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# How to Generate Knowledge from Single Case Research on Innovation?

Øyvind Pålshaugen

The article starts with some specifications of the question raised in its title. These specifications makes clear that in practice this is a question of providing some *partial, supplementary* knowledge which is useful for those who are involved in processes of organisational change and innovation. Then follows a few methodological considerations, which emphasises the *complementary* role of the researchers versus to actors within enterprises in the kind of action research projects presented in this article. The case presented is one of broad participation in organisational innovation, based on an action research project in a Norwegian enterprise. It is shown that contrary to common belief, the broad participation in the discussions and the preparation of the foundations for the decision making by the top management is of great importance both to the employees and to the enterprise, even though the final decision on organisational choice was quite different from what was wanted and expected by the employees and the middle management. In the final section it is argued that the possibility of making use of knowledge generated from single case research on innovation is immensely enhanced when the diffusion of knowledge takes places as an aspect of national programmes of innovation. This is because then not only the general validity of but also the *general interest* of such knowledge are much greater.

**Key words:** knowledge generation, organisational innovation, broad participation, dialogue conference, decision making

### **I. Introduction: What kind of knowledge to be generated?**

“How to generate knowledge from single cases” may be considered an example of the kind of general questions of which it is not possible, or wise, to try to provide a general answer. On the other hand, any answer that may be given to this question will fail if it is not able to attain general interest. And, in order to attain general interest, the answer must also be of some general value, not to say validity. To this I have no objection. What I would object to, is the belief that there has to be established in beforehand criteria according to which the general value and validity of the answers can be judged. The most important, and the less controversial, consequence of the fact that it is not always possible to give general answers to general questions is that the question itself has to be specified. Thus, as for the question of what knowledge can be generated from single cases in action research, I will try to make this question more precise by presenting a few specifications.

Firstly, I will remind that the knowledge provided by action research is presumed to be knowledge that is *useful* outside the scientific community, useful to the so-called practitioners. Action research within working life is presumed to be useful for various groups of actors, both within the enterprises and within the organisations and institutions that are somehow devoted to working life development, reforms and politics. In a very general sense, knowledge from action research by and large seems to have the same kind of goal as knowledge generated from management and organisation studies: to provide a better understanding in order to support and promote better managerial and organisational practices. This means that the kind of knowledge to be generated from action research is knowledge that should be useful in efforts of enterprise development, organisational change and innovation.

This purpose of providing useful knowledge has an implication that is quite often overlooked by the more conventional studies of management, organisation and innovation: in order to be useful knowledge, the knowledge generated has to be of a kind that *adds* something to the knowledge that the actors within the organisations in the field already have. For instance, there are lots of case studies of organisations that to a very large extent only reproduce the knowledge of the organisational phenomena that already exists among the members of the organisation(s) in question. The most simple

reason for this is of course that the empirical material of organisation studies most often are generated by some methods of gathering data by questioning, observing, interviewing etc. a smaller or larger selection of the people working within the organisation(s). They get back from research what they put into it in the first place.

Another reason, also quite simple, is that organisation and innovation studies are written to be read foremost by people who do not work within the organisation(s) where the study is undertaken. Thus a presentation of empirical material that mainly consists of a reproduction of what is common knowledge to those who 'makes up' the case, seems to be necessary in order to make sense of it outside its original context. A rather frequent, unintended consequence of this strategy of writing case studies is that the efforts made to provide *comprehensive* knowledge of the case tends to overrule or substitute for the efforts of generating some *new, additional* knowledge on the basis of the case. The case study is thus turned into 'just another case'.

A third reason, related to the second one, is that what is presented as new knowledge in organisation studies very often turns out to be not really new knowledge, but just rather common knowledge presented within a new theoretical framework. As we know, more or less new theoretical frameworks are rather continuously developed within management and organisation theory. But, as we also know, that a new framework (may) make us see well-known phenomena from a new angle, does not mean that we thereby get some really new knowledge about the phenomena. In particular, when there is a demand for knowledge that is more *useful* than the already existing knowledge, the effect of presenting comprehensive empirical studies in (some) new theoretical framework seems to be limited. The reader has to invest more intellectual energy in understanding the general theoretical framework than in creating an understanding of its possible practical consequences.<sup>1</sup>

For all these reasons, the aim of generating knowledge from case studies in action research is not to generate comprehensive knowledge of the case(s)

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<sup>1</sup> For an example of a more elaborated and specific presentation of these points, see Pålshaugen (2009).

in question, but rather to generate some new knowledge of those *aspects* of the case that may be considered a *supplement* to the knowledge that we suppose already exists on the phenomenon under study. The research strategy is thus to provide some partial, *supplementary* knowledge with the purpose that it shall be useful in creating change. The purpose is not to provide some comprehensive knowledge with the purpose or ambition of presenting ‘what is the case’, knowledge that for a large part reproduces what is more or less already known.

To give examples: there exist a large number of theoretical models of organisational structures for most kinds of enterprises in most kinds of business areas (industrial enterprises, service enterprises, knowledge enterprises, etc.). For any particular enterprise to develop the kind of organisational structure that fits its specific conditions, the big problem is usually not to search among the abundance of theoretical models in order to find one that fits best; the big problem usually is to find the kind of working ways and methods that make it possible to carry out the process of organisational innovation in practice, along with the performance of the daily work. It is not to find what organisational structure would be the best solution, but to find working procedures for organisational change that allow for the specific solution to be developed in the course of the run in accordance with the local conditions, that makes up the big challenge, in practice. Consequently, generating new, supplementary knowledge on *processes* of organisational change and innovation seems more adequate than generating new theoretical models on what organisational structures should be the result of processes of organisational change.

However, we cannot forget that, as a scientific undertaking, action research is supposed not only to generate knowledge that is useful for practitioners. Action research should also contribute to the generation of new knowledge within the scientific community. And, as we have already touched upon, the kind of knowledge that is demanded by the practitioners is not necessarily the same kind of knowledge that is demanded by the scientific community. Generally speaking, the scientific knowledge to be generated from action research projects undertaken within (and in co-operation with) enterprises, will normally be regarded a contribution to management and organisation

theory. But in difference to the rather common, though unspoken, assumption within the scientific community, that the kind of knowledge generated from organisation studies and innovation studies may be of pretty equal interest to both academics and practitioners, action research projects are undertaken on the premise that the need for (new) knowledge is pretty different.

One obvious reason, which is also commonly realized, is that what may be new knowledge to practitioners is not necessarily new knowledge to researchers and academics, and, though less commonly realised, *vice versa*. Perhaps even more important is another reason that we also have already touched upon, namely that the kind of knowledge that is required to fulfil practical purposes (e.g. processes of organisational change) may in certain respects differ quite a lot from the kind of knowledge that is required to fulfil theoretical purposes (e.g. to provide a scientific understanding of some organisational phenomena). Even though knowledge of both kinds is about *understanding* something, it is not necessarily neither the same kind of understanding, nor the same kinds of phenomena, that are to be understood. We may obtain a general notion of this difference if we think of knowledge that is generated and used in order to *do* something as part of a *practical discourse*, while the knowledge that is generated and used in order to just *understand* something may be considered as part of a *theoretical discourse*.

At present it will suffice to remind that just like some theoretical knowledge of management and organisation are not necessarily neither new nor interesting to practitioners, knowledge that is interesting or useful to practitioners are not thereby automatically neither new nor interesting to the scientific community. Therefore, as regards the ambition of action research to generate new knowledge within the theoretical discourse of management and organisation theory, it is absolutely required to have a vigilant eye for what may/is to be regarded as new knowledge within this discourse. In general, two kinds of new knowledge may be generated. The one kind is what we may term *positive contributions* to organisation theory. That is, new knowledge or new perspectives on some particular aspects, issues or phenomena that are among the crucial topics of organisation theory. The other kind we may term *critical contributions* to organisation theory. That is, critical perspectives on some particular aspects, issues or phenomena within organisation theory,

including the way these topics are treated or coped with within the theoretical discourse on organisations that takes place within the scientific community. One example is the so-called critical management theory, another example would be the creation of some kind of *critical theory* of relevance to the discourse on organisation theory (Pålshaugen 2006).

Having specified the question of what knowledge can be generated from single cases by the lines of arguments that are sketched in this section, I will below try to elaborate one answer to this question by means of presenting a case. However, before presenting the case a few remarks on methodology and methods seem appropriate.

## **II. Methodological considerations**

As we know, “method” stems from the Greek word *methodos*, which means the way one has to follow in the pursuit of something (*meta* has both the meanings “above”, “after” and “by”; *hodos* means “way”). What way to follow, then, is dependent on what you are after, or what you are looking for. In questions of research methods, there is no question of applying the device “one size fits all”. The apt device is rather the opposite: The methods to be applied have to be in accordance both with the kind of phenomenon to be investigated and the kind of knowledge to be generated concerning the phenomenon. For instance, if the research question is what is the attitude of managers in Germany towards democracy at work, a questionnaire would probably be a suitable method. When doing research on aggregated units action research methods are usually not appropriate, and to my knowledge no such research projects have been exerted.

On the other hand, in order to explore the dynamics of organisational change within some particular enterprise, applying a questionnaire would generate rather ‘tiny’ knowledge of this phenomenon. Of course, in the case of a very big corporation a questionnaire might serve as one of the methods, but both interviews and eventually some observation techniques would serve to provide some more in-depth knowledge of the case. These kinds of considerations are well-known to any social researcher, and most researchers are able to handle a certain number of the methods that make up the standard

repertoire of social research methods. Such kinds of considerations are relevant also in the case of action research, but since the methods of action research are at best *becoming* a part of the standard repertoire of social research methods, I will elaborate a little on the reasons for the choice of methods.

The purpose of action research is a combined one: both to *make use* of scientific knowledge to contribute to practical development and change within some particular field, and to *generate new knowledge* of some particular aspects of this field, knowledge that may be of general interest to the scientific community and which in turn may be useful to the practitioners. Historically, the intervention into the field by researchers was done mainly to serve the second part of this double purpose. The rationale for intervention was formulated by the slogan (attributed to a number of scholars, among them Kurt Lewin): “If you want to understand a social system, try to change it”. In a certain sense, this slogan means just taking the above sketched line of reasoning one step further: questionnaires may give you bits and pieces of information from a large number of respondents/units; interviews may give you some more comprehensive information from a more limited number of respondents; (participative) observation may give you some personal experience from each particular situation you observe, and intervening in the field, which action researchers do, may give you particularly rich personal experience of a number of aspects of the field, in particular those aspects that are important for understanding how to change it.

However, if we remind ourselves that the point of making scientific knowledge become useful to practitioners is exactly to help them make *changes and innovations* in the field, the purpose of getting knowledge of those aspects of the field that are particularly important to make practical changes is rather coincident with the purpose of doing research in a way that makes scientific knowledge useful in practical change. Thus, in general, intervention in the field seems an apt method to serve both purposes. The kind of interventions, and the specific methods by which the interventions are undertaken in practice, in each particular case, is dependent on the specific need for change and the specific kinds of knowledge that is relevant to generate from the kind of case in question. Consequently, I have to make a few



remarks on the kind of organisational changes my colleagues at the Work Research Institute (WRI) and I have tried to pursue over the years, and the kind of knowledge that has proved to be of particular interest/relevance in this connection.

Put in very general terms, the overall research question we have pursued in recent decades may be formulated like this: *How to organize and carry out processes of enterprise development and innovation based on broad participation from management and employees?* The background for pursuing action research on this question is both of a more general kind, relating to the development of working life in Western Europe, and of a more local kind, relating to the specific development in Scandinavia, and of course Norway in particular. At the most general level, much research has been conducted that indicates that the participation of those affected in processes of organisational change is a means to make a successful outcome. Case-studies that report on successful single enterprises are supported by findings from cross-national surveys that have explored the relationship between representative and direct participation in enterprise development (Frölich/Pekruhl 1996; Markey/Monat 1997; Heller et. al. 1998). Also a related branch of organisation studies, investigating the effect of job redesign and various strategies for “empowerment” of the employees, supports these general conclusions.

However, general research results supporting such conclusions, and general support on these conclusions also from at least some groups among management and HR staff in various business sectors does not mean that enterprise development and innovation based on broad participation is a general phenomenon *in practice*, neither in Western Europe, in Scandinavia nor in Norway. The reasons for this are manifold, and many of them are quite easily understood. In a certain sense, most of the reasons are considered to be of a practical kind: lack of time, lack of resources, lack of competence, lack of support, etc. But just because these kinds of reasons are considered to be practical ones, they are in fact also to some extent *theoretical* reasons: Any consideration on something is also a way of *thinking* about something. And it seems that the considerations undertaken on strategies of enterprise development and innovation based on broad participation are accompanied by a kind

of sceptical thinking that is condensed in the old German saying: *Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis.*

Managers and other stakeholders within working life that hold this combination of a sympathetic and sceptical attitude towards the question of enterprise development and innovation based on broad participation, are thus among our strategic important collaborators in action research projects on this issue. If we get involved in such projects, we will obtain the possibility both to demonstrate how research-based knowledge may be useful to the practitioners in their efforts of organisational change, to demonstrate that the “theory” of broad participation may work in practice, and, least but not last, to generate new knowledge of *how* and *why* it works.

As we have already touched upon, these kinds of projects also have to generate knowledge of relevance and interest to the research community. From this point of view, our research interest in pursuing enterprise development based on broad participation may also be conceived as a research question of how to contribute to a (further) democratization of working life. Just because democratization of working life is not simply a goal in itself but also a means to improve both the competitive advantages of the enterprises and the working conditions of people at work, strategies of change that are strategies of both development and democratization, are of particular interest in research projects.

More recent theories of democracy have argued well that processes of democratization should not necessarily take on the form of searching for some particular democratic form or democratic structure as the goal of the process. (e.g. Habermas’ works). Rather, the *procedures* of democratization are as important for the result of the process as the theoretical model of what organisational forms the process should end up with. In this connection, the criterion that enterprise development should be based on broad participation is to be regarded an important criterion to a strategy for *procedural democracy*. Hence, it is part of our research strategy also to generate new knowledge on how to promote democratization of working life by means of democratic procedures of enterprise development and innovation (Pålshaugen 2002).

One important methodical consequence of this research strategy is that in our collaboration with enterprises on issues of development and innovation, we are both in theory and in practice less concerned about questions on the *content* of the development work than we are concerned about the *form* of the development work, that is, the procedures, the ways of working, in short the overall development *process*. Our interest in this respect also fits very well with the complementary interests of the enterprises. For one thing, in a capitalistic system based on private property of the means of production, it is in the end left to those who represents the owners the enterprise to decide *what* they want to obtain by the process of development or innovation. And moreover it is the people within the enterprise that are the 'experts' as regards the content of their work, including the work with development tasks. Thirdly, on the condition that processes of enterprise development and innovation are processes to be based on broad participation, divergent views among the people within the enterprise on what should be prioritised as the most important tasks of development and innovation has to be handled as part of the process. Thus, our competence is of a complementary kind, and pertains first and foremost to the question of *how* to obtain the goal: which work procedures to apply, which ones will be in accordance with the constellation of goals for the process.

This focus on the process does not at all mean that we are not involved in questions of the content of the work, neither does it mean that we do not make any use of our knowledge in issues of management and organisation. Rather to the opposite: It is on the basis of our (con-current) analysis of the content of the work with the development tasks of the enterprise and our knowledge and competence in questions of organisational matters, that we are able to provide both practical and theoretical input to the process of development and innovation. On the theoretical level we provide perspectives on the options as regards the question of what kind of work procedures are in best accordance with the content of and goal of the work. On the practical level we may assist in organising and carrying out those work procedures that the parties within the enterprise decide to be tried out in practice.

From theoretical and practical experiences with action research projects of this kind over a few decades we have developed a number of methods, tech-

niques, theories and perspectives on how to proceed by enterprise development and innovation based on broad participation. It is important to note that even though the methods of enterprise development and the methods of research overlap, they are not identical. In general, the experiences, information and data generated by our theoretical and practical work with the questions pertaining to the overall development process make up most of the empirical material of the research. However, literature studies, document studies and other, quite conventional forms of data gathering usually are also part of the project, in various kinds of combinations.

Both the development methods and the theoretical knowledge and perspectives of enterprise development and innovation are to a great extent generated from a number of action research projects in collaboration with enterprises, both single enterprises, networks of enterprises, and networks of enterprises and other institutions/organisations which are somehow dedicated to the task of working life development. As for the methods of development, they to a very large extent consist of concepts, tools and devices for organising various kinds of *dialogues* among various groups of people (management and employees at all departments/levels).

The ways of organising such dialogues is mainly dependent on the organisational structure or the task structure of the enterprise. In principle it is not one's formal position in the organisational hierarchy, but one's functional contribution to the overall task performance that is the point of departure for participating in the dialogues. Dialogues on improvements of task performance, innovations in task performance and reorganising of task performance require on the one hand participation from those who represents the competence in performing particular tasks, but new ways of performing dialogues between those is also a requirement for innovative dialogues. Thus, the need for organising new kinds of dialogues. In order to discuss the possibilities of development and innovation within the context of the whole enterprise or one organisational unit within the enterprise, it is useful to organise so-called *dialogue conferences* which allow for a large number of participants (up to 200), oscillating between dialogues in groups and plenary sessions (Pålshaugen 2001).

The purpose of those dialogues are on the one hand to make all relevant knowledge, competence, perspectives and viewpoints available to the development process, in order to create as innovative solutions as possible to the development tasks in question. On the other hand it is also a purpose to make both insights and prejudices, both commonly accepted perspectives and conflicting perspectives, both common interests and particular interests to be made part of the dialogues. In this way a quite comprehensive diagnosis of the situation and of the challenges that the enterprise as an organisation is facing is provided, and also the more or less broad spectre of viewpoints and options as regards what should be *done* in this situation is provided. When both the diagnosis and the suggestions of what to do is provided by broad participation, this of course represents a quite valuable foundation for making the necessary *decisions* on what to do. However, the relationship between the generation of the foundation for making decisions on the basis of broad participation and the content of the decision(s) that is/(are) made, is more complex than what common knowledge in organisation theory makes us believe. Thus, I will use an example of such a case, in order also to suggest one single answer on how to generate knowledge from single cases.

### **III. How to generate new knowledge from one single case?**

#### **An example<sup>2</sup>**

An enterprise within the process industry, Hustadmarmor AS, located near the city of Molde, engaged researchers from WRI to support them in a planned 3-year process of organizational development, based on the strategy that all employees should have a chance to participate actively. The management and employees at Hustadmarmor comprised at the time (2001-2003) about 140 persons. To make everybody participate in the discussions of what are the problems, what should the future be like and how to get there in practice, three dialogue conferences were organized as the start of a process of organizational renewal and innovation. On that basis various project

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<sup>2</sup> The presentation at the following next two pages is drawn from an article where this case is presented within another theoretical and historical context (Pålshaugen 2004).

groups were organized to work out ideas for new solutions and proposals on how to carry them out in practice.

Among the big issues was the question of how to organize the main production process. After the dialogue conference, a project group worked out a number of alternative organizational models. This project group had, through the dialogue conferences, learned both the importance and some of the techniques to perform dialogues, so they were careful to apply devices for engaging a broader part of the work force in the process of working out these models, and in particular the process of evaluating them. In addition a new dialogue conference was devoted to this particular issue, with participants from all levels of management plus the union representatives (ca. 40 persons). Like the first three dialogue conferences also this one were designed and facilitated by a team of researchers from WRI, among them the author.

At this last conference, it became clear that practically all middle and lower management, plus the union representatives, were in favour of an alternative of organisational innovation that briefly speaking represented a way of organizing teams along the production line. This alternative was also in accordance with the view of the majority of the workers that had a chance to evaluate the main organizational models. However, the top management advocated another model, which briefly speaking was to divide the production line into four separated departments: this model was termed 'blocking'.

The discussions on this dialogue conference were quite intense, and the top management did not succeed in convincing the others that 'blocking' was the best organizational model. A dialogue conference, though, is a forum for creating new knowledge by exchanging, experiences, viewpoints and interpretations. The dialogue conference is not a decision-making forum, it is a forum for generating the foundations for decision-making. And on the basis of this whole process of dialogues, participative design and evaluation of models, the top management decided to go for: the 'blocking' model. The reaction from the majority of the others included astonishment, anger, many question marks and a lot more, but the management's right to make the final decision is indisputable. Disputable, however, is of course the content of the decision, and it is well known that decisions on organizational models that

are too disputable will risk entering into severe trouble when it comes to carry out the decision in practice.

What happened at Hustadmarmor was that the discussions that followed in the wake of the somewhat unexpected decision by and large ended with a conditional acceptance, in the sense that most people were willing to 'give it a try' in practice. And the main reason for this was not that they changed their mind about which organizational model they preferred. The main reason was that in the course of all the dialogues and discussions that had been undertaken in order to elaborate the different organisational models, they had the experience that no single model would solve all problems: all models had their benefits and shortcomings, they solved certain dilemmas and generated new ones, and there were legitimately different interpretations of the meaning and practical consequences of most aspects of each model. Therefore they realized that the only way to judge the quality of the model that was chosen by the top management was to 'give it a try': to test it out in practice.

Without participating in this kind of dialogues the management and employees would not have had this knowledge of the legitimacy of different interpretations, which means that the final answer to the question of what is best in practice is not to be found by the one final argument, but by the final action. In fact, if these kinds of dialogues had not preceded the decision of the top management, they had risked that their attempt to implement a 'blocking' model might have been subject to a kind of 'sabotage'.

The majority of both middle/lower management and the employees would have been inclined to 'decline' the model of 'blocking', and this decision would have been made on what is, literally speaking, theoretical grounds: The majority did not believe in the theoretical model of the production process divided into four departments, which they regarded to be a 'bad' model. Throughout the dialogues this 'knowledge' was reinterpreted, and even though they did not change their minds, they gained enough new knowledge to become more open-minded, which was an important condition for an eventual successful implementation of the 'blocking' model, which, practically everybody at Hustadmarmor agreed on that today, has been quite successful in practice.

The knowledge to be generated from this case, as regards the overall research question of how to succeed by processes of enterprise development and innovation based on broad participation, contains more than just some additional knowledge such as that the dialogical methods for participation were applicable also in this kind of situation; that the particular combination of dialogue events and use of project groups is important for the progress of work and final success in each particular case; and so on. The most interesting new knowledge to be generated from this single case concerns the role or function of broad participation as a combined mean to both develop and democratize enterprises.

It is commonly supposed that in order to obtain increased democratization of working life, it is necessary for representatives of the employees to exert increased influence on the decisions made within enterprises. It is also commonly supposed that increased influence of the employees means a reduction of the power of management to make decisions. Further, it is also a common opinion that increased participation in discussions and dialogues on enterprise matters will be of limited or even no interest for the employees, if they do not by the same token obtain some increased participation in the forums where the decisions are made. Another version of this analysis is that if the majority of people within an enterprise are invited to participate in discussions, and to present their views on questions of essential importance for the future development and survival of the enterprise, it will not be really possible for the management to make decisions that are contrary to the viewpoints of the majority. In fact, this opinion is so commonly held both by management, union representatives and work life researchers that it is regarded as common knowledge rather than a common opinion (*episteme* rather than *doxa*). This “knowledge” is among the important factors that maintain the scepticism against strategies of enterprise development based on broad participation.

However, as we have seen, the lesson to be learned from the *Hustadmarmor*-case is that it contradicts all these suppositions, opinions or knowledge. Most obvious, the management did not follow the view of the majority when they made their decision on the future organisational structure. Less obvious, but not less true, is that the participation in the dialogues on the future organisational structure of *Hustadmarmor* was of significant interest even though



they had no increased formal influence in the decision-making, and the decision did not follow their recommendation. I will therefore elaborate this point in somewhat more details.

As I have briefly described above, the participation in the dialogues on the different new organisational forms made both the management and the employees involved in the dialogues obtain increased knowledge of the fact that any new organisational form will both solve some old problems and create some other new ones. By the same token, many of them also obtained the insight that different kinds of organisational dilemmas pertain to different kinds of organisational structures. There are always organisational choice(s), but there is never an organisational choice by which all such dilemmas will be settled. The increased awareness of this as a kind of general knowledge, and the more specific knowledge of what this meant as regards the two main alternatives at *Hustadmarmor*, made it easier for the majority to accept the decision in favour of the 'blocking' model, and most important, made the majority more inclined to engage in the *practical* realization of this new organisational structure.

In the course of the run, it was the practical experiences made with the new structure that led to the gradual appearance of a general acceptance of the new organisational structure. As a consequence, when the new organisational model was accepted and no longer a conflict issue the experience of having participated in the overall process of organisational development was considered more important than the experience of having "lost" the battle on the overall decision. In this way, the significance of having participated in the organisation development process was dependent not only of the decision that was made by management. Quite as important was what they had experienced and learned by their participation in the organisation development process.

By means of this participation they had, on the basis of their experience and knowledge, both contributed to better analyses of the main alternatives of choice as regards organisational innovation, and they had learned about the kind of dilemmas that pertains to various kinds of organisational structure. Thus, they had also learned that organisational choice is always a choice between different kinds of organisational dilemmas. Such dilemmas cannot

be solved within a theoretical discourse; they have to be coped with in practice. The solution on paper that is finally chosen is never the final solution. To make the solution work well in practice it has to be worked out in practice, and this work means coping with dilemmas and conflicts, as well as making adjustments in the course of the run. And these subsequent discussions on adjustments may be regarded as part of an ongoing/continuous practical discourse on organisational development.

#### **IV. Finale: How to generate knowledge on single cases from *Modellversuche***

On the basis of the various kinds of knowledge presented above, knowledge that was generated from this single case we may also formulate an important kind of knowledge in a more general form. It is generally believed that in processes of enterprise development and innovation based on broad participation, one of the main goals with the dialogues is to create *consensus* among the participants. More specifically, a *common understanding* of what is the case and a *common opinion* on what to do, among the participants of the process of change and innovation, is considered a prerequisite for a successful result of the process. However, from the *Hustadmarmor* case we have learnt that this emphasis on *consensus* is to be regarded a belief, rather than a piece of knowledge.

From the *Hustadmarmor* case we have learnt that the meaning and aim of broad participation in change processes is not to create a broad, theoretical consensus among the participants, as a basis for action. What is required is not the creation of a common understanding and common opinions, which both are of a certain theoretical nature. Rather, what is required is the creation of a *common practical discourse*, with broad participation from both management and employees. Within this common practical discourse, there may be both different understandings, different opinions and of course different experiences. The aim of the dialogues is not to harmonize such differences, but to expose them to each other in dialogues, in order to challenge, to deepen and to develop <further> the kind of experience, understanding and opinions of each and every participant, and thereby generate a better founda-

tion for making decisions on what to do, as regards both the content of the decisions and the conditions for carrying them out.

Thus, the crux of the dialogues based on broad participation in processes of organisational change and innovation is not to make the participants come to a common understanding. The crux is to make them undertake a *common practical discourse*, in which they on the basis of their experience, knowledge and opinions try to develop the best practical reasoning about what to do in their particular case, like in the case of *Hustadmarmor*. Of course, the level of consensus will always be an issue, but not the main issue. On the one hand, an overall consensus on what to do does not mean that the organisation does the right thing, and on the other hand it may very well be possible to do the right thing in the absence of consensus, as we have seen by the example from *Hustadmarmor*.

This knowledge which I have just presented is generated from one single case, but I have nevertheless presented it as a piece of general knowledge. How can we justify that generalization? I will end this article with a brief discussion of this question, because this is an important issue also for the research undertaken in relation to the *Modellversuche*. The question of how to generate knowledge on single cases implicitly, of course, is also a question about the *general* value of such knowledge.

It may seem paradoxical, that the narrowing down of our research question turns out to be an important condition for the *general* value of the knowledge that was generated from the single *Hustadmarmor* case. As will be remembered, I have formulated the overall research question guiding the design of single research projects like this: How can we organize and carry out processes of enterprise development and innovation based on broad participation from management and employees? Thus, the main focus in our research publications is neither questions of the organisational structure nor the dynamic of organisational performance, neither the new organisational solutions nor the new products/processes that might be the outcome of innovation projects, even though we in the practical work with the projects are involved in, and gain knowledge of, all those issues. But by writing publications, the crucial question is, for reasons described earlier in this article: what kinds of knowledge from this project are of both general value and general

interest, as regards the organizing and carrying out the *process* of enterprise development and innovation based on broad participation from management and employees? The focus is on what are the crucial aspects of the *process*, and, in the case of *Hustadmarmor*, the knowledge generated on the meaning of *consensus*, or rather, the need for diminishing the conventional emphasis on the meaning of consensus, appears as an important knowledge of general value.

The question then, is how to undertake the generalization; how to justify the claim that this is knowledge that holds in general, not only in the case of *Hustadmarmor*? As we know, one conventional procedure for generalisation is to extrapolate by means of general statistical criteria: size of enterprise; kind of branch; kind of workforce; kind of customers; (kind of) location, etc. A 'finding' from one single case, an enterprise with these or those general characteristics, will in all probability be found also in other enterprises bearing on the same/similar characteristics, and may thus be held true for such a population of enterprises. The main problem with this way of making generalisations is not the problems pertaining to questions of probability in general and questions of how to select the criteria that define the actual population of enterprises in particular. The main problem is that most ways of selecting criteria which are selected for the purpose of justifying the generalisation from the single case in order to make the finding relevant for the research community, will create only a 'virtual' (or perhaps better, 'accidental') population of enterprises, in the sense that the finding that is claimed to be held true also for these other enterprises, will only virtually or accidentally be of any relevance to them. The finding may be justified as being of general *value* by this 'statistical' procedure, but it will not be justified as a finding of general *interest*.

Another way to put this is to say that that the described procedure of generalisation is based on a *decontextualised* population of enterprises. Any enterprise exists within a context, a context in which the enterprise operates, i.e. a real, dynamic context. But the 'context' of the enterprises within a population of enterprises shaped by general characteristics, is not a real, dynamic context, if anything, it is a virtual, static 'context'. The question, then, is: what kind of criteria would be helpful to make generalizations which

address those kinds of enterprises which do not make up just a *virtual* population, because they bear on some statistical/static similarities, but which makes up a *real* population, because they bear on some real, dynamic similarities, which means: they are involved in some similar kind of *processes*.

In order to suggest an answer to this question, the concept of a *Programme* will be helpful, both in theory and practice. For example, the research project undertaken at *Hustadmarmor* was undertaken as part of a national research programme in Norway. This research programme, entitled *Value Creation 2010*, comprised a number of research institutions and industrial milieus throughout the country, and both parties of working life in Norway participated in designing and carrying out this programme. Thus, certain common criteria were established for the research projects to be funded by this programme, and among those was the requirement that the research should somehow support processes of enterprise development and innovation. Hundreds of enterprises were in various ways involved in this programme (Gustavsen 2008). One simple point is that these enterprises, by dint of taking part in this national programme, made up a real population of enterprises to which the kind of general knowledge on the issue of *consensus* that was generated on the basis of the *Hustadmarmor* case, was of both general value and of general *interest*, because it was knowledge of a kind that might be useful to them in their practical development processes. These enterprises were involved in more or less similar *practical processes* of development and innovation, and this kind of new general knowledge on important aspects of such processes, was of both general value and general interest to them, because of the similarities of the practical challenges they were facing in these processes.

In other words: the knowledge on development and innovation processes generated from single cases is/will be of general interest mainly to other enterprises which are undertaking some similar kind of *practical processes*. But even when this is the case, within the theoretical discourses of the scientific community knowledge can still only be *claimed* to be generally valid and of general interest. If it is true that the proof of the pudding is in the eating, not until the scientifically generated knowledge actually becomes part of the *practical discourses* within working life communities (enterprises,

networks of enterprises, common arenas of, etc.), will both the general validity and the general interest of some knowledge be proved in practice. Thus, the ultimate evidence of the general value of knowledge from single cases is not to be found in the theoretical arguments for its representativeness, but rather in the extent of the practical use of this knowledge in the practical discourses within working life<sup>3</sup>. Consequently, the use of practical methods for the dissemination of knowledge into practical discourses of working life is as important as the use of methods for measuring the representativeness of the knowledge within the theoretical discourse of the scientific community, when it comes to the question of judging about the general validity and general interest of knowledge generated from single cases.

In this respect, national programmes of research and development are of particular importance: Such national programmes usually will, or they should, contain some practical methods or mechanisms for the dissemination of knowledge generated through the programme. It is widely accepted that a dissemination strategy has to be part of the programme policy. The question is: of what kind? Experiences from recent national programmes in the Nordic countries indicate that the most effective methods of dissemination of knowledge in this kind of context are various *communicative* methods. This means that the programme initiates and/or stimulates some kind of common *practical discourse*, e.g. a common practical discourse on how to organize and perform enterprise development and innovation. Such a practical discourse may be undertaken in many forms, and by many means: in networks of enterprises; at workshops, seminars and conferences; in particularly designed programme arenas, etc. Such meeting places and arenas may work as a kind of “search engine” for new, useful knowledge, and thus as a method of dissemination by communication.

In this connection the Norwegian research programme Value Creation 2010 serves as just one example. Since 2007 Value Creation 2010 has been integrated into a new, even more comprehensive national programme called

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<sup>3</sup> This concept of *practical discourse* as a process of ‘knowledge re-generation’ rather than ‘knowledge transference’ is presented in more elaborated ways in Pålshaugen (2004, 2006).

Regional R&D and Innovation (abbreviated VRI in Norwegian), which has an initial time-frame of ten years (2007 – 2017). This programme comprises projects in regions all over Norway. One of the fundamental components of the VRI programme is exchange of experience, learning and co-operation across scientific, professional, administrative and geographical boundaries. Therefore, the VRI programme contains a number of measures and instruments to create and support practical discourses, on both the regional and national level, with participants from trade & industry, R&D institutions, public authorities etc. with the purpose of generating collaboration on innovation projects.

But there are also other examples, from other countries, which comprises even greater number of enterprises and which also may bear on more resemblances to the Modellversuche. The Finnish national programme known under the acronym TYKES is another example (Alasoini 2006, 2008; Arnkil 2008). Research in relation to the German programme on Modellversuche might benefit from the kind of strategy for generating knowledge from single cases that I have presented in this article. Like in any large programme for stimulating and supporting development and innovation processes in enterprises, some evaluation has to be done that documents the results, as regards the total amount of the output. But as regards the creation of new knowledge, the results mainly are interesting at an aggregated level, as indication on the total output from the programme. Usually there is an enormous variety as regards the content of the local results, but what is interesting as regards the creation of new knowledge, is questions like this: what aspects of the processes were important in creating the results; which cases are sources of new knowledge as regards such aspects of processes; what knowledge will be crucial for the design of new programmes, etc..

In this way we may realize the importance of generating knowledge on single cases, on the condition that the strategy for posing research questions is in accordance with the kind of strategy that pertains to an overall (national or regional) programme of enterprise development and innovation: anything interesting that happens, literally takes place somewhere. And what takes place at some local site, may create knowledge of general value and interest to enterprises at other places, not necessarily similar enterprises, but enter-

prises that are involved in and struggle to find their way in similar processes. In case of knowledge about enterprise development and innovation processes, we may term this kind of knowledge specific knowledge of various kinds of “good practice”. And as pointed out by Alasoini and stressed by Arnkil, “‘good practice’ needs to be understood as *generative ideas*, rather than ‘ready made objects’” (Arnkil 2008). For this reason, the question of how to create common arenas for practical discourses, which allow for general knowledge from some specific enterprises (single cases) to be *re-generated* as useful knowledge to other specific enterprises through this common practical discourse, is just as important as the question raised in the title of this article. My point in this article, however, has not been to answer the second question, just to point out that an answer to the question of how to generate knowledge from single cases cannot be satisfyingly answered without posing also this second question.

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