasons, it is not only a theoretical approach, it is also an 'empirical attention' *and form of participation*. It is a way to participate in practice – a way to look, ask, walk around and position oneself. The researcher's understanding is also reflected through where she looks, what she looks for, who she asks about what etc. There are reasons why the researcher in the example above, sits with the children on the floor or lends a hand in the kitchen that is linked to what she wants to understand. In Osterkamp's words, you could say that the researcher participates on the basis of 'emotions as action-guiding' (Osterkamp, 1979). The point is that our theoretical understanding of the world cannot be separated from our subjectivity. In the field, you often do what 'feels right'. The researcher's subjectivity is expressed in ways of participating that have to do with the researcher's bodily presence, her experiences and her interplay with other people. Research processes are not only an 'intellectual' quest for knowledge but are also an

embodied practice. The experiences (provocations, challenges, wonder, indignations, etc.) which the research process triggers, give rise to further exploration and searching for what is at stake in the practice in which the researcher is involved. Parallels can be drawn here to an auto-ethnographic tradition, where the researcher uses autobiographies (narratives on their own personal life experiences) as a means of obtaining knowledge about cultural practices (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).[3] However, it is not the researcher's 'introspection' or personal life experiences we find relevant here, but the relation between the researcher's subjectivity and knowledge interest as an opportunity to seek out general relations in practice.

We have emphasized here that the researcher's curiosity is intertwined in a theoretically based search for connections. Therefore, the following section will explore the significance of theory.

From techniques to reveal internal problems to theory and collaboration

Based on conceptualizations of the relationship between people's personal reasons and their social conditions, we work with a *common exploration* of people's reasons for doing what they do. This is also a discussion we find that we share with our collaborators in practice.

In both the development of the professional work with children and families in difficulties, and in the exploration of the same, we are confronted with tasks linked to ideas about 'internalised mental structures'. 'The internal' is presented as something we either are tasked to 'treat' through special programmes or techniques or, in the exploration, to reach as something untouched – again through special methods, techniques or narratives. In treatment, it may concern problematic 'parenting skills', 'resistance' and a lack of a sense of reality. In the research, it may be about describing 'the true self' or about getting the informant's 'own story' without influencing it.[4] Mik-Meyer and Järvinen (2005)

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[3] Ellis and Brochner (2000) describe the auto-ethnography as a diverse tradition, where the emphasis may be placed differently on 'auto' (the researcher's personal narrative), 'ethno' (the researcher's own experiences as access to knowledge about what is happening in the field), and 'graphy' (how knowledge is produced through auto-ethnography) respectively. This illustrates that the ethnographic and autobiographic aspects can have different weight within the auto-ethnographic tradition. Still, the writing and analysis of autobiographic narratives is central to this tradition.

[4] Kvale (1996) illustrates this through the metaphor of the interviewer as a miner, where the knowledge one is concerned with is found inside the interviewee (like 'hidden metal'), and the researcher's task is to identify and uncover this knowledge without 'contaminating' it. Danziger (1990) presents a parallel metaphor about the sleeping beauty.

describe this as an illusion of some special, detached inner part, which much research methodology is about reaching or uncovering. In this way, methodological differences relate to different conceptualizations of the 'research object', i.e. what is exactly the object of the research? When the object is some isolated inner part, we must find techniques to bring it out and to keep away the social impact.

Much thinking on methods is therefore concerned with techniques to control the influence that the researcher's preconceptions can have on the phenomenon that is being examined. Moreover, techniques are presented so that the researcher can 'hold back' in order to bring out the informant's own narrative or story about themselves (this critique is also discussed in Kvale 1996).

In both professional practice and in research practice, it is suggested that the professionalism and scientific nature respectively relate to special methods of achieving something internal, that cannot be achieved immediately – and that can appear quite mysterious. Such methods seem to entail that the internal problems should be found by separating or excluding other elements often explicated as the researcher's theoretical understandings and subjectivity.

When we present the researcher's curiosity and participation as theoretically based, it is about understanding theory as an integral aspect of all the sub-processes in research. Thus, we do not regard the theoretical understanding as something that 'closes off' openness, but rather as something that can 'unlock' our immediate understanding and open up for curiosity concerning life conditions, personal reasons and perspectives. Such an understanding can be seen as grounded in a philosophy of practice, where concepts are thought of as embodied in forms of practice and cannot be articulated a priori (Jensen, 1999).

Concepts are not seen as made beyond practice to manage and goal-direct practice 'ahead of practice' or to reflect, asses or deconstruct practice 'afterwards', but to be developed 'just in time' as Jensen formulates it (1999). Concepts are part of curiosity and approaches to problems and efforts in practice. In such conceptualizations, theory is understood not as something to enlighten, mirror, represent, foresee or control a reality outside theory. Rather, conceptualizations of 'theory' may be hinting at ways of reflecting, analysing, pointing to problematics and dilemmas for different social practices, of which the theories and research are a part.

Still, in the research process, the theoretical concepts form the backdrop for a special curiosity, in our case regarding people's participation and interplay, as well as their social conditions and how people arrange themselves in relation to these.

The above-mentioned figure on isolated internal structures is therefore far from unambiguous. In both professional work and research, there are different

forms of critique of this approach, and emphasis is placed instead on relations, interactions, systems, communications, etc. The research's object then becomes e.g. social meanings that are created in the interaction. Drawing on interactionism (among others Becker and Goffmann), Mik-Meyer and Järvinen formulate it such that the focus is hereby changed from 'social problems' to problem definitions, from marginalised individuals to stigmatization and marginalization processes, from individual motivation and intentionality to social interaction (2005, p. 12). Mik-Meyer and Järvinen develop the argument with the constructivist supposition that meaning cannot be localized in the phenomenon itself (exemplified by Latour and Fairclough). By extension, they argue that one must "distance oneself from a goal that one can (and should) locate motivations and intentions in individual subjects" (ibid., p. 14, authors' translation).

These formulations are close to this article's endeavours, and yet there is the important difference that we seek to understand marginalization processes and social interaction *through* the individual's personal intentionality and based on how social problems are experienced and dealt with in the individual person's life. In order to be able to analyse problems as they are meaningful for specific people in their social lives, we need to be able to analyse personal meanings and reasons as related to social life situations, positions and standpoints. Therefore, it seems significant to adopt an exploratory approach towards individuals' reasons for doing what they do.

Although we share the ambition to break away from locating intentions as 'internal' and as a matter of something that is separate from social relations, we find it problematic if the question of intentions is not raised, not explored, or is not the subject of curiosity. When the research focuses on "the creation of social identities, on the interviewees' strategies for (positive) self-presentation and on the interview's narrative characteristic" (ibid., p. 17), it seems that the positioning and self-representations etc. are taken for granted as what is at stake for the participants. When people's intentions and reasons are not included, the 'matter' (the problem with which the interviewees are concerned) may disappear.

In the research practice presented here, we adopt an explorative approach to people's personal reasons, and we start from the assumption that personal reasons can teach us about social structures. In this light, subjects' personal actions, feelings and thoughts are seen as aspects of their participation in social practices.

In order to develop knowledge about the connections between personal meanings and social conditions, we are interested in people's intentions with and reasons for doing what they do. This means involving the co-researchers in the researchers' curiosities. So, instead of techniques and rules about not influencing, we argue for an open collaboration regarding explicit research questions and common exploratory processes.

How research may contribute to social change

> *You see, we think that research is terribly dangerous – that is what we need to break away from. It is some people, who come and take a look at what we are doing, and they lift it up a bit and turn it around a bit, and then we get it down again and can use it if we involve ourselves in it. (Head of family centre, the authors' translation)*

The excerpt above (which is also from the minutes of a project group meeting) indicates that the co-researchers are also inspired by involving themselves in the research.[5] Research can have implications for practice in several ways. The significance that the research collaboration can achieve depends on how the professionals proceed with the research in their practice.

The research leaves its mark, both through the discussions and issues that are addressed at meetings, and through the researcher's involvement in the daily life of the family centre, which was highlighted with the excerpt from an observation day presented earlier. The way the researcher here relates to the family, the curiosity regarding how they manage their everyday lives, is a curiosity to see common dilemmas in families' lives at play in this particular family. The researcher's participation provides the family worker, Tove, with the opportunity to see the family in another way than what she is used to due to her professional tasks. Their dialogue afterwards about the family's situation focuses on the professional practice as a condition of the family's daily life at the institution, and it inspires thoughts about how things can be done – and understood – differently.

The researcher's way of participating in practice also has significance, and the places that a researcher chooses to go to explore the research problem seems to be significant. The head of the mentioned family centre highlights e.g. that the fact that the researcher went with the children to the day-care facility and to school, directed her attention to the fact that

> *the children are living a life in many other places, and perhaps our work should also focus on that. Perhaps we can do much more by cooperating with some of those who are significant there.*

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[5]The idea that the researcher 'lifts up' and that the practice 'brings it down', does not harmonise well with the understanding of knowledge that we present here, but it illustrates a 'conventional' figure about research and reflection that we within research have tried to break away from, and to talk instead about mutual involvement and learning processes.

Such considerations are in contrast to the traditions of the family centre, which are to concentrate on family treatment (e.g. in relation to parental abilities) aimed at the relations between mothers and children in this isolated context. By going to other places (besides the family centre) in their research process, the researcher highlights possible relevant connections in the lives of the children and parents. Furthermore, she gets an opportunity to convey perspectives on the practice of the family centre from elsewhere, such as how the professionals in the day-care institution perceive the work the family centre is doing. For example, were the professionals at Sara's day-care institution in doubt about how they should contribute, what kind of cooperation they were involved in in relation to the family centre? In this way, the research collaboration can inspire reflection on the circumstances in the professional work, as it appears from a decentred perspective, from others' perspectives and tasks.

Other examples from this project could be when the researcher's curiosity about administrative referral processes as a condition for working with children in difficulties, leads to the professionals becoming preoccupied with the demands placed upon them by the municipal administration as a condition for their work (Røn Larsen, 2012, 2018). Or when the researcher explores the community in the general class as significant in relation to the special education efforts for individual children (Morin, 2008). The researcher's preoccupation with the general classes was by no means a new focus for our co-researchers, but during the collaboration period, the work aimed at the children's schools, after-school centre and parent collaboration was intensified and the content changed.

The researcher participates from another position and often has the opportunity to traverse the divisions and structures that the professionals are placed in. It seems that it is both the researchers' curious approach and the 'content' of this curiosity that can serve as inspiration. What seems to be important is the questions that we as researchers ask, what we look for and pursue.[6] You can say that what the researchers are concerned with, makes an impression and become significant for the professionals. It forms the starting point for discussing circumstances in practice, which are often taken for granted or seem esoteric. Such discussions are not only a neutral reflection of practice. As we have emphasized here, they are shaped by the researcher's curiosity and theoretical understandings. At the same time, the researchers' understanding and

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[6] In an evaluation of a previous practice research project, we were surprised that a day-care professional emphasized that one of the things that made the greatest impression was that 'you have looked so much at the children'. It took a little time before we realised that it was actually the researchers' activity, spending so much time observing the children, that made an impression on someone who had worked in the field for 20 years. As the day-care professional said: "It has made me look differently at my work" (Højholt, Larsen & Stanek, 2007).

approach will be developed, challenged and qualified along the way. It is this mutual aspect that we would like to highlight and develop here, now seen from the perspective of the researchers.

How practice may influences research

The researcher's understanding of practice develops largely through what the co-researchers wonder about, notice and bring to the joint discussions. The co-researchers' sense of wonder points to what they are concerned about and experience as limitations and dilemmas in their work. The example shows how the family worker's question about the researcher's participation in the daily activities of the family, enables the researcher to learn about some important challenges in the professional work with the families, such as how professional methods in practice can be perceived as 'straitjackets'. The researchers also learn about how the professionals' viewpoints and understandings are formed by their professional location, conditions and tasks (e.g. the responsibility they have for creating change in the family), while the children's life in other contexts are someone else's responsibility and are both out of sight and out of influence.

Through the collaboration with the parents, the researchers learn about family life, about how practical and relational challenges intertwine, and about conflicts and collaboration in the families. For example, Rikke talks about how it affects her relationship with her daughter that she now has a boyfriend who helps to take care of Sara's younger brother. This illustrates how everyday practical aspects, such as the sharing of daily tasks, are very important for the relations between the parent and the child. Following on from this, the researchers become interested in the question of how to support the relations in the family through focusing more on the parents' practical life situation – and conditions for developing as parents. This led to discussions in the research group regarding the problems related to the fact that parenting is often understood as something that primarily has to do with internal preconditions and is something you do alone. Through the collaboration, an awareness developed about how to work with the conditions for family life and parenthood such as caring for the children's everyday life across contexts (Højholt, Kousholt & Juhl, 2018; Kousholt, 2012). This means that the professional care must also be organized so that it can 'traverse' contexts and actively become involved in supporting children's living conditions in a complex life across contexts (see also Schwartz, 2014, 2017).

The professionals' discussions about methods (and fatigue in relation to repeatedly having to implement new methods), shifts the researchers' focus towards how we can describe professionalism in a different way than through

new guidelines that can become 'straitjackets' in new ways. It follows from this that the researchers become preoccupied with how guidelines and manuals for a specific kind of treatment seem to exclude exploratory activity and the development of new understandings. It is this very notion of professionalism that we find necessary to problematize (see also Højholt, 2006; Røn Larsen, 2012). Instead of developing new methods or techniques, the research could inspire exploration, creativity and continuous development of understandings and interventions that can be relevant to the changing lives of parents and children. The researchers continue to work on how to conceptualise professionalism in a situated manner that relates to the professionals' participation and tasks in a complex social practice.

The professionals' efforts to develop their practice highlights how they encounter challenges in terms of how new ways of working become recognized as professional if they are not described as an established method. The researchers also become aware that the issue of being able to document work as specialized professionalism, is both vulnerable and conflictual for the professional practice.

In this way, the professionals in the project have helped to raise research questions (such as the question of the importance of documentation, an issue which is particularly addressed in Højholt (2010) and Jensen (2011). Moreover, when the researchers present material from their research (such as observations from children's and families' everyday life), the professionals shift their attention towards the work's content and the contradictions in their working tasks. At the same time, the professionals 'push' the research towards questions like: 'what does this insight into children's and families' daily lives and difficulties entail for our professionalism?' and 'How can you work professionally with the problems raised by the research?' The researchers thus become engaged with professionalism and how conceptualizations of professionalism are important for the understandings of social problems. These movements highlight how research can have an influence on its field and, conversely, how co-researchers and empirical realizations alter research, what we refer to here as mutual learning processes.

What researchers learn is furthermore expressed in their analyses. Within the natural sciences, the results of the research are often regarded as an objective result of the controlled use of scientific methods (which others should be able to repeat, independently of time and place and participants), and thus not as something that can be characterized as a social learning process in which many different aspects come into play. The analysis process is also a social practice, e.g. influenced by what the researcher is otherwise a part of as conferences, research communities, research policy requirements, etc. (Dreier, 2008).

Analytic approach – Anchoring personal perspectives in social structures

The point of departure regarding people's participation in social and historical interplay becomes significant in relation to the analysis: When people take part in various communities, they act situated in social structures, and seen in this light, the participants' experiences can teach us about general connections. However, this does not happen merely by writing down what people do and say, but by relating this to their *conditions* for doing so, the *meanings* they ascribe to what is at stake, and the way they *reason* about what happens. These concepts can help to anchor the analyses of personal experiences in social practice. Concepts imply certain analytical potential. They direct the researcher's attention to certain connections (see also Brinkmann, 2012; Schraube, 2015). The analytical approach is thus about exploring personal and specific aspects and connecting these to life conditions in a particular practice. In this way, we analyse the specific practice on the basis of the personal meanings it has for different participants and how it is part of a more comprehensive historical practice.

The article's approach to research practice does not really make sense without an analytic approach that anchors differences and conflicts and social problems in practice structures. This is also linked to a discussion of the critical project in practice research, i.e. can we be critical when we cooperate and involve ourselves so closely? We believe that it is possible, but also that the criticism must be anchored in practice, i.e. in structural, organizational, conceptual and theoretical difficulties, contradictions and conflicts. This means that the criticism should be directed towards general challenges. It is precisely the process of searching for 'the general' that can be said to characterize research.

Searching for general connections emphasizes the scientific challenge of involving *differences and changes.* In relation to generalizations, we confront the danger of reducing complexity, simplifying variations and exaggerating points. Generalizations must *build on* differences, variations, connections in relation to concrete situations and the historical practice these are part of. This is an analytical practice of anchoring differences in social practice and connecting them to common problems and conditions that still have different meanings to different persons (Brinkmann, 2012; Schraube, 2015)

Generalization could be seen as a way of relating different perspectives, personal dilemmas and social conflicts to the common social world in which they are embedded. Differences may teach us about connections in social life, e.g. how structural arrangement may give different participants unequal possibilities, and in this way teach us about structural connections in historical practice.

The movement from empirical data to writing an analysis can therefore also be discussed as a movement from knowing to generality. Possibilities for

generalizing involve a further search for connections in the 'well-known'. To know something is about recognizing it in its various manifestations, to see something repeated, to know something from different perspectives and different places. Analysis is therefore about searching for dynamics and reasons and having theoretical concepts that can assist in the search for connections between, for example, reasons and conditions.

Analysing interviews or observation notes also becomes a process of 'asking questions' about people's lives and participation in social practice. Extracts from interviews must be analysed in connections with knowledge about people's everyday life. If we do not ask about conditions, we cannot analyse the connections between what people do and their conditions for doing it.

The work of identifying connections in the material also occurs by working with examples. These may be examples that illustrate common connections, or where a contrast or a conflict is involved. Some examples capture the researcher's concentrated attention. They may be special in the sense that they stand out and thereby illustrate general conditions in a special way, or show something that is 'repeated' in various ways many times. It may concern examples where the researcher notices something immediately, but it is only possible to analyse it through a deeper knowledge of the material.

The writing process in itself is a contribution to the analytical practice. Having to disseminate the knowledge you have gained through participation in a field involves systematizing and reflecting on connections. This should not be understood as a search for the unambiguous or for what matches. Often, curiosity is directed at what does not add up in terms of dilemmas and conflicts.

The researcher will often begin by selecting large parts of her material for the analysis, while the criteria for selection (why this interview extract is important, how it says something about a person's life situation or particular perspective) is not specified. The researcher knows about many more connections and dimensions in the material than the reader, and it is only when these connections are written down explicitly that others can see analytical connections, rather than more or less random interpretations of the material. The researcher must ask herself: Why have I chosen this? What do I learn from this extract from an observation – what does it point to based on my knowledge of the field?

In the analysis, it will be important to present all of the parties concerned as having reasons for their actions, i.e. not to describe one perspective at the expense of another. The researcher's curiosity should be included throughout, also in relation to actions that the researcher is critical of. She must be inquiring and investigative: What can this be related to?

Summing up

In this article, we have attempted to illustrate how researchers and co-researchers work with shared problems. Although researchers and co-researchers are connected in common efforts, these efforts nevertheless have different meanings for us, and we can translate them and pursue them in different ways in terms of research practice and professional practice. One could say that researchers and co-researchers are connected through their differences, through different ways of dealing with the shared problems. Researchers and professionals and their users are both separated in different places, tasks and conditions, and connected through the fact that we have tasks in relation to each other. These tasks are not unambiguous, however. There are political, professional and scientific disputes about both the role of research in a welfare society, and how social problems should be understood.

So, not only are there differences between the researchers and the people they collaborate with, there are also plenty of differences internally between the professionals, and internally between the researchers. This is one of the things we can learn from the collaboration, that the differing and conflicting perspectives can be analysed and can tell us something about the structures in which and with which we work. We obtain an insight into how the fields we work in and across (not least the research field) are problematically organized. Issues of power, hierarchal relations and unequal possibilities are at stake in various ways, both within and across the fields we work in.

The relation between research and practice (just like the relations between different professional practices) can be organized in ways that impede collaboration and joint contributions. This illustrate structural problems: The research is very problematic linked to a number of other practices, such as professional practice which it is used to evaluate, monitor, document, manage, standardize and much more. At the same time, the division of labour is created in a historical development and is re-created and changed, and not least discussed, as we do here. In our article, we want to inspire debate about this division of labour and make a proposal to regard collaboration in research as mutual learning processes. It is an invitation to challenge narrow perceptions of what research can be, and to experiment with ways of cooperating. It is also an invitation to professionals, civil servants and other user groups to engage actively in research's issues and processes, and thereby use research and contribute to mutual learning processes.

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