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Gender issues in action research – Implications for adult education

Introduction

Gender equality is a widely recognized value. Still, on the practical level, it is not easy to achieve true gender equality even in contexts which are in many ways favourable to it. The context of my observations is Finland, a Nordic welfare state in which legislation, women's educational level and rate of participation in working life as well as day-care provisions for children favour gender equality. However, even in the Nordic countries ranking highest in the international comparisons of gender equality, gender wage gap, gendered segregation in work and education or hierarchic difference between the valued masculine and the devalued feminine have not disappeared.

Gender has proved to be a complicated issue both for research and practice. Gender change projects trying to make changes in detected disadvantages have repeatedly run into a problem: it is difficult to put gender issues on the agenda and it is difficult to keep them there. With three case examples, this article addresses the question why it is difficult to approach gender issues in change projects and what are the conditions that make it less difficult. All the cases relate to working life matters: the comparable worth case is based on my own research work; the systemic approach case and the democratic dialogue case I have found in the research literature. I start by presenting the various

ways in which gender is understood and the implications of this for research and practice. Secondly, I deal with the potential of action research in making a contribution to gender issues. Thirdly, I present the three cases by highlighting their successes and failures in achieving their objectives. After the presentation of the cases, I reflect on the similarities and differences between the cases. Finally, I suggest some challenges for adult education theory and practice in the context of gender issues and gender change projects.

Conceptualization of gender

Feminist and gender studies have produced knowledge of the forms of hierarchies, occupational segregation and division of labour, and through their findings, contributed to the understanding of organizations as gendered as it regards their structures and practices. There is much less knowledge, as Jeff Hearn (2000: 609–610) remarks, about change and intervention processes from the gender perspective. The accumulation of knowledge would require refinement both in the conceptualization of gender and understanding of change processes as well as new stands in the research/practice relationship.

In feminist research, the relationship between theory and practice has traditionally been close. A willingness to generate changes in unsatisfactory conditions has been a motivating force in doing research. Research has supported, among other things, provision of equal opportunities for men and women through educational interventions. Research has also paved way for such organizational practices that ensure equitable procedures in recruiting and career development, as well as in the integration of work and family.

Liberal-feminist movement (see a review by Calás and Smirchich 1996) has been active in keeping up the conversation on equal opportunities for men and women. In its early versions this approach has been based on the concept of biological sex and it has contributed to activities in which barriers have been removed from the route to equal opportunities. In its later versions also the social in the form of socialization into gender roles has been included in the gender concept. The way of conceptualizing gender in the approach is not, however, sufficient for tracing such processes which produce and maintain differences between men and women. The same applies to the radical-feminist movement which has emphasized differences between men and women and the need to value the differences as such. Therefore, a concept of gender which addresses the relevant aspects of the social structure and social process is needed to guide organizational interventions (cf. Hearn 2000: 609–610).

To overcome the stable and essentialistic sex/gender dichotomy, a widening group of researchers have suggested a conceptualization of gender as an activity. Candace West and Donald Zimmerman's (1987) article, which is considered to be the foundation-laying writing for these strivings, introduces the perspective of 'doing gender' (cf. also Korvajärvi 1998). For the purposes of this article, Joan Acker's writings in which she develops further in organizational contexts the 'doing gender' perspective are especially interesting.

Joan Acker (1997) has been interested in the processes which actually reproduce and maintain the structures placing women and men in different positions in society. By gender she understands patterned, socially produced distinctions between female and male, feminine and masculine (Acker 1992: 250). Behind the reproduction of gender inequalities she suggests to be four sets of processes. She calls them gendered processes, meaning that the advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a

distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine (Acker 1992: 251). The first set of processes she defines to be the production of gender divisions, the second is the creation of symbols and forms of consciousness to deal with those divisions, the third is the patterned social interactions enacting gendered relations, and the fourth is internal mental work of individuals in their construction of gendered understandings of their world and action (Acker 1992: 252–254).

Two of the cases to be presented here have linkages to the line of thinking proposed by Acker. I and my research group (Rantalaiho and Heiskanen 1997) have utilized Acker's multilevel understanding of gendering in a variety of settings in which structures of working life are reproduced, starting from classifications which describe waged labour relationships to collective bargaining, from daily experiences in work organizations to the borders between public and private spheres and further to change projects which try to do something with gender segregation and valuing of jobs. The first example, the comparable worth case, was based on the international theoretical and pragmatic discussion on the idea of comparable worth, the basic principle of which can be expressed briefly: equal pay for jobs of comparable worth. My own perspective to look at the case was influenced by the idea of gendered practices (Heiskanen 1997). The second example, the systemic approach case by a group of British and US researchers (Meyerson and Kolb 2000, Coleman and Rippin 2000, Ely and Meyerson 2000), derives its understanding of gender also from the multilevel view of gendering processes as presented by Acker, and the researchers try to put it to the test in the context of an organizational change process. The third example, the democratic dialogue case (Drejhammar 2001, 2002), is based on the Scandinavian tradition of action research but, differing from the mainstream of the tradition, the case approaches organizational change issues with gender sensitiveness.

Types of action research

The term ‘action research’ has been used in many different ways, which stems from different traditions and philosophical, psychological and political assumptions. Reason and Bradbury (2001), the editors of the voluminous *Handbook of Action Research*, define action research as ‘a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview’. Further, they define that action research ‘seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concerns to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities’ (p. 1). According to Reason and Bradbury (2001), action research ‘is only possible with, for and by persons and communities, ideally involving all stakeholders both in the questioning and sensemaking that informs the research, and in the action which is its focus’ (p. 2). These are characteristics which penetrate different traditions and approaches and describe, in broad terms, also the understanding of action research in this article.

One well-known example of an approach in which the idea of participatory and democratic process is prominently present is the Scandinavian approach of ‘democratic dialogue’. It has developed from the roots of Kurt Lewin’s field experiments and the work by the socio-technical school into an original orientation. The approach has been influential in developing communication arenas for representatives from different organizations to exchange their experiences (Gustavsen 1991) and the recent modifications of the approach have broadened the concept of network of organizations to a concept of development coalitions striving for enhancing development in organizations and regions (Gustavsen 1998, 2001). Gender issues have been only marginally on the research agenda made

within the framework of the approach. The democratic dialogue case to be presented here describes an attempt to use the approach in identifying and solving gender-related issues in workplaces.

The Scandinavian approach is not alone in its relative neglect of gender issues. Rather, gender issues have seldom been an explicit focus in the action research approaches in the first place. On the other hand, action research and a variety of feminism-informed studies with a gender focus have common concerns (e.g. Maguire 2001). The lessons action research might derive from the studies with a gender focus are that we need to explicate our understanding of gender, as argued in the previous section, in the specific settings to which we direct our attention. Within the framework of this article, this means wage work organizations.

The comparable worth case

The first example (Heiskanen 1997) relates to a comparable worth case in which a national approach was developed in close interaction with international experiences. The comparable worth strategy focuses attention on the wage gap between men's and women's jobs. The strategy made a breakthrough in the USA and Canada in the 1980s and early 1990s, and has since then gained ground in other countries as well. The advocates of the strategy speak for explicit policies whose most essential method is job evaluation. The core argument in the strategy is that, to rectify the wage bias, the contents and requirements of work should be acknowledged as the key issues which determine wages and that these should be assessed with a reliable evaluation method.

This article talks about 'the Finnish case' of comparable worth because the process had nationwide effects. Since the Finnish case strived to develop its own approach instead of a mere application of

existing international examples, it provided a new window of opportunity to observe how the gender issue was dealt with in the process and what kind of role the key actors gave to expertise in the turns of the process.

The comparable worth case represents a situation of social problem-solving in which a large number of actors were involved and in which informal parallel activities came into existence. The main role was played by the labour market parties and the committee set by them. A deeper understanding of the work of the committee, however, can only be achieved by contextualizing the committee's work in the wider discursive field around the topic and by paying attention also to the informal parallel activities related to the committee's work. Research had many roles in this process. The committee needed research to answer to the specific questions resulting from its task description. This research the committee commissioned to different research institutes. In the informal parallel activities, the feminist researchers participated in the discussions around the topic. I had an opportunity to observe the process as a researcher for about two years. My observations cover the discussions in the newspapers and labour market journals, the progress of the committee's work and the discussions in the joint forum of female labour market activists and researchers. I participated in the discussions held in the forum and was heard by the committee as an expert of working life research.

At the initial stage, the development of the job evaluation strategy in Finland was clearly a women's project. The first task was to generate consciousness about the problems and solutions in wage justice issues. The legislation in the provinces of Canada aroused women activists' interest. Contacts between Finnish women in labour unions and the state's equal rights administration with women activists in other countries as well as scholarly writings (e.g. Acker 1989, Gunderson 1989) and personal communication with Joan Acker and Margaret Hallock from the USA, for example,

provided a channel for a new way of thinking. An important event in increasing the interest in the issues was a seminar organized jointly by the Office of the Equality Ombudsman and Work Research Centre, University of Tampere, the site of my research activities. The aim of the seminar was to present current research topics and to discuss the equal rights policies in working life. The participants were civil servants dealing with equality issues, trade union activists, members of the political parties, Members of the Parliament, as well as journalists and researchers.

Political processes promoting the idea were in progress in different arenas. The blue-collar and white-collar central unions had appointed a joint working group whose task was to set targets for the solving of equal rights issues in working life. The group's report emphasized the development of job evaluation practices as a means of promoting equality. When the central labour market parties appointed the Job Evaluation Committee, the status of comparable worth changed overnight: it turned from the topic of seminars into a nationwide labour market issue. The committee, as its members representatives from all central unions, from both employers' and workers' organizations in the private as well as the public sector, a few experts and the Equality Ombudsman as its chair had the following tasks: 1) to find out more about the existing job evaluation systems, 2) to make suggestions as to how these could be developed further with special attention to female-dominated sectors and jobs, and 3) to think of ways how job evaluation comparisons could be made across sectors of employment.

The setting up of the Job Evaluation Committee was prominently reported by newspapers and the wide publicity continued through the committee's work period. Trade union papers in particular greeted the setting up of the committee enthusiastically, for example with the following headlines: 'Women's hopes are high' and 'Job evaluation ends wage gaps'.

Research was the way to get answers to the three questions defined at the onset of the committee work and, because research had such a prominent role, the question of who would do the research became crucial. The committee members had different favourites for research and, largely due to conflict regulation, the committee decided to split the research into subtasks, commissioning them to different researchers. From the point of view of social learning, the solution was less successful since each researcher had only a short contract and a true ground for progressive communication between the researchers and the committee was lacking. The research preconditions suited clear-cut technically oriented research tasks but were not good, for example, for reflecting on the formulation of the problems or for searching new perspectives.

The committee started its work in the spirit of *détente*, as the chair of the committee expressed it, and wanted to save such an atmosphere through its working period. Critical tones were saved for other forums and parallel activities. The most important forum for critical reflection, in which I also participated, was a women's group whose participants were women chairs from the female-dominated unions, women members of the Committee and a number of researchers with sensitivity to gender issues.

After the excitement-filled start, the women activists started to increasingly express worries in the women's group about whether the research proceeds to the basic questions. Their concerns related to the obvious insensitivity of the research to the gender bias which may hide both in working life practices and in research which produces knowledge of working life.

The women activists considered as the core question the undervaluing of women's jobs, which the systematic information, according to their expectations, would reveal. This was not, however, explicitly stated in the problem formulation of the committee. In fact, the understanding of the

research and development function varied within the committee and its members' interest groups, but these issues remained undealt with in the discussions within the committee. The committee proceeded with a relatively technical understanding of the task and relied on technical expertise in giving answers to the defined questions.

The women activists' worries about the process were connected to the hidden formulation of the problem. Their expectations went one step further than the official formulations. The women activists considered, however, as a value of weight to get the process started, to set the ball rolling, as they said, and they were not willing to jeopardize the committee's work by raising gender issues as unsolvable problems. The price they chose to pay for this was to keep the gender issues on the background and to rely on indirect ways of approaching gender issues through more general fairness argumentation, and by making demands that the research should be technically as competent and unbiased as possible.

The systemic approach case

The second example relates to an attempt to create a gender-equitable workplace (for more details, see Coleman and Ribbin 2000, Ely and Meyerson 2000, Meyerson and Kolb 2000). A group of British and US researchers set itself a goal to put to the test feminist understandings of organizational processes and structures and to offer alternative visions of organizing. The group succeeded in getting access to a global manufacturing and retailing company. The seven-member group of researchers leaned on the tradition of participatory action research, which required a close collaboration between the researchers and the organizational insiders.

The researchers set as their goal an intervention process which was due to be both critical and generative: critical, because an analysis using the gender lens would question the underlying assumptions, values and practices; and generative, because the analysis would reveal possibilities for transformation (Meyerson and Kolb 2000: 555). The researchers' main collaborators were change agents on the company level, on the one hand, and work groups in particular projects on the local level on the other. For over two years, the researchers made interviews and gave feedback on them, as well as participated in numerous meetings with the executive committee of the company, the group of change agents and specified work groups on the local level.

The different interests and knowledge basis of the partners in collaboration made it necessary to build bridges between these differences. The organization members had practical concerns and they were in need of concepts that they could readily apply. The researchers had elaborate but not well contextualized concepts from the feminist theories and they wanted to use them for critique and interventions. The bridging task proved to be much more difficult than the researchers had expected.

The researchers' theoretical starting point was based on the view that gender is systematically linked with strategic organizational issues. Their conceptual framework was based on the notion that gender inequities in organizations are rooted in taken-for-granted assumptions, values and practices that systematically accord power and privilege to certain groups of men at the expense of women and other men (Meyerson and Kolb 2000: 554). The task in the change would be to make the organization members aware of those assumptions, values and practices and create new ways of doing and thinking. According to the researchers, unquestioned assumptions and values may limit the activities of organizations in many ways by closing out, for example, alternative arrangements in organizing work, in defining work tasks for men and women, in arranging the relationship

between work and family and in judging collaborative forms of work not in accordance with the individualistic and competitive ideology.

The project got a good start for its working. The chief executive officer of the company was helpful in assigning some people to work as internal collaborators in the project. The members of the executive committee of the company and a number of people whom the researchers had contacted as potential inside change agents read the proposal and greeted it with enthusiasm.

A cornerstone of the intervention method was to find within the company employees who would commit themselves to functioning as change agents and take care of the practical intervention measures in collaboration with the researchers. The officially nominated internal collaborators were people who were working in different kinds of development tasks and responsible for employee training, maintenance of the company's corporate culture and organizational development. The researchers started to translate their theoretical framework into practice and to plan interventions with this group.

The researchers had quite a broad view on the concept of gender. The organization members instead equalized the term 'gender' with the term 'women'. The researchers used two routes to concretize their thinking and intentions and to bridge the gap in concepts. Firstly, they suggested a dual agenda for interventions. The researchers presented a model which was due to advance gender equality and, at the same time, to increase organizational effectiveness. The reasoning behind the model was that the same assumptions, values and practices that compromise gender equality often undermine effectiveness as well. By surfacing the connections, the researchers wished to be able to choose intervention points that would enhance both equality and business goals. Secondly, the researchers

presented concrete examples from projects undertaken in other companies. They hoped that the examples would inspire and give faith on the becoming change process.

Finally, it became clear that neither the suggested intervention strategy nor the examples were sufficient to convince the collaborators of the feasibility of the change process. For the interventions the researchers had suggested that they would provide the theory and analytical approach, while the organization members provide the local knowledge, experience and context. However, the researchers were unable to specify what the business benefits and improvements would be. They were also unable to show with the examples of the other companies what results the company might expect because there was no sufficient resemblance between the situation in this company and the example companies. To continue the process, a local project was needed which would concretize the objectives and methods of the approach.

The project got access to a manufacturing unit of the company to build a change project. Along with doing research in the unit, the researchers continued collaboration with the internal change agents. The recently nominated manager of the unit welcomed the project suggested by the researchers gladly with the hope that the project would give incentives for reorganization of the traditional production process, for development of the work culture towards a more encouraging model and for loosening the rigid sex segregation and improving gender equality in the unit. The manager was supportive in composing a work group due to collaborate with the researchers, but did not commit himself for the concrete activities of the project.

For the start of the collaboration with the work group, the researchers made interviews in the plant and presented the results for the work group in the form of a story showing structural gender patterns in the plant. The work group compiled a working agenda which contained a list of issues

needing improvements in the plant. As the researchers remark, the business side of the dual agenda was explicit in the defined goals but the gender side was implicit at best. In the beginning of the collaboration the researchers saw the relationship building the first priority. Because business or work problems were the primary concern for the organization members and the gender issues seemed more remote at least in the language in which the researchers talked about them, the researchers decided to leave them to the background for a while. However, at a later stage, there was no chance to return to them. The work group continued its working according to the goals it defined, and the gender issues slipped out of sight.

The researchers were deeply concerned about the process of losing gender in the actual change process in the manufacturing plant. In their next research stage they were more careful in keeping the focus on gender. The second local project was in the headquarters whose staff had expressed interest to investigate gender inequities in the corporate offices. In presenting the interview results in the headquarters the researchers made the gender implications very clear and the presentation seemed to resonate with the experiences of the headquarters staff. However, later discussions with the participants revealed that an analogous process had taken place in both the headquarters and the manufacturing plant. The staff members did not combine gender and business implications while analysing their actual work culture and ways of working. For them the analysis with gender focus was in itself interesting and thought provoking but their commitment was in ‘more pressing business problems’.

As an overall evaluation the researchers thought themselves to have been fairly successful in one task of the dual agenda, namely in the business and work issues. This was visible in the organization members’ willingness to rely on the researchers’ expertise in acute work problems. In

the other task, the gender issues, on which the researchers focused their own ambitions, they felt to have been less successful.

The democratic dialogue case

The third example is another kind of attempt to combine the goals of developing organizations and promoting gender equality. Inga-Britt Drejhammar's study (2001, 2002) is based on the theoretical and methodological thinking of the Scandinavian LOM programme. The programme was a national development programme of working life which supported development activities in about 150 enterprises with the contributions of 60 researchers (Engelstad and Gustavssen 1993). Even though the programme was broad, gender issues were only marginally present in its activities. Drejhammar has bridged this gap in her study with special focus on gender equality questions.

Behind the LOM programme lies a generative theory which gives guidelines as to how organizations can be created and developed. The theory is action oriented with three key concepts: arena, dialogue and resource (Gustavsen 1990). According to the theory, communication is the generative or creative mechanism to bring about changes in organizations. For the individuals to be able to construct knowledge in interaction with other individuals there is a need for arenas where the communication can take place. For all the people concerned to be able to participate in the discussions and bring forth their views on the matters there is a need for rules for the dialogues. For people to be prepared to express their views based on their own experiences in the dialogues there is a need for resources, a reasonable amount of autonomy being the most important of them. The LOM programme has been influenced by Jürgen Habermas' (1984, 1987) ideas of democracy and communication, especially his ideas of ideal communication situations in which well-grounded arguments are in the leading role instead of power, for example.

Inga-Britt Drejhammar and her colleague in the fieldwork stages, Kerstin Rehnström, could use in their work many of the basic ideas of the LOM programme, such as principles of democracy, emphasis on communication and support for individual autonomy. However, since the LOM programme had not paid special attention to gender, they needed other ideas from other theoretical sources as well. They leaned on feminist writings which illuminate the relationship of communication and power. Feminist writings have shown that gender aspect is missing from organization theories. A consequence of this has been that organizations are seen as gender-neutral but that behind the neutrality in fact is a male norm of qualifications and behaviour expectations. Drejhammar points to feminist writings (e.g. Holter 1992, Wahl *et al.* 2001) that have shown the ways in which the erroneous assumptions of gender neutrality prevent people from seeing how power and gender are related to each other and what consequences this relationship has for women's working conditions. Quite often it is the functional order in workplaces, including hierarchy, where male dominance resides.

The researchers' starting point for their research was that it is important to take into account the relationship between gender, organization structures and communication processes. Their basic assumption is that there are essential hindrances for women to express themselves in organizations. One is men's structural power over women, which is related to historical reasons. Another is that women have not had the same kind of access to communication arenas of society and working life as men have. The third hindrance is that, as a consequence of male power and limited access of women to communication arenas, women have limited communication ability in public arenas. In seeking practical solutions for improvement of communication in organizations from a gender perspective, the researchers ended up to apply the LOM programme's procedures, taking also into account Fraser's (1992) notions which emphasize that since women talk from a subordinated

position, there are special difficulties to create a symmetric relationship between men and women in joint discussions.

The project started with a work conference with 'Development of organization and equality' as its theme. Altogether nineteen people from four organizations participated in the conference, eleven of them were women and eight were men. The conference participants compiled project suggestions to be developed further in their own organizations. These suggestions related to the question how to create such working conditions and organizational settings that women would stay in and become recruited to the organizations and what kinds of actions would be needed to promote women's competence development. Three of the participating organizations, an engineering unit, a revision unit and a paper mill committed to continuing cooperation with the action research project; one organization chose another route for its development activities.

To become acquainted with the situations in the organizations, the research project conducted interviews in each of them. The development stage, which altogether lasted two and a half years, started with founding different kinds of work groups. As a difference to the LOM programme and in congruence with Fraser's (1992) concerns, in addition to the cross-functional groups, also separate women's groups were established and in the industrial organizations also supervisor groups from supervisors who lead women workers' work.

The project achieved some of its objectives in all the organizations. The most important were the following: 1) development and establishment of arenas for dialogues for continuing development work; 2) increase in knowledge of and insights into reasons for equality shortcomings between men and women and 3) concrete actions for women's competence development, especially for more qualified work tasks. The positive achievements were more substantial in the engineering and

revision units than in the paper mill. Partly this can be explained by smaller size and more active internal change agents in the former units and partly also by the rigid and hierarchical structure of the paper mill combined with male values.

Drejhammar (2002, 44) emphasizes the role of the women groups as a development support through the course of the project. In the male-dominated organizations (engineering, paper mill) women had adopted a withdrawing and defensive way of communication in situations in which men and women were together. In the revision unit where more than half of the workers were women they, however, felt that they as a group are invisible. In all the organizations the members of the women's groups felt it rewarding that they could talk undisturbed about matters which were not normally talked about in joint organizational discussions, to reflect openly on their own role and to seek remedies for unsatisfying communication situations.

Drejhammar's (2002, 44) conclusion from the project is that it is not sufficient that women get access to dialogue arenas. According to her, women also need to develop resources to be able to stand up and speak in various working life situations.

The cases and the action research situations

The three cases presented above are different regarding the research/practice relationship and are based on different but converging theoretical roots. Both organizational change projects (the systemic approach case and the democratic dialogue case) started from researchers' initiative, while in the comparable worth case, the labour market parties were the initiators. In an action research setting, the problems to be solved and stakeholders' commitment are core issues from the point of

view of the flow of the process. van Beinum (1998: 18, 19) has interestingly differentiated action research situations from the point of view of problem formulation and expectations concerning the development process and its outcomes. He uses symbols S1 for the starting situation, S2 for the end situation, π for means by which desired change will be achieved and ? to indicate that the situation or the means are undefined. In the first situation (S1 – π – S2) we know where we are, where we want to go and what to do to get there and it is the least problematic. In the second situation (S1 – ? – S2) we know where we are and where we want to go but do not know how to get there; it already provides a problem-solving situation. In the three other situations, confusions, ambiguities and uncertainties are more prominent. In the third situation (S1 – π – ?) we know where we are and what to do but do not quite know where we will end up; in the fourth situation (S1 – ? – ?) we know where we are but do not know where to go nor what to do; and in the fifth situation (? – ? – ?) we do not know what kind of position we are in or what to do, nor in what direction to go.

Some amount of ambiguity was present in each of the cases. With some reservations, the comparable worth case proved to be of the third type of situations. The need to collect more systematically information of the work requirements was acknowledged at the outset of the process and the general lines of the job evaluation system to be developed were also agreed on, but what the process finally would result remained an ambiguous issue. While the preliminary understanding of the problem was a given matter at the start of the comparable worth case, in the organizational change cases the researchers had to convince the stakeholders of the meaningfulness of the suggested development process. In the democratic dialogue case it succeeded better than in the systemic approach case. In the systemic approach case, the relation between gender issues and organizational matters stayed ambiguous. The systemic approach case is a mixture of van Beinum's (1998) categories four and five and the democratic dialogue case resembles a mixture of categories three and four. In the democratic dialogue case the situation was less diffuse than in the systemic

approach case, because the participating organizations of the democratic dialogue case could locate concrete problems in equality issues and define potential solutions to them.

By taking a closer look at the cases through a gender perspective, the placement of them into van Beinum's categories becomes more complex. van Beinum uses in the description of the categories an expression 'we know'. Specifically related to gender issues there in fact was in none of the cases a 'we know' situation but there were multiple problem formulations, either explicitly or implicitly. The multiplicity characterized also the motivational basis to know. In their definition of action research, Reason and Bradbury express that action research pursues practical solutions to issues of 'pressing concerns' to people. This situation of 'pressing concerns' described only some of the actors of the case studies, who considered gender issues to be of high importance.

Both feminist research and the participatory tradition of action research set empowerment goals, empowerment understood in general terms as a process in which people gain the ability to undertake activities, to set their own agendas and change events and as the ability of less powerful groups to participate in formal and informal decision-making and to exert influence (e.g. Crawley 2001: 26). All the cases can be said to have achieved empowerment goals on some areas. In the comparable worth case the female union activists created contacts to activists and researchers from other countries and joined the international discussion on the reasons and solutions of gender wage gap. The process resulted in an evaluation scheme usable as a tool in negotiations against undervaluing of women's work. In both organizational cases, the systemic approach and the democratic dialogue cases, groups whose access to public discussion arenas of the organizations is normally quite limited got a right to speak on the basis of their own experiences. Some of their suggestions were also taken into account as remedies to organizational practices.

How to keep the gender focus?

In spite of the achievements gained in the three cases something was missing. Both the comparable worth case and the systemic approach case have reported on difficulties in keeping the gender focus visible. In the comparable worth case the female union activists made a conscious decision to keep at some distance such matters which might disturb discussion between labour market parties. Even though they originally had hoped to be able to give more visibility to women's issues, they decided to let the more technical issues to lead the process. Acker (1989) has reported on an analogical course of events in a comparable worth case in the USA. In the systemic approach case the process more or less drifted to a direction in which gender faded out of sight. In the middle of the process the researchers deliberated that it might risk the cooperation relationship if the researchers tried to turn the course of actions towards the original idea of the focus.

What makes the gender issues difficult to approach? I point out here some reasons without any intention to be exhaustive. In action research projects the situation is often the kind that both the researchers and the stakeholders are anxious to get something into start. Quite often it also happens that not enough time is devoted to the question what the different parties really want from the future development process, what expectations and interests they have and in what ways they are ready to commit themselves to the process. Both the comparable worth case and the systemic approach case showed in the course of the process that there were diverging conceptions of what would and should come out of the process. The question of participants' interests is especially complicated in the gender issues because gender is strongly related to power and different kinds of privileges which the development activities might redistribute. When the development objectives require joint learning it is easier to postpone the questions of dispute and to start with something more neutral or shared, with the risk that there will be no chance later, either, to return to the matters of dispute.

A further complication to get a touch on gender issues follows from the pervasiveness of gender. Acker's (1992) systemic understanding of gender sheds light on the complicatedness of gender-related matters. Practices on many different levels can result in distinctions and divisions according to gender. In her evaluation of the systemic approach case, Acker (2000) emphasizes that the embeddedness of gendered assumptions in practices makes gender both pervasive and invisible. Since these assumptions are taken for granted, it is difficult to see that the practices actually contributing to gendered consequences have anything to do with gender.

In the systemic approach case the researchers had an ambitious goal of taking the multilevel understanding of gendered processes and practices seriously and to teach the organization members to see how complex the conception of gender can be. This proved to be too demanding a goal. In the democratic dialogue case the organization members dealt with concrete practices and what was thought to be problematic in the practices from the women's point of view. From a theoretical point of view, the gender issue was approached in a more straightforward way, and from the organization members' point of view, in a more comprehensible way in the democratic dialogue than in the systemic approach case. In the democratic dialogue case the research project conveyed the message that the participants' own experiences are the most important starting point for development activities. In the systemic approach case the researchers conveyed the message that the organization members should learn to understand gender-related issues as complex matters before they can root out gender inequities from the organization. The democratic dialogue case recognized as an achievement the partial remedies in women's working conditions and organizational position, while the researchers in the systemic approach case would only have been satisfied with a major change in the organizational thinking concerning gender matters.

Gender neutrality is one more phenomenon offered as an explanation to the difficulties to deal with gender issues. The feminist organization literature to which both the democratic dialogue and the systemic approach researchers refer has argued that research and theories in that field present organizations as gender-neutral without paying attention to the imprint of male norms and values behind the conceptions. In our own studies (Heiskanen and Rantalaiho 1997: 195) we have dealt with gender neutrality in a broader context of cultural definitions. We have suggested that two major types of cultural definitions cause difficulties in intentionally changing gendered practices. One is the 'naturalization' of gender and gendered hierarchies; another is the idea of gender neutrality. In our local cultural and national context those two aspects are closely intertwined. According to our reasoning, the practices which differentiate between women's and men's activities naturalize the gender hierarchy in the world of wage work, but so do also the practices that tend to hide the difference. Since in our cultural context the spirit of an already-achieved equality is pronounced, we have concluded (Heiskanen and Rantalaiho 1997: 196) that the seeming gender neutrality and the ideology of equality produce the very same hierarchy. The idea of gender neutrality proposes that gender should not be considered in some context because to do so would be either partial or detrimental to gender equality. But taking the neutrality idea as a starting point is a great obstacle to sensitivity and produces gendered consequences.

Ely and Meyerson (2000) ask whether it matters if the action research project loses gender out of sight if it in any case gets results which improve conditions and position of people involved. They give a tentative answer that it does. They think that, without gender focus, changes in practices that at the first sight seem beneficial might in any case have unwanted gendered consequences. That leaves us with the challenge of finding approaches and methods which help to keep an explicit gender focus through an action research process.

Implications for adult education

A unifying feature between feminist research and action research is the goal of empowerment and strengthening of agency. Both research traditions have strived to dismantle relations, structures and mechanisms that reduce agency of those in subordinated positions and to create conditions in which all people's voices can be heard and not only of those with power. Also in adult education empowerment and agency are often appearing terms, either together with terms like emancipation and personal growth or interchangeably with them. Adult education has needed concepts which bind together structural conditions of activity and individual development and which allow normative statements about the direction of development process.

Agency, which in general usage means a possibility of an individual or collective to act differently, to have an influence on the pre-existing state of affairs and to exert some sort of power (e.g. Giddens 1984: 9, 14–15), has a fairly fixed meaning in the context of gender issues.

Overwhelmingly agency has been seen through the lenses of male domination and female subordination and related structural conditions, most often conceptualized as patriarchy. In empirical field, however, autonomy and constraint which describe conditions of agency show a more diversified picture. In our own studies (Heiskanen and Rantalaiho 1997: 191, 192) we have found both great durability and potential for change in gendered practices. According to our observations, a typical feature of hierarchical gender-differentiating practices is an intertwining of several factors rather than a simple cause–effect relation. The circular process between different levels of social action includes both mutually reinforcing process links and unpredictable points. Therefore a strictly gendered hierarchical 'iron cage' may coexist together with an easy indifference towards it.

Such observations challenge the understanding of autonomy and agency which the dichotomy of male domination/female subordination implies. It is also Lois McNay's (2000) concern. She criticizes structural explanations of gender relations because of their lacking ability to make understandable how the structural relations operate at the level of daily life and how the individual moves between and negotiates different sets of power relations. McNay (2000: 5) calls for a generative notion of agency to make understandable how individuals when faced with complexity and difference may respond in unanticipated and innovative ways which may hinder, reinforce or catalyze social change. She thinks that understanding agency as 'the capacity to manage actively the often discontinuous, overlapping or conflicting relations of power provides a point from which to examine the connection between the symbolic and material relations that are constitutive of a differentiated social order'(McNay 2000: 16).

Adult education is facing the need to adapt its practices to the post-modern condition in which ambivalence and contingency rather than certainty dominate social and cultural life. As Finger *et al.* (1998: 14, 15, 21) argue, such conditions contain many different and contradictory options concerning the future of social life. They see that an important function for adult education is to reinforce and facilitate such public debates and social actions that discuss, clarify and challenge the different scenarios that are actually developed. One obvious task is to develop new understandings of and support for agency which are compliant with ambivalent rather than progressive conditions.

The cases provide examples of the organization of discussions in the midst of those activities that are under reflection. As it was seen, gender proved to be a difficult issue to be taken up in discussions. In raising the gender issue, the cases used different strategies. In the comparable worth case women activists' and researchers' joint group was a place where gender issues were discussed openly while in the labour market committee they were pushed to the background. In the

democratic dialogue case the women's groups allowed a free expression of experiences as women workers. In the systemic approach case the joint forums did not develop into the direction that they would have released the obstacles of talking about gender issues; in less formal discussions the researchers could find out that a number of the organization members had got new things to reflect on in their private thinking.

Concerning gender issues, I see it as a challenge to combine the pedagogical knowledge of adult education, the knowledge of research/practice relationship of action research and the knowledge of gendered structures and practices of gender studies in creating spaces for interpretation and action. Positive examples for tackling micro-level processes, that is immediate practices and interaction events as well as their interpretation, already exist (cf. the democratic dialogue case, also Bierema 2003) The systemic approach case tried to reach also the macro-level processes and basic assumptions behind the strategic organizational issues. Partial improvements in gender relations can be achieved through the focus on micro-level processes but a major change would necessitate including all the levels in which gendered practices take place. How to do this still remains a question which needs further deliberation.

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