Practice research: critical psychology in and through practices

Morten Nissen

Abstract: In this paper, I retrace the development of ‘practice research’ as the action research methodology of the tradition of ‘Critical Psychology’, in Berlin and Copenhagen. The outset is the project of building a psychology on the foundations of Marx’s philosophy and social theory, the standpoint of which, as stated in Marx’s Feuerbach Theses, is that of human society, or socializing humanity. The resulting theory and methodological principles are outlined and critically discussed. The pivotal issue is how to relate a standpoint of humanity with a standpoint of the subject in everyday life. While this original Critical Psychology can be seen to fall into the trap of a kind of cartesian modernism in its methodology, the subsequent Danish attempts to a remedy through a situated reformulation can be criticized as influenced by relativist postmodern trends. A way out of these problems is sought, finally, in the formulation of a general epistemology and methodology of practice, to which the idea of overcoming ideology is central.

Keywords: Action research, practice, critical psychology, methodology, humanity

The origins of practice research

The term ‘practice research’, as referred to here, originates in the research tradition which since the publishing of Klaus Holzkamp’s book Sinnliche Erkenntnis in 1973 has been called Critical Psychology (in German: Die Kritische Psychologie – and it is sometimes added: with a capital K. This distinguishes the name of a proto-organization, a ‘School’, from a simple predicate of very different trends which can be said to be ‘critical’. Accordingly, I shall refer to the theory/movement/tradition as Critical Psychology). Due to its strong geographical center it was also known as the Berlin School or German Critical Psychology. Since Holzkamp’s Grundlegung der Psychologie (Foundation of Psychology) in 1983, the tradition aspired for the predicate Subjektwissenschaft, the ‘Science of the Subject’ (see, among others, Holzkamp, 1973, 1983, 1993; Osterkamp, 1975, 1976; good introductions in English are Tolman and Maiers, 1991; Tolman, 1994. A word of caution: the German Wissenschaft [Danish: videnskab] is perhaps ill translated into the English Science; a translation convention which was probably motivated by the ambition to redefine ‘science’ rather than turning our backs on it).

Practice research (Praxisforschung), as a term, is traceable to the early 80s,
where systematic and deliberate attempts at a grounding of this research in the reflection of various forms of (so-called ‘psychological’) practice were undertaken, notably in the shape of a standing research conference called *Theorie-Praxis-Konferenz* convened twice a year between 1983 and 1995.

From the beginning, the methodological notions in Critical Psychology and its practice research were much influenced by the kind of action research ideas prominent in the academic branches of the student movement and New Left in the 70s. The origins of these were the Marxist tradition of the labor movement and the communist parties. If action research, then, as it is usual among psychologists, is attributed to Kurt Lewin and his followers, it would not be accurate to say that the practice research of Critical Psychology is a branch of action research. It is more relevant to probe the ways in which Critical Psychology has interpreted its Marxist heritage in a general attempt to understand the relations of theory and practice.

First of all, the epistemological references to Marx’s 1845 *Theses on Feuerbach* (Marx, 1973) are in many ways the most consequential source of the development of the methodology of Critical Psychology. In the early 70s, Marx’s 6th Thesis on Feuerbach was widely received and approved in various strands of critical psychology (see, above all, Sève, 1974): that ‘the essence of humanity is no abstraction inherent in each individual’, but really ‘the ensemble of social relations’ (Marx and Engels, 1977). This sentence expressed the impetus for a ‘Copernican revolution’ in psychology: like Copernicus’ theory of the Universe established that the solar system doesn’t revolve around the Earth, a Marxist psychology should be founded on the realization that human life isn’t centered around the individual. What was then much less widely adopted was the epistemology of practice and hence the establishment of a new materialism expressed in some of the other of Marx’s theses:

The first criticizes ‘all previous materialism’ for only seeing reality ‘in the form of an object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively’ (ebd.).

The second states that ‘the question of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory, but is a practical question’ (ebd.).

The third: ‘The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by people and that educators must themselves be educated’; ‘the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice’ (ebd.).
The tenth: ‘The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new materialism is human society or social (or perhaps better: societalizing, *vergesellschaftende*, MN) humanity’ (ebd).

And, finally, the 11th simply says: ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it’ (ebd.).

These theses were a turning point in Marx’s philosophy, and in many ways they are yet to be realized (see, e.g. Ilyenkov, 1977, or Jensen, 1999). With their strong emphasis on subjectivity as fundamental to Marx’s philosophical program, they provided Critical Psychology with ‘authoritative’ arguments that a psychology could, in fact, be developed from *inside* a Marxist world view, and with a strong emphasis of developing a ‘standpoint of humanity’. Methodologically, they also expressed, at a philosophical level, how fundamentally Critical Psychology was based on, and strove for relevance to, a revolutionary practice.

Now, terms such as ‘practice’, and ‘revolutionary practice’, are very far from providing a stable and clear-cut point of reference. It is not only the case, and the point, that practice is inherently historical – subject to change and the origin of changes – but it is also inescapable that the *concept* of practice is itself variable.

The emergence of ‘practice research’ in the tradition of Critical Psychology during the 80s was, on the face of it, an attempt to concretize an abstract and purely theoretical project. Its students had graduated and become professional psychologists. But what arose was, rather, a different *kind* of practice and, as a consequence, a different kind of reflection on practice. This is evident when one compares the literature in Critical Psychology on ‘practice’ from the 70s and the 80s. In the 70s, the institutionally defined boundaries of pedagogical or psychological practice were transgressed into a kind of political practice, understood as forms of resistance. In the 80s, prevailing institutional features were instead analyzed as factual conditions for individual professionals. In the 70s, close-to-full-time activists, although winning their bread as students or professors, engaged in alternative schools (of which the so-called ‘Pupils’ Shop Red Freedom’ [*Schülerladen Rote Freiheit*] was the most famous), counseling etc. to realize a Critical Psychology in practice. In the 80s, professional psychologists and other ‘practitioners’ met with researchers to reflect on and describe the conditions of ‘their’ practice. In the 70s, the practice of critical psychologists was one out of a huge variety of revolutionary practices of the strong and elaborated student and labor movements. In the 80s, the Left was on the defensive and the point of reference for reflection on practice was, increasingly, the general mainstream tendency toward local quality management.
This recontextualization of ‘practice’ led to an array of problems, some of which I shall return to in what follows. But it also considerably sharpened the methodological awareness of the researchers in Critical Psychology. In Holzkamp’s 1983 account of Critical Psychology, rather vague formulations (e.g. ‘critical practice’) derived from the general epistemological backdrop are combined with very abstract conclusions drawn from the system of general theoretical categories. But in the years that followed, a number of reflections on empirical methodology, relations between theory and practice, and institutional conditions for practice appeared. The problematic and somewhat alien contextualization of Critical Psychology in what the professionals knew as ‘practice’ proved a fertile ground for methodological reflections.

It is these reflections which propelled the second shift in the history of practice research in Critical Psychology, a shift that is at the same time geographical in that it signals an increasingly visible difference between the Berlin- and the Copenhagen-based projects. The way I understand this difference is consistent with the growing divergence in the theoretical conceptualization of social practice. It is above all the introduction of the concept of action contexts - to some extent influenced by the ethnomethodological, symbolic interactionist, and, later, social constructionist currents that were extensively discussed in Copenhagen - that gave rise to a form of practice research that significantly differs from the forms that emerged in Germany.

In developing my argument along these lines, I wish to explore the possible lessons to be learnt from the shifts and contradictions, as well as maintain the continuity that makes them relevant. As I see it, a fruitful epistemology and methodology of practice research can be developed through working out how the situated Danish approach can be construed as a continuation of the Marxist action research roots, rather than as a concession to postmodern relativism, as some of our German colleagues seem to regard it.

I would like, first, to announce my intentions of making a dialectical argument. In retracing what is my standpoint in these matters, I must engage with those I have tried to learn from, and with what I believe to have learnt from them. Thus, I cannot help describing a progressive movement towards (what I believe to be) a ‘truth’; nevertheless, I hope I will achieve an open-ended conclusion that conveys the sense of uncertainty which any attempt at a critical reconstruction of a living and fertile tradition must bring about.

I say this because I am aware of the dangers of an arrogant oversimplification and evolutionism: of promoting myself as the ultimate in a succession of caricatures. As characters in a formative narrative, the Critical Psychologists are inevitably bereaved of many otherwise important nuances, tensions and developments. For one thing, the history of Critical Psycholo-
Morten Nissen

gy is a history of ongoing debates and of differences, also ‘inside’ of the Berlin group, as well as ‘inside’ the Danish group, etc. Secondly, all of the participants also work simultaneously together, cover different fields, develop standpoints that supplement each other etc. Thirdly, we all develop over time; thus, for many purposes, it is unfair to describe ‘German Critical Psychology’ as belonging to the 70s and the 80s, or ‘Danish’ to the 90s and the 00s. And finally, at all points in the trajectory of development described, we all take part in broad and diverse social historical practices, the complexity of which I cannot but reduce.

The general methodology of Critical Psychology

At the outset, the question of how to develop a critical psychology was debated in its general form. Allow me to recapitulate the most important of the answers given in Critical Psychology.

The first requirement for a critical psychology is that it recognizes both the common sense and the scientific concept of the individual as an ideological pillar of capitalist society. The private form (Privatform), as it was termed, is a social reality blindly reproduced by the psychology that had emerged as a technology of social control. The critique of psychology, in this way, must also be a realization of its truths in the framework of a different understanding, or, as it was also phrased, a critique and reformulation of ideological ‘pre-concepts’ into a system of concepts theoretically reflected on a new level. This kind of understanding would then be a thinking about, rather than in, the thought-forms of bourgeois society. This implied that a critical psychology must be a *meta-psychology*. As it was formulated by Holzkamp (1983, p. 31 ff.), Critical Psychology’s main direction of progression was ‘categorial’, i.e. to establish fundamental categories with which to critically evaluate and develop psychological theories. On the other hand, and this was – and is – crucial, a critical psychology must also be a *psychology*, not as a concession to institutional legitimacy, but because any critique logically presupposes conceptual counterpositions to that which is criticized (although, of course, it was not without connection to the fact that Critical Psychology had acquired some – conditional, partial – recognition as a legitimate theoretical tradition in the university departments of the Freie Universität in Berlin and the University of Copenhagen).

The kind of psychological theory that was to be created should, as far as possible, expose its own conceptual foundations and at the same time be committed to the formulation of concepts about human individuality that *contained and transformed* the truths of psychology into a framework better suited for the practical purposes of a revolutionary humanism. This work was called *re-interpretation*. Re-interpretation generally meant working out how concepts and models of psychology would be distorted reflec-
tions of the special circumstances of capitalism, falsely universalized as
general features of humanity and performing the ideological function of
legitimizing (naturalizing) suppression – and, intimately connected to that,
establishing explicit ideas about the kinds of human potentials that were
suppressed and distorted thereby. Criticizing the concept of ‘motivation’,
for instance, meant showing how a process of internalization of coercion
was universalized as an intrinsic psychological feature in the interest of get-
ting people to do what was not in their best interest. But this could only be
meant seriously as a critique if ‘motivation’ could be conceived to be more
than that – and at some point, it was necessary to state just what that ‘more’
could be (see, above all, [Holzkamp-]Osterkamp, 1975, 1976). In short,
what was inhuman – in society and in psychology – could only be fought
and overcome with some idea of what was human. The alternative to such a
‘positive’ development of a psychological theory on explicitly critical,
Marxist, grounds, would be that the psychological concepts implicit in crit-
tique and also immanent in any kind of (revolutionary) practice were left
unreflected, i.e. left to the spontaneous thought-forms of a bourgeois socie-
ty.

Specifically, the insistence on explicating a positive psychological theory
over and above its ‘deconstruction’ was motivated by a wish to avoid the
kinds of psychological revisionism that the attempts to combine psychoana-
lysis and Marxism had produced. On the part of the critical theorists, or
freudo-marxists, the idea of developing a Marxist psychology had been re-
jected from the beginning; Marxism was seen as a theory of economy and
society. Instead, psychoanalysis was imported, as a kind of non-mainstream
account of subjective experience. The hybrid result was not only eclectic,
but on vital points reproduced ideology – and without any tools to over-
come it: the analysis of subjectivity had become regarded as a kind of a
privileged free space of a hermeneutics founded on the notion of a reactive
individual counterpoised to society. Whether society, on this basis, was
confirmed or critically disconfirmed, was of little consequence. Eventually,
the economistic reduction of Marxism to a functional ‘logic of capital’ (not
so far from the Parsonian functionalism coming to prevail in sociology) fit
quite well with the Freudian reduction of subjectivity to an experience of
‘socialization’. Rather than integrating Freudian truths, Freudo-Marxism, in
particular in the form of the ‘theory of socialization’ that became widely
received in the 70s, had reproduced its limitations. By contrast, Oster-
kamp’s (1976) reinterpretation of psychoanalysis, based on a completely
different theory of human needs, motivation and anxiety, contributed sig-
nificantly to an understanding of conflictual dynamics, repression, guilt etc.
without presupposing the necessity of socializing an anti-social infant.

The same reproduction of ideological ideas of subjectivity was seen where
Marxists, in their theoretical work, sought purely sociological understand-
ings of practice, rejecting psychology altogether as ideological: inherent to
that position is the idea that human individuals are endlessly moldable (but
on the grounds of which evidence and to which specific consequences, it
was never stated), and/or simply a total division between (Marxist) theoriz-
ing and (ideological) everyday life - something which could be seen as a
practical reproduction of the ‘private form’.

In the debates in the 70s over how to develop a critical psychology, Critical
Psychology, thus, maintained that we must face the task of historicizing the
ideas about Humanity. Humanity, and Human Nature, should be reappro-
priated from its alienation in Science – Science, here, meaning the prevail-
ing essentialist search for universals that served to naturalize society. In
general terms, this historicizing contained two aspects.

First, and generally – but often overlooked in (even critical) psychological
discourse – we learn about ourselves as humans in and through history. All
historically specific practices shed some light over what is human, and,
conversely, the concept of humanity is always relevant to some historically
specific practices – especially those which aim at cultural and societal
transformation. Our critical historical awareness should not only be pointed
at the ‘others’, as in the deconstruction (ideology-critique) of traditional or
bourgeois psychology etc., but also directed at ourselves, since the
‘modernism’ of deliberate societal transformation with reference to human-
ity is inescapably part and parcel of a revolutionary practice (as Marx’s 10th
and 11th Feuerbach theses testify).

This means, written in today’s terms, that a ‘genealogy of subjectification’
should not be counterposed to ‘attempts to define human nature a priori’, as
does Wetherell (1999, p. 402) in her critical commentary on Osterkamp’s
statement to this point (1999). The point is that there is nothing ‘a priori’
about a theory of humanity founded in a critical practice (in a wide sense,
see below); rather, it may be argued, the post-structuralist urge to taboo the
concept of Humanity inherent in revolutionary practice reflects the acade-
mism of a critical stance that remains preoccupied with interpreting the
world. Any revolutionary stance includes a radical humanism; the Fou-
caudian lesson that this not only implies subjectivation, but also carries the
germs to a subsequent perversion, should be an important qualification rather
than a global and incontestable counterargument. This paper can be
seen as an attempt to realize that qualification.

Given the overall revolutionary purpose, the interplay of the general idea of
humanity and its special relevance contains the important notion of potential: what is ‘human’ is a general idea about human life and at the same
time a statement of that which we wish to realize. Notably, the general de-
determination of human beings as the social producers of our life conditions
is both a key to understanding society, even under the most alienated regime, and at the same time holds determinations of human potentials that we must struggle to realize.

Second, in a historically critical psychology, individuality and individual subjectivity must be approached also as a feature of humanity, and not only as the historically specific ‘private form’. The individuality of human subjectivity is anchored in the body and its life processes. The actions of the individual, then, is that kind of social practice which is bound up in such bodily conditions as birth, growth, aging, death, movement, perception, needs, emotions etc. This must be the differentia specifica of any psychology as distinct from other theories of human social practice. Historicizing that, Critical Psychology adopted the ‘historical methodology’ which had been suggested, above all, by A.N. Leontiev in the tradition of activity theory (especially in Leontjew, 1985). According to this methodology, the fundamental categories about individuality and psyche shouldn’t be merely stipulated (as I just did above), but, rather, developed in a criticizable way in an empirically informed reconstruction of the historical development of life processes. Only thereby could the false dichotomies of nature/nurture or nature/culture, so characteristic of bourgeois psychology, be overcome. Rejecting the idea of ‘nature’ as a reaction to the naturalizations in traditional psychology would only mean capitulating to that very same idea (whether by unfoundedly claiming human nature to be endlessly plastic or by leaving it entirely to essentialistic biologists).

Consequently, categories like psyche, meaning, emotion, learning, sociality, action potence, participation etc. were reconstructed in an impressive collective research effort. The guiding principles were a historico-logical methodology that made use of general dialectical principles such as that of development through qualitative leaps driven by contradictions, the idea of specification (e.g., mammals as both a development from, and a specification of, animals), the idea of Aufhebung (e.g., the quality of emotion acquiring new meanings as motivation in the context of anticipatory learning) etc.

These reconstructions (Holzkamp, 1973, H.-Osterkamp, 1975, 1976, Schurig, 1975, Seidel, 1976, Holzkamp, 1983) led to the identification of four distinct main levels in the phylogenetic development of individuality: first (on the basis of an unspecific individuality of life processes such as organismic metabolism and sexual reproduction), the emergence of activity, meaning and psyche; second, the level of individual learning and development; third, the emergence of labor, participation and action potence; fourth, the dominance of societal existence and the relation of possibility between individual subjects and cultural meanings (See Tolman, 1994, for a detailed account in English). In particular, the focus was on the ontological and methodological consequences of the two latter transformations
which made out anthropogenesis.

With these results, a two-level methodology of theoretical development was formulated (in Holzkamp, 1983): theoretical categories of a general kind pertaining to the level of humanity were produced in the historical-empirical research outlined above; these were then used as the building blocks to create specific theories about life under specific circumstances, investigated in an actual empirical research. As I shall explain below, this formal rendering of a general methodology was not without problematic consequences regarding the reflection of the practice research foundations of Critical Psychology. First, I must sketch some of the theoretical propositions at the categorial level that serve as founding principles for a critical psychological practice research at the actual empirical level.

Basically, the subject in bourgeois psychology is realized as an isolated individual, either conditioned or, at the most, passively contemplating and experiencing the world. These are the categories of traditional psychology, sometimes explicitly stated, but often unthinkingly realized in the (immanent discursive) structures of research practices. By contrast, the human beings who appear as the result of historical-empirical research are conscious participants in cooperative creation and transformation of life conditions and thereby of themselves – as expressed in the pivotal category of the human potential for action potence, the individual’s participation in societal control of life conditions. If such qualities are to be realized in psychological research practices (or practices reflected in psychological theory), that is, in actual-empirical research, so that we do not reproduce the prevailing ideological image of the individual, the ‘subjects’ whose actions we wish to understand must be ‘subjects’ in the full human sense of that word: that is, not only ‘objects’ and ‘individuals’, but also recognized and realized in our research practices as ‘agents’ and self-reflecting centres of intention and consciousness, as persons with action potence. In a word (or two), they must be recruited as participants, as co-researchers. Empirical research, then, (for, with and about humans) is necessarily a kind of cooperative introspection in a flow of action. It is we who investigate how each of us live and act, for what reasons, under which conditions etc., and we have practical reasons for doing so.

Of course, this ‘view from the inside’ – or, with a grammatical expression often applied in Critical Psychology, this ‘first person perspective’ – counts as un-scientific in an empiricist traditional psychology in which subjectivity and objectivity, as well as the particular and the general, are irremediably dichotomized. But ways to achieve objectivity and generality can in fact be specified from this starting point (best presented in Holzkamp, 1983, ch. 9, and Markard, 1991).
Objectivity, or the validity of empirical claims, is tested in the process of a critical practice. **Empirical claims are about the action possibilities of subjects.** A practice that expands the real scope of action delivers experience about objective action possibilities beyond the immediately recognizable. Since the relevant life conditions of humans are societal, the direction of expansion of action possibilities is also the direction towards generalizing action possibilities. Generalization, thus, is not viewed exclusively epistemologically, but also, and very closely related, [ontologically as a ‘generalizing action potence’, contrary to a ‘restrictive action potence’, i.e., defensive forms of maintaining a status quo of a relative action potence (See Tolman, 1994, ch. 7).](#)

Generality is thus achieved, not by standardizing experience into some average, but by creating, communicating, and using common action possibilities, and by suggesting relevant aspects of the subjective situations of the people involved as typical, to be tested, enriched, and revised by people to whom the research is relevant. With the subjects of our research ‘on our side’ of the subject-object-distinction, this generalization of possibilities (‘Möglichkeitsverallgemeinerung’) fuses with the idea of an intersubjective test of validity (replicability) in a scientific community that constitutes a ‘generalized standpoint of the subject’.

In connection with one of the first systematic empirical research projects that was informed by these general considerations, the so-called SUFKI project (SUBjektentwicklung in der Frühen KIndheit, i.e. ‘development of subjects in early childhood’), the methodology was described as a sequence called ‘the model of development’ (Die Entwicklungsfigur, see Markard, 1985).

The research process would take its starting point in some problem felt and deemed relevant by the involved co-researchers. Since our spontaneous consciousness consists of ideological thought-forms, the **first** step was to formulate the problem in the immediately available ideological concepts, the so-called pre-concepts, but nevertheless also as a ‘de-privatization’ in the inter-subjective space provided by the research project. And since our aim is critical, the **second** step was to approach and analyze the problem with a ‘suspicion of ideology’, in a kind of critical ‘deconstruction’ that would also lead to a reformulation of the problem in the categories of Critical Psychology. The **third** step, then, was to establish the ‘generalizing’ action possibilities that were thus implied, and attempt to realize them in practice. The **fourth** step was a return to the first step in the sense that the feedback from practice would lead to the experience of new problems and dilemmas, etc., in a **principally endless process** until no further research into this ‘typical subjective situation’ seemed relevant.
Practices, categories, and the idea of a chastity of mind

Even if this methodology is often presented as a coherent whole – as indeed I have also attempted, in the interest of establishing a continuity of tradition and theory from which the following discussions can evolve – its maturing into the system of categories of a ‘Science of the Subject’ carried important developmental contradictions.

The perhaps most important of these led directly to the call for a practice research. As outlined above, the priority of founding a theoretical psychology in academia, and also the gradual retreat of the student movement and various forms of socialist activity by the end of the 70s, had turned the central full-time researchers into specialists in theoretical categories, and rendered the guiding principle of relevance to a critical practice somewhat intellectual. This was often felt, by the growing number of professional psychologists educated in Critical Psychology, as a need to concretize the very abstract theoretical concepts into theories that would aid the development of alternative practices in the fields of social work, psychotherapy, education, etc.

The practice research turn began with a letter from a group of counselors complaining about a lack of material on practice in the *Forum kritische Psychologie*. What they wrote was, among other things, this:

> Critical Psychology refers, we dare say, more than any other approach, to practice. It was not coincidentally formed in the context of the Pupils’ Shop and later the Project Studies. (...) [But] the majority of graduates, who like ourselves will become ‘operators’ somewhere, are left to themselves. Goodbye, fair theory? Or, expressed somewhat flatly: How am I helped by the debate on the [theory of] regulation of action (*Handlungsregulationstheorie*) in taking a stance on the new guidelines for counseling in institutions driven by the Catholic Church? (Böhm, et. al., 1982, 145, my translation from the German, MN).

The correspondence led to the establishment of a ‘*Theorie-Praxis-Konferenz*’ in Berlin. Similar arguments motivated a Danish forum of ‘Critical Psychologists’ that functioned between 1981 and 1993. Both organizations were key fora for the promotion of Critical Psychology as well as for the debates on theory and practice (see also Dreier, 1986, 1991, 1992, Dreier et.al., 1988, and Fahl and Markard, 1999).

Right from the start, the researchers, in line with the second step of the ‘model of development’, reacted with a ‘suspicion of ideology’ towards the concept of practice, the notion of ‘application’ of theory, the idea of ‘expe-
tise’ and ‘discipline’, the pseudo-concreteness of the immediate experience of psychopathology and of the standard methods (for psychotherapy, teaching etc.) to be applied regardless of context etc. The arguments against such traditional images of the relations between theory and practice have been put forward persuasively by Dreier (1984, 1985a, 1988a, 1988b, 1992) and Markard (1988, 1991b), and it was through these critical reformulations of problems conceded by ‘practitioners’ that what can be called a critical tradition of practice research was first developed. In these debates, Critical Psychology became aware of its similarities and differences to principles of (Lewinian) action research, as well as to the more academic hermeneutic and qualitative methodologies (Markard, 1991). An analytic tool termed the ‘portrait of practice’ (Markard and Holzkamp, 1989; Markard, Holzkamp and Dreier, 1994) was developed that focused on the mundane and the structural qualities of psycho/social work institutions and was widely used by practitioners to describe ‘their practice’. Here is an extract of the introduction (to the Danish version):

As you see, the analysis begins (not coincidentally) with ‘institution’, i.e. the context of conditions for the work. Here, the analysis moves from the comprehensive, encompassing and into the concrete institution. Then the approach is shifted, so that conditions are analyzed chronologically by following typical trajectories of cases. In the second part, the means (instruments) of the work are analyzed, that is, the means of analysis (theories), the methods and procedures of intervention, diagnosis and assessment, and, finally, the equipment available. In the third part, aspects of concrete situations at work are scrutinized. And in the fourth part, communication about the work is investigated: various forms of exchange, publishing, and language when talking and writing about work. In all four parts, that is, all the way through the portrait, we focus, as mentioned, on the meaning of each issue for s/he or those who work, which problems are connected with them, which reasons for actions they give rise to, and which other action possibilities can be utilized or created. (Markard, Holzkamp and Dreier, 1994)

Also, more comprehensive critical analyses of some fields of professional practice were developed, such as social work (Bader, 1985), psychotherapy (Dreier, 1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1986, 1988b, 1991, 1992, 1995, 1996), and schooling (Holzkamp, 1991a, 1991b, 1993; Haug, 1977).

Still, the relative fruitfulness of these developments could not quite satisfy the ‘practitioners’ who still didn’t quite know ‘how to practice Critical Psychology’. The positions of the dialogue – the demand for relevance vs. the critique of the idea of ‘application’ – were reproduced over and over and with a growing frustration. In the terms of the ‘model of development’, it
remained almost impossible to proceed from the second step (the critique and reformulation of the problem) to the third: identifying and realizing generalizing action possibilities. Basically, there was a contradiction between, on the one hand, the general methodological ideas of a unity of practical change and research, and of the necessity of advancing from ‘negative’ critique to ‘positive’, productive formulations, and, on the other hand, the increasingly blatant lack of practical breakthroughs in the hostile political climate of the late 80s.

When I entered the Danish and the German conferences in 1987 and 1990, the debates were to some extent centered around different reactions to this predicament.

One distinct strategy that was visible in both countries was that of attempting to break out of the institutional coercions of the discipline by establishing ‘autonomous’ alternatives in the form of economically and politically self-sustained counseling facilities that directly referred to Critical Psychology as their conceptual framework. These formed communities that defined themselves distinctly politically and at developed extensive methods and local languages for practical counseling, a combination which could attract many volunteer students of psychology and thereby reproduce the communities. Here, one could really speak of ‘a Critical-Psychological psychotherapy’. Against that fraction, it was repeatedly argued by the more professionally practicing psychologists, and by the researchers, referring to experiences from the various ‘alternatives’ of the 70s, that there is no way to create a ‘free space’, free of capitalist exploitation, and that, consequently, to establish a ‘Critical Psychological counseling’ would be to render oneself blind to the oppressive relations inside the counseling. In general, such ‘alternatives’, it was argued, had ended up reproducing rather traditional forms of practice (see also Nissen et. al., 1999). This was a typical origin of therapeutic movements, and even of some of the institutions of the psychological establishment. Correspondingly, the very ideas of counseling and psychotherapy were not really challenged, since they were constitutive of the way these communities mobilized participant volunteers: a kind of ‘practicing’ facility for future professional psychologists.

Another way of handling the problem was to disclaim the scientific rationality of psychological practice. This emerged as the increasingly visible stance of Morus Markard who since around 1990 engaged in the PAPP project (Projekt Analyse Psychologischer Praxis – see Fahl and Markard, 1999), and who became one of the central organizers of the Theorie-Praxis-Konferenz, as well as the Berlin branch of Critical Psychology as such. This way, the purely critical, or de-constructive approach to practice that kept frustrating practitioners was confirmed as theoretically well-founded, and thus, the problem was not the lack of applicability of Critical Psychology.
Psychology, but the ideological thought-forms that prevailed in practice and the conditions that made them relevant. De-mystification became the most important research goal, as behind what appeared as professional expertise was exposed the everyday restrictive patterns and strategies of practitioners, the critical reflection of which constituted the practitioner’s ‘social-subjective knowledge of context and contradictions’. The deconstructive approach to the practice and the discipline of psychology was not, however, accompanied by any (visible) doubts as to the theoretical categories or methodology of Critical Psychology. On the contrary, these were repeatedly confirmed *ex negativo* through the unveiling, not only of their traditional counterparts as ideological, but also of practitioners as characterized by eclecticism and ad-hoc-deliberations in the contexts of psychological practice.

A third alternative was the route taken by O. Dreier, first, and later, by a number of researchers in Denmark. I shall return to describing these practice research projects shortly. But in order to understand how these projects, and the theory of action contexts which grew in and around them, developed the tradition of Critical Psychology, we must begin by discussing one of the basic problems in the theory and the methodology which Dreier and his associates eventually came to address.

In the above mentioned letter from a group of counselors to the editors of Forum Kritische Psychologie, Böhm et. al. also wrote this:

> Why do so few contributions come ‘from practice’? An example: one always feels quite proud when one, from time to time, has succeeded – so one thinks – in sticking to a theoretical principle right into the petty details of the everyday. Attempts, then, to report this back into the theoretical debates, regrettably, often lead – this is our bitter experience – to a denouncing of the still quite frail and surely imperfect product on the part of the ‘editorial fraction’ (*Fraktion der Abarbeiter*), with heavy – but brilliantly argued – punches. We remark this because we feel it is important, for what we hope will be the increasingly frequent ‘debates on practice’, to develop rules of transaction that do not, once again, displace the practitioner right from the start to the bottom of the staircase. (Böhm, et. al., 1982, 145-146, my translation from the German, MN)

This problem of unequal power relations, inside the fora of Critical Psychology, wasn’t really addressed, and it continued to haunt attempts to establish a dialogue between theory and practice. The problem was, in my opinion, aggravated by a certain formalism in the methodological formulations which threatened to transform categories – even against explicit intentions – into undisputed, dogmatic premises for any actual-empirical re-
search.

The relation between ‘categories’ and ‘theories’ was often presented as a logical sequence or hierarchy. Categories, it was stated (in, e.g., Holzkamp, 1983, and Markard, 1991), were the *logical presuppositions* that underlay any actual-empirical investigation, and thus provided a *framework* within which theories could be developed. Accordingly, the ‘model of development’, as a process in actual-empirical research, would contain no feedback loop into the system of categories, since the development of categories required a different kind of data, the historical-empirical. With that formulation, however, the general epistemology of practice, as derived from Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach, was divided in two: one part relegated to a philosophical and sociological background outside of psychology, and thus separated from the explicitly stated methodology of Critical Psychology, and the other part informing methods of actual-empirical research. The system of categories was, in effect, excepted from the principle of practical relevance. It thus became less transparent how the purpose of general categories and historical-empirical research was still, basically, to be relevant in critical, revolutionary social practice in a broad sense, and how this (inevitably, as stated above, shifting) relevance necessarily would also have implications for the general theory, no matter how well-established in pale-ontological, ethological, and historical evidence.

The methodological formalisms can presumably be traced to a certain *Kantian* influence on Holzkamp. Even if Holzkamp’s categories were by no means a once-and-for-all given limited number of universal categories of thought, they *were* in fact stipulated as logically ‘transcendental’ in relation to the level of actual-empirical theory. This established a dichotomic division of theoretical levels (not altogether, by the way, unlike Kurt Lewin’s distinction between theoretical constructs and action research hypotheses – also [neo-] Kantian inspired).

This tracing of the history of theories does not, however, in itself explain the state of affairs. Given the history of Critical Psychology in terms of the relatively advanced discussions about Marxist theory and epistemology in the 70s, and given the work on the relations between theory and practice that had seriously questioned such divisions – including in Markard (1991), *critical* of Lewin, but not attentive to how the same problem reappears in Critical Psychology – how come this problem was not surmounted as soon as those involved became aware of it?

One reason was the already mentioned ‘professionalization’ of the notion of ‘practice’. The critical attitude towards psychological practice could question the disciplinary organization that (at least seemingly) placed the academics in the center – but it could not transform it. The forms of repro-
duction of professional expertise which Dreier (1989) criticized as characteristic of traditional psychology were, ironically, repeated almost term by term in the organized fora of Critical Psychology: practitioners came individually to the ‘schools’ of the ‘masters’ and were individually responsible for the ‘transfer’ of their ‘knowledge’ and ‘methods’ into a ‘practice’ delimited by ‘institutions’. And the only kind of ‘practice’ which could challenge the masters of theory was the criticized psychological practice, since the common denominator of the 70s, the political practices, had been effectively forced on the defensive.

Another reason was the simple fact that it was those categories, in a sense, which defined the identity of the communities of Critical Psychology. This was, in a way, a consequence of the combination of traditional academic henchmanship and the New Left political sectarianism of the 70s. The lively disputes over how to develop a critical and Marxist psychology (or not) had faded away into unproductive stalemates and entrenchments of positions in the Universities (as well as, in different ways, in other contexts). People got used to accepting ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ premises for participating in communities, and it was experienced as counter-productive to want to ‘start all over again’. But it was also an expression of a deeper problematic in the action research methodology of any critical psychology. This issue can be phrased the problem of how to relate the standpoint of everyday life with the standpoint of humanity into a ‘generalized subject standpoint’.

To couch the problem in terms of standpoint theory is my way of leading my argument in a direction that emphasizes the continuity with Critical Psychology so far described, and at the same time points to the development of the theory which provided new angles to the problem – the focus on position and context. As in many other strands of critical theory, the standpoint of research and theory is essential to Critical Psychology: developing theory from a standpoint within, siding with the subjects, recognizing that the seemingly neutral bird’s eye perspective of ‘objective science’ is really taking sides with those in power. And also realizing that not even the most critical of psychologies can create a utopia from which society can be criticized ‘from the outside’; Marx’s ‘standpoint of human society or social humanity’ was generalizing, rather than utopian: we’re in it! All of these had been basic principles all along. What was new about Dreier’s approach (1997) was to take the idea of standpoint as the concretely ontological stances of people (such as researchers) in positions and locations of the action contexts of everyday life, rather than abstract and general ideas about ‘neutrality’ vs. ‘solidarity’, or the like. This, eventually, opened to the question of how the standpoints idealized in methodology might be actually realized in practice. Abstract and general ideas, too, form subjectivations in concrete and specific action contexts.
In a recent lecture at the University of Copenhagen, F. Haug, referring to Virginia Woolf, expressed as fundamental to political experience and learning that a standpoint of humanity was connected to a standpoint of everyday life. It was by consciously, and against the current, seeing the world from the point of view of mundane everyday activities, emotions and aspirations, but also by holding firmly to a demand for recognition of those as human, that a feminist critique was developed. To do this, however, required endurance and discipline. One form that Haug derived from Woolf’s writings was the principle of a ‘chastity of mind’ (rather than of the body): the unrelenting process of purification of a critical stance against prevailing ideological temptations (see Haug, 1999, Haug, in press).

As I shall return to below, the ongoing self-critique must indeed be an important aspect of a critical psychological action research. But what is visibly problematic, in Haug’s poetic and precise rendering of the procedure of Critical Psychology, are the notions that it is the ‘mind’ which, by way of a ‘chastity’, realizes the ‘generalized subject standpoint’. This matches all too well how the system of categories on humanity is understood to define a Critical Psychology in the shape of a University based context, a framework within which a critique of ideology can unfold.

In fact, most of the actual-empirical research projects in German Critical Psychology have nearly all used the same basic practical structure (cf. Markard, 1985, Fahl and Markard, 1999, Haug, in press, Haug and Hauser, 1985, Bader, 1985, Althoff et.al., 1998. Ute Osterkamp’s research [1990b] on a refugee center is a notable exception). The community of research, the project, is initiated and gathered by professional researchers. It is defined as Critical Psychology. Practitioners, or co-researchers, individually decide to participate. They are often students, or former students, of Critical Psychology, and either they have read, or begin by reading together, central books from the tradition. In fewer cases, this education of co-researchers is less ambitious, but it is always present as a precondition for the research cooperation. The central contexts of the projects are meetings in which everyday problems of the participants are discussed, more or less following the procedure of the ‘model of development’. This mostly takes place at universities.

This way, the ‘chastity of mind’ is achieved in the context of a theoretical discussion which reconstitutes the standpoint of the (individual subjects in) everyday life by way of a critical reformulation. This critical reformulation refers to the standpoint of humanity inherent in the categories, which, again, are ‘transcendental’ because they define the community. The otherwise carefully eliminated cartesian dualism creeps in simply because the action context that realizes the ‘generalized subject standpoint’ is one of theorizing. It is in the unnoticed practical constitution of the ‘we’ of critical
psychology that a purification of an abstract general humanity becomes a precondition for constituting the subject of everyday life as ‘a subject’. Emancipated from ideology, purified by transcendental categories, subjects enter a virgin level of description.

This entails a utopianism, a misrecognition of partial interest and ideology, very similar to the kind which had been identified in the strategy of creating autonomous ‘alternative’ counselings, schools etc. This is so, even if no attempts are made to go on from criticizing ideology and ‘restrictive action potence’ to realizing and describing possible kinds of ‘generalized action potence’. Even the most frustratingly disempowered academic dispute is a concrete utopia if it claims to ‘be’ Critical Psychology.

The realization of a standpoint of humanity in practice, thus, was paradoxical in a way opposite to the misrecognition of humanity and human nature which characterizes critical psychologies that refrain from explicitly stating the psychological theory inherent in their practice. Here, the theory of humanity was explicit, but the ways in which ‘humanity’ was constituted discursively/practically were ignored. At first, the ‘concrete utopias’ of practice research constructed subjects in ways that were abstract and vague, or, perhaps, open, because they were negations of traditional subjectivations. But, ironically, those very abstract and academic constructions of subjectivity, the human being as such, of which the practitioners always complained, were soon to become a very powerful social construction in connection with the discursive changes, by the end of the 80s, in most fields of psychological practice, in the direction of the discourse of ‘The Active Society’. It was, in a sense, by realizing these potentials that Dreier’s contextualized formulations of Critical Psychology, which evolved in the course of the 90s (Dreier, 1994, 1997,1999), provided or conceptualized a different road to practice research and enabled a reestablishing of the unity of research and practical change. And it is by self-critically discussing the implications of this form of practical grounding that the ideas of practice research, that I am in the process of encircling, emerged.

The action contexts of practice research

Theoretically, Dreier had become inspired by the theory of situated action (Lave, 1988, Chaiklin and Lave, 1993, Lave and Wenger, 1991). The situated approach that characterized Lave’s anthropological perspective matched well with how the general ideas of social psychology in Copenhagen had been influenced, in the course of the 70s, by symbolic interactionism. The extent of the interactionist and ethnomethodological influence is debatable. Dreier never accepted the epistemological and ‘categorial’ premises of these traditions; rather, he built a theory of action contexts through a reinterpretation of their insights and points of focus. What was also im-
important to this research was the establishment of the interdisciplinary re-
search group *Health, Humanity and Culture* in 1990 and the discussions
with Jensen (1987), Wackerhausen (1998), Højrup (1983, 1995), and oth-
ers, about the philosophical and sociological presuppositions and implica-
tions of the theory. Finally, this period saw a breakthrough in terms of a
recruitment of a handful of new participants in the development of a dis-
tinct Copenhagen version of Critical Psychology (see Axel, 1997, Højholt,
contributions are far from unanimous, it is possible to distinguish some
common features of a theory of subjects in action contexts, as well as some
principles of practice research on this basis.

First of all, a critique was aimed at the abstract sociological figure of *the*
individual and *the* society. In Critical Psychology, it had been strongly em-
phasized that individual and society should not be dichotomized as in trad-
tional psychology. Still, however, the figure remained as a category struc-
ture in which an internal, dialectical relationship was proposed. Dreier ar-
gued that this figure itself tended to construe the individual as positioned
nowhere and society as an abstract system. Instead, the concept of *action
context* – which in Holzkamp’s 1983 account of the category system ap-
peared as a more vague referent to society at large as the context of the in-
dividual’s actions (*gesamtgesellschaftliche Handlungszusammenhang*) –
was reformulated as a *mediating unit of situated social action*. The con-
cretely situated, physically local, action context is societally structured as a
form of inter-subjectivity, including the tensions and conflicts implied
therein. Subjects are positioned in locations of the action context’s concrete
constellation of action, and their perspectives and standpoints are under-
stood on that objective basis as ‘partial’. At the same time, subjects’ partic-
ipations in action contexts are shifting, and they move between contexts.
Thus, subjects’ everyday life comprise trajectories of participation into a
whole life situation that grounds the interests, premises and concerns they
pursue with their standpoints and actions.

The situated focus facilitated an action research like approach to the prac-
tice of psychology in social work, educational, and psychiatric settings. The
key idea was that of a necessity of *de-centering*, that is, viewing and pursu-
ing, say, psycho-therapy, not, as in traditional clinical psychology, from the
exclusive angle of the (therapist in the) therapy session itself, but rather as
one among the many socio-culturally interconnected action contexts in the
lives of the people involved. This meant taking seriously the users’ pers-
pectives, not as isolated attitudes or the like, but as perspectives relevant
to the development of practice, and grounded in the users’ daily lives. It
also meant broadening the picture of practice to see the structures of con-
flictful cooperation, delegation etc. between professionals, families etc.
In Dreier’s own practice research (1995, 1996), and in that of Højholt (1999), the central axis is the cooperation between one or few practitioners and researchers. The aim is set to develop both theory and practice. Through systematically interviewing users in a de-centered approach from the users’ everyday lives, in a process parallel to the practice of family therapy, data is collected that is used in a reflexive development of the practices and change of their institutional conditions. In her Ph.D. thesis project, Højholt continued broadening the scope, beginning in a close cooperation with a psychologist in a psycho-social counseling facility, interviewing parents of children labeled ‘problem children’, and ending in a wide-ranging exploration of the practices of children’s development around the beginning of school. The broadening of scope, however, also made the action research alliance vaguer. The idea of a distinctly bounded subject or organization to provide the ‘practitioner’ in an action research process had to be abandoned.

The central idea of combining the development of public institutional services with a subject approach to the users’ everyday lives and the contexts of professional practice was quite successful, in the sense that it became the guiding methodology of a number of development / research projects driven by students and/or practitioners with interests and possibilities to engage in developmental work. My own research since 1990 has struck the same resonant cord, as intentions to realize user influence, lay psychologies, and non-scholastic learning have been prominent forces in my cooperation with local social work development projects.

The success of the action context approach to psycho-social practice, of course, was not hailed as a victory for Critical Psychology. Many saw potentials in taking the users’ side and beginning from the mundane everyday activities of people as a strategy for developing the quality of public services without having the slightest idea of critical psychology, let alone Critical Psychology. In that sense, this was the opposite to the ‘German’ approach in which the learning about Critical Psychology was mandatory upon entering research as subjects. The point was that any practical change would imply cooperating with people who might be positive towards the concrete practical aims but skeptical or antagonistic to Critical Psychology as theory. On the other hand, the practicality of the approach also made it an important entrance route to critical psychologies and to Critical Psychology. Many learnt first about ‘practice research’ and then learnt to challenge, say, the idea of the isolated individual.

This does not imply that the practical aims were simple in contrast to a complex theory. Quite the reverse, in a sense. The practice of practice research lent itself to complex mixtures of interests, perspectives, ends and
The socio-culturally mediated ends and means, and the collectivity, of practices, including research practices, is a key theoretical issue in Critical Psychology. Participation presupposes some common purpose – or, to be more precise: since Leontiev’s theory of activity, also taken up in Holzkamp’s concept of action (as well as, incidentally, by Engeström 1993, 1999), activity is viewed as the engagement in socio-cultural structures of ends and means – something which would notoriously be absent in symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, in which production is nonexistent and the motive of any interaction is reducible to the individual actors’ wish to keep status quo in good repair. But Dreier’s action context theory, in its reinterpretation of the (ethnomethodologically inspired) truths about the situated locality of action, logically, led to a questioning of simplified notions of ‘common aims’, ‘shared beliefs’, or the like. Thus, viewed by themselves - and on the background of the rise of postmodern and discursive psychologies etc. - Dreier’s works raised again the question of how a situated practice approach was distinguishable from interactionism.

One way to go about this problem was to think of action contexts as situated units of collective and inter-subjective action with cultural ends and means. In the attempt to understand socio-cultural resources without reproducing the dichotomy of structure / agency, the work of Foucault became relevant. Foucault had not been received in the tradition of Critical Psychology until by this time, the early 90’ies, when his works were being discussed and used both in the German and the Danish groups (cf. e.g Holzkamp, 1993; Nissen, 1997; or see the issue 33/1994 of the Forum Kritische Psychology on incest). In my own version, what came out of the reading of Foucault was a determination to connect discourse analysis – of the kind that saw discourse as more than just words, i.e. as immanent in practice – with the situated action context which Dreier had proposed. The result was a model of action contexts in which participants were constituted in relation to each other and to the discourse by which actions are culturally defined, that is, the interrelated elements of ends, means, actors and objects.

This combination of situated and post-structuralist approaches is by no means simple. By the end of the day, they can only be mediated in a theory which also includes a notion of objectivation and an understanding that subjectivation results from recognition and interpellation rather than merely a deployment of discourse (see Nissen, 1999/a; 1999/b; in press). The potential to overcome that contradiction, one important schism in Discursive Psychology, is one of the fruits of the general theory of Critical Psychology and its Marxist roots. The point is not to return to an a priori subject and a
metaphysical reality, counterbalancing a platonian sphere of discursive logic, but rather, to view discourses and situated subjects in terms of production, with subjective as well as objective preconditions and products.

But before I return to a general formulation of the action research methodology that can be developed from this, a further critical reflection on the practicality of the situated approach to Critical Psychology is needed.

Using a Foucauldian approach to the discourses immanent in practice, and, not least, those immanent in the development of practice, makes one acutely aware of how progressive changes are easily translatable into the deployment of new governmentalities. The relative success of the situated approach to practice research was and is connected with wide-reaching changes in various fields of psy/social work practice. The ‘deconstruction’ of the subject/structure, or individual/society relation and the devising of local, situated action with subjects engaging in, and moving between, contexts – these changes aren’t confined to theory. And they are certainly well beyond the scope of any accomplishments of Critical Psychological practice research.

As suggested by M. Dean (1995), these discursive changes can be designated with an epithet in OECD policy: The Active Society. ‘Society’, here, is sought to be ‘activated’ as responsible partners and competent users, rather than corrupted by dependence on welfare state provision. Specifically, as Dean points out (and Rose, 1996a and b), an ethics of the self emerges – often in coarse disciplinary forms such as ‘work-fare’ – that centres around the axis of dependence/autonomy and introduces activation and self-reflection as core technologies. In a parallel movement, the once so unitary ‘system worlds’ of state institutions, professional disciplines, government hierarchies, even political ideologies etc. are broken down into flexibly combinable local and temporary units of practice. What appears is a governmentality of self-reflecting subjects, rather than bodies, and situated practices, rather than comprehensive systems or structures.

Some (e.g., Bultman, 1997) have understood this simply as forms of neoliberalism. There is no doubt that what is implied is a frontal attack on universalism, on the general standards that have provided the essential yardsticks of equality, and on the solidarity embodied in state welfare. The praising of society rather than state, and of the autonomy of individuals, are traditional liberalist ideas. And, to be sure, it is easy to point to liberalizations in the overall picture of the policies of, say, New Labor, the ‘Third way’ etc. All the same, I am not satisfied that this analysis quite captures the complexity of the issue. First of all, it seems that traditional liberalist appeals to a natural society and natural individuals, in most areas of the ever-growing psy practices, have given way to a large scale production of
Morten Nissen

‘individual’ and ‘society’. The active society is the aim of a state, or state subsidized, intervention. It is not the return of the great wild forests, but the industrious and systematic cultivation of plantations. Moreover, as the traditional nation state form seems to weaken, we need new concepts to capture just what is ‘the state’, rather than think in the traditional terms of liberalism/socialism which took the nation state for granted (I am currently engaged in an interdisciplinary research project that aims to disentangle this problematic, especially in terms of developing a theory of the [Danish] welfare state and its cultures. See Nissen, in press, or visit http://www.hum.ku.dk/lov).

Still, it is apparent, I hope, why the suspicion arises that the practice research of (Danish) Critical Psychology, having barely escaped the cartesian utopianism of industrial capitalism, may have plunged right into an equally affirmative relation to the post-industrial establishment.

The standpoint of humanity and the standpoint of everyday life are now connected in a different way. Everyday life has become a residual totality outside of the cultural and societal determinations that structure action contexts, and humanity appears in the negative movement of transcending local, institutional forms, and perhaps as the principle of establishing a totality from moving between and connecting them. Even if a notion of situated concreteness counters any abstract universals, it seems itself constituted by abstract concepts such as ‘space’, ‘time’, ‘body’ etc. Does this mean that ‘humanism’ is reformulated in even more abstract terms, or is it an agnostic position on the issue of human potentials?

Again, I wish to maintain that the mere critique – and its implications, such as praising the death of the subject, the end of psychological theory, and the disconfirmation of the progressivism of action research – does not constitute a real alternative. It makes little difference whether post-modern discourse is expressed in a positive or a negative form. That is a useful polemic only if the point is to mediate the contradiction productively. At this point, we no longer have the categorically framed contexts of theorizing in which to secure a chastity of mind. Academic purity will help us no more than fashionable pragmatics. But what do we have, then?

I suggest we work our way towards an answer through a model of practice research that takes the lessons from the discursive and situated action approach into consideration.

**Practice research as a transformation of references**

In a situated approach, the idea of research as the accumulation of ahistorical and non-contextual, universal knowledge must be discarded. Knowl-
edges, even of the most general issues, are objects produced, recontextualized, appropriated, transformed etc., in situated research practices as well as in other practices. Since we can no longer grant research, or science, a privileged position as a kind of non-contextual non-practice, and since we understand all practices to be immanently discursive, imbued with knowledges and theories, we face the problem of what is so special about research. And next, providing that research can in fact be construed as something special, we must approach practice research / action research as a kind of situated joint venture between a research practice and another practice.

Research as the movements of relevance and consistency

The following ideas about the nature of research are the result of my humble attempts to appropriate a strand in contemporary philosophy of science / theory of knowledge that builds rather directly on Marx’s dialectics, not least as expressed in the above mentioned Theses on Feuerbach. In particular, I should mention the works of Jensen (1987, 1999), Ilyenkov (1977), Ruben (1978), but also, even if less directly, Højrup (1983, 1995), and Latour (1987, 1993).

The simple contradiction that research is a practice among others, but, on the other hand, a practice like none other, forms the initial core concept: the contradiction of relevance and consistency. Like any other practice, research is a practice of appropriating, re-contextualizing, producing, and transforming meanings embodied (objectified) in material objects. Meanings are fundamentally seen, here, as action possibilities. The question arises, then, like it does with all practices, what kinds of action possibilities are produced, for what and for whom? That is to say, what is the relevance of research? Relevance, then, points to the basic question of the relations of research to other practices (research for itself), or to put it bluntly, the question of what wins me my bread and what that means in terms of what I do. This question already begs the next: what is the special relevance of research?

The special feature about research is that it deals with the general in other practices (and in itself). But how can that be? Logically, the general cannot be distilled to exist by itself. It is always bound up with the special and the particular. Abstraction of the general is a process of relating rather than disconnecting, or, in the words of Hegel (1988, p. 72), generality is mediated simplicity (vermittelte Einfachheit). Research in itself, then, as a special practice working with generalities, specializes in the mediation of simplicity. This is realized through the creation and transformation of special objects whose meaning reside directly and primarily in that capacity. That is to say, they are made with a view to their epistemological relations to what
in the same process are constituted as ‘reality’ and ‘practice’. Such objects are theories (objectified in texts, graphs, etc.), prototypes, experimental conditions, samples etc. The epistemological relation, it should perhaps be emphasized, need not be conceived in a simple realist fashion as a kind of representation, reflection, image, or the like. Instead, it is evident that the very idea of relevance points a different way.

The way it points is in the direction of theory. Any relevance requires theoretical consistency. Logically, a concept, as a mediated abstraction, is a knot in a network, or system, of other concepts. It can only be given meaning through its presuppositions, implications, negations, specifications etc. Within such conceptual systems or theories, self-contradictions lead to breakdown and loss of meaning. No mediation of simplicity, no generality, makes sense if self-contradiction renders its relevance arbitrary. On this background, research can be seen as work devoted to the overcoming of inconsistencies. Theories are built, in essence, to explain how something can be both A and non-A at the same time.

This already leads us on to seeing how the basic contradiction of research must be seen as a form of movement. In the words of one of the most inspiring Scandinavian action researchers of the 70s, T. Mathiesen (1971), the art is to always turn around before it’s too late. If consistency is a special feature of research, then the close encounter with other practices that makes it relevant, inevitably, leads to inconsistency. In other words, problems and dilemmas in practice are reshaped as contradictions in theory. The theoretical work then consists in, temporarily, turning the back to the immediate necessities of practice, in order to reestablish consistency. This produces irrelevance, or to be more precise, it leads to a transformation of relevances; its renewed relevance requires practical changes. Thus, the process of ‘rising from the abstract to the concrete’ is far from a simple deduction or ‘application’; it is a transformative movement.

This movement describes relevance and consistency as counterposed. However, it is also implied in the above considerations that no theory can be relevant if it is not consistent. Similarly, without the demand for relevance, there would be no impetus for creating consistency. This means that relevance and consistency not only contradict, they also presuppose each other. The theory of knowledge consists in the unfolding, and thus mediation, of that contradiction.

Practice research as joint venture

Practice research, viewed as situated practice, is ideally the joint venture of two distinct situated practices. It should be reduced neither to a research methodology nor to a means of strategic development of a practice.
Relations between research and other practices are mostly mediated through recontextualizations of products. This simple fact normally both conceals the specificity of research to outsiders and its practical foundations to insiders (cf. Billig, 1999, who makes the more general point that the market form of exchange of commodities makes it a structural ‘unconscious’ that, how, and under what conditions our everyday things are produced). If any direct encounter is arranged, it is most often in the form of one practice instrumentalizing the other. This is evident in much of contemporary evaluation studies. In this field, the choice is, roughly, between sticking to a scientistic formalism that soon becomes an end in itself, or the production of policy documents of uncertain validity and generality. This is known as the dilemma of rigor or relevance (e.g. Argyris and Schön, 1974, 1991). The ‘happy outcome’, that which leads to new contracts, is when these vices are combined – when it is precisely a pseudo-scientific form that lends legitimacy to an unchallenged policy. It is no wonder that much ‘action research’ of various kinds have earned a dubious reputation as research.

On the other hand, action / practice research can be viewed as precisely the situated embodiment of the above general features of research. Thus, it is in practice research that one may hope to have access to the most fundamental and comprehensive catalogue of methodological and epistemological questions. It appears that practice research is both the most advanced and the most corruptible of methodologies.

Speaking of a joint venture, I aim to capture, firstly, the facts of cooperation and of engagement in projects with unknown outcomes. Secondly, I suggest that practice research is best viewed from the middle, from the standpoint of the relation, rather than in the context of either research or practice. A new, a third, situated practice is constituted: something close to what Wenger (1998) would call a ‘boundary practice’. From this vantage point it is evident that the kinds of researchers that are most likely to be interesting partners, are those who build on some epistemology of practice. Turning our gaze the other way, the interesting practitioners are those who pursue a concern for reflection and development.

Practice research does not rely on teaching theory to practitioners, nor on a reshaping of theory into everyday concepts. Rather, it establishes its own locality of indexical transformations of meaning. The transactions of practice research are discursively constituted and developed in an ad-hoc language of its own. Here, all kinds of objects – the experience of practitioners, theoretical concepts etc. – are references: relevantly transformable only to the extent that they make sense as something to be referred to in the joint venture. Seen from research, the objects of practice research are prototypi-
cal, ‘empirical’ embodiments of theoretical concepts; their cycle of reproduction proves productive, in that theories develop through their externalization.

This ‘extended reproduction of the concept’ remains deeply mystical to those who insist only to see research from the inside, in itself. Ilyenkov (1977) compares it directly to Marx’s analysis of the shortcomings of bourgeois economics: viewed from the standpoint of Capital, why should value grow in the process money-commodity-money? To Ilyenkov, this is Hegel’s weak point. Practice remains to Hegel an externalization of Spirit in the otherness of Substance, a cycle of word-act-word, the productivity of which is inexplicable. Seen from practice, they are representations and explicates of practical problems, a process through which – mysteriously to the practitioner who stays outside of research – new action possibilities arise.

When we view practice research from the point of view of the relation itself, as a situated practice, it is a transformation of references. Such reference transformation is not internal to the situated practice research itself. Rather, the qualities of its products – objectivity / generality as well as reflexivity of action – derive from how they mediate networks of practice on and between both sides. Thus, for example, it is perhaps not until the time has come to report in a community of researchers that the researcher realizes (note the double meaning of this word) the change of meaning that has taken place in the course of practice research. Reformulating projects and concepts (in the direction of consistency and new relevance) is then what produces objectivity and generality (on this side of the cycle).

This social aspect of objectivity also includes that any transformation of references is also a transformation of the situated practice – the actions contexts, its participants and their relations to each other. This means that the organization and the content of practice research are very closely related and even tend to coincide (just as is the case in a psychotherapeutic process) – its externalities are, as it were, central. This feature makes it highly relevant to view practice research as a many-sided process of alignment, as suggested in the ‘actor-network’ approach to the study of research proposed by Latour and others (e.g. Latour, 1987, 1993, Fujimura, 1987). On the other hand, the idea of a transformation of references should not be overstated to the point where everything is reduced to an undifferentiated mass of ‘actants’ in a local process. Indeed, the specificity of research, and hence the necessity of consistent and productive theorizing, are as pivotal to the present argument as are the categories of subject and object.

Overcoming ideology – the in-and-for-itself
How does this situated approach to practice research construe the above mentioned problem of reproducing postmodernism? First of all, the discourses and action contexts of the ‘Active Society’ appear themselves as references to be transformed. That is to say, it is understood that the idea of a researcher, understanding herself as ‘Critical Psychologist’, meeting a ‘subject’, is insufficient, whether as the starting point or as the outcome of a purification process.

Just as in the ‘model of development’ from the early 80s, this ‘joint venture model’ assumes that we’re in it, we begin with the ‘pre-concepts’ of the practices we take part in. It is in the process of their transformation that they become the objects of our reflection, rather than the way we reflect; forms we think about rather than in.

But transforming these pre-concepts, these references, in this model, does not lead to any actual-empirical theory ‘in the framework of’, or ‘on the basis of’, Critical Psychological categories. Rather, the transformation of references implies further references; precisely which further references are relevant and how, that is a concrete question. On both sides, the range and depth of relevant implications will vary. But on the side of theory, in particular, the demand for consistency necessarily leads to some general theory of humanity. And on the side of practice, revolutionary aspirations necessarily call forth some standpoint of humanity.

Yet, these formulations, even if unavoidable, are not quite satisfactory. Thus, in the first instance, relativism or academism seems the implication of a situated practice research methodology. Even if the discourse of the ‘active society’ can be objectified and described, in which direction should it be overcome? That, we have just learnt, is a ‘concrete’ question, pointing to ‘some’ humanity, depending on the ‘situation’. Does this relativism imply that I, as a researcher, have, once again, engaged in the illusions of a distance, the no-where standpoint of problematizing all truths? The Foucauldian inspiration, certainly, makes that possibility obvious. This would also mean an important shift in the meaning of the word ‘critical’ in Critical Psychology, back to a more traditional academic critique.

I would never have come this far if not to suggest a different solution to this problem. Addressing an audience of ‘critical psychology’, telling the story of ‘Critical Psychology’, surely, only makes sense if there is more to being critical than that. If, in other words, the transformation of commitment into reflection need not imply its alienation.

A possible way to handle these problems could be to return to the concept of ideology. One of the many stories that I haven’t told about Critical Psychology, incidentally, concerns heavy debates over developing a theory of
ideology (cf. Projekt Ideologie-Theorie, 1979; Hänninen and Paldán, 1983). A situated approach to ideology may constitute a fruitful continuation of these debates, even if at first, it seems to lead to a relativism that speaks against the very idea of ideology. Various discursive and situated approaches to practices and thought-forms have avoided or directly opposed the concept of ideology because it was seen to imply, even if implicitly, ex negativo, the existence of some universal truth (Whetherell and Potter, 1992). If the concept is at all retained, it is in the classic sociological tradition of reducing everything to the clash of partial interests (in effect, universalizing partiality).

In Billig’s excellent situated rendering (cf. Billig, 1991, 1997), the concepts of discourse and ideology are closely related: ideology works through the (rhetorical) mobilization of discourse in some actors’ interests; conversely, discourse constitutes the actors who mobilize it. The mechanism of deixis is central to this working of a ‘local’ ideology, the ideology of some particular subject, community etc. ‘Ideology’, then, as a concept distinct from that of ‘discourse’, designates a particularity which is absent in Foucault. So far, Billig’s concept of ideology closely matches the above outlined action context approach in ‘Danish’ Critical Psychology. Ideology is the kind of sense that reproduces (constellations of) particular subjects and communities (see Nissen, 1999/a; Nissen, in press).

But how is the standpoint of research constituted? And how may we understand the generality which, logically, is the silent partner of such particularity? When Billig (1997) analyzes ‘banal nationalism’, for instance, what kind of ‘advanced internationalism’ is its counterposition, and in which ways does it organize the relevance of Billig’s analyses? More generally speaking: how do we get beyond the (ideological) dichotomization of reproduction from production which inheres in the traditional sociological focus on the reproduction of partial interest?

Facing such questions, it becomes clear that paying attention only to the making of a particular sense, and to the alignment of forces relevant to some local process, is a very one-sided and limited approach to relevance. Instead, we need to re-adopt and further develop the above outlined idea of a ‘generalized subject standpoint’, the connecting of the standpoint of humanity with the standpoint of everyday life. The generalized subject standpoint is the troublesome and productive reconciliation of the ‘first-person’ standpoint of the subject in-itself (the making of sense, or ideology), with the standpoint of a human society from which the particular subject and its local ideology can be viewed for-itself and thus, criticized, overcome. Thus, the in-and-for-itself maintains a generality with reference to humanity as a concrete movement of overcoming of ideology.
Theoretical ‘categories’ on Humanity, including those specifically addressing individual action, remain important resources to any critical psychology. As ‘resources’, we must modestly understand them to be always recontextualized as references in various forms and shapes in critical practice research. Still, we must assume a responsibility for their continuous development – sharpening their relevance, picking up the contradictions that arise through their use, creating theoretical mediations, and challenging critical practices with them. In this process, we must realize, Humanity will tend to get confused with ideological reproductions of prevailing societal forms, and so, we should be relentlessly, self-critically working on distinguishing. Not with the illusory aim of a purification of mind, or even of everyday life, but with the realistic expectation that this work can lead to understandings of both – of Humanity and of societies of today – which are highly relevant because they are the building blocks to historically concrete potentials.

The big, as yet unanswered, question is how we construe the historically concrete aim of a a human society as one necessary constituent of our action research standpoint. There is no reason to think that this can be construed as some academic universality, like the idea of ‘communism’ that was built to solve Marx’s theoretical problem of the recognition of the proletariat as the recognition of the human being as such (Hobsbawm, 1998). But there is also no reason to suppose that it will be stripped of any generality and completely reducible to local contingencies.

References


Dean, M. 1995. Governing the Unemployed Self in an Active Society. Economy and Society 24:4, 559-583


Dreier, O. 1995. Subjectivity and the Practice of Psychotherapy. Paper presented at the conference for the International Society for Theoretical Psychology, Ottawa, Canada


Engeström, Y. 1993. Developmental studies of work as a testbench of activity theory:
Morten Nissen


Forchhammer, H. 1999. The Emergence of the Client Perspective in Cancer Treatment. Outlines, 1, 51-58


Højrup, T. 1983. The Concept of Life-Mode. A Form-Specifying Mode of Analysis Applied to Contemporary Western Europe. Ethnologia Scandinavia


176
Latour, B. 1993. *We have never been modern.* Hertfordshire, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf
Mørck, L.L. In prep. Practice Research and Learning Resources. A Joint Venture with the project ‘Wild Learning’. Submitted to the *Outlines*
Nissen, M. 1999/a. Subjects, discourse and ideology in social work. In: Maiers, W. et.al. (eds.). *Challenges to Theoretical Psychology.* North York, Canada: Captus Press, 286-294


Project Ideologie-Theorie. 1979 *Theorien über Ideologie*. Berlin: Argument Verlag


Wackerhausen, S. 1998. Accounting for and changing practice. The roles and interpretations of beliefs, concepts, rules, models and goals. *Nordiske Udkast* 26:2, 63-78


Acknowledgment: The author wishes to thank all the people who have been engaged in discussions over this paper, including some of those whom it is about. It remains an account of the author’s position, of course, but it would never have come about without these feed-backs. In particular, the author would like to thank Morus Markard, Ute Osterkamp, Jean Lave, Ole Dreier, Martha Augoustinos, and an anonymous reviewer at the ARCP.

Morten Nissen is assistant professor in community psychology at the University of Copenhagen, Department of Psychology, and editor of Outlines - Critical Social Studies. Address: University of Copenhagen, Department of Psychology, Njalsgade 88, DK-2300, Copenhagen S, Denmark. Email: mnissen@psy.ku.dk