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An Experience of Integral Participatory Action-Research with Cooperatives: a Scientific Approach Engaged in a Process of Social Transformation

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Introduction

This paper relates the experience of a doctoral thesis in economics, carried out between 2015 and 2020 with three Business and Employment Cooperatives (BEC), within the framework of an original approach [3]: an integral participatory action research, known as IPAR [8], completed by a reasoning based on pragmatist philosophy [9] that articulates abduction, induction and deduction [15]. This questioning seems to us to be all the more important with regard to the stakes of social and ecological transition insofar as action-research constitutes a tool for social transformation. In line with the cooperative principles and the tradition of cooperative research, we consider action research as a process of production of scientific and operational knowledge. However, action-research is not self-evident, neither in cooperatives nor in universities, considered as time-consuming, slow with uncertain results for the former, and insufficiently solid theoretically for the latter. There is indeed a challenge today to address this topic in spaces like the Conference ICA CCR EU.

More precisely, it is a question of discussing epistemological and methodological elements relating to the implementation of action research in the social economy tradition [10], with a singular posture, that of researcher-actress-member, within the framework of an Industrial Convention for Training (ICT) through Research in a BEC. Here is our problematic: How can we develop a research approach that allows us to produce new knowledge that is scientifically proven with regard to university protocols while supporting and enriching cooperative actions? To answer this question, this paper is divided into three parts. First, we present the theoretical framework (1.) that enabled us to shape our approach and specify the survey methods (2.). This feedback process aimed at proposing tools and methods that can be used in the practices of both parties. Finally, its implementation allows us to show the contributions of an action research, and also the limits and obstacles encountered (3).

Theoretical frameworks

First of all, in order to build an investigative approach and solid reasoning, it is important to draw on conceptualisations and methods. This perspective associates research and the production of knowledge with socio-economic activity and the production of actions. This theoretical work - epistemologically and methodologically - provides tools for the concrete implementation of research. Inspired by methodological institutionalism [15], this involved research includes an assumed subjectivity [14], provided that it is scientifically proven. It can then be defined as a method of knowledge and a theory of action [7] that involves abductive reasoning, nourished by transdisciplinary dialogue [12].

The experience allows the production of knowledge and actions, in a fertile dialogue between researchers and actors, in a problem-solving perspective. Among the different approaches to action research (AR), it is the purpose of knowledge production [2] that characterises our approach: social



change in order to "know in order to change", represented by participatory action research. Indeed, in social economy organisations, AR takes into account their productive and transformative aims and the dual quality of their members, who are involved in the democratic decision-making process.

IPAR has several purposes. It is part of a tradition that links the enterprise movement and the thought movement: it has a transformative aim [10]. It results in the production of scientific and operational knowledge: it aims to produce new knowledge that is fundamentally dual [2]. It includes an educational dimension in a perspective of learning and empowerment, associating a reflective practice with the experience, production and transmission of knowledge: it is embodied in a pedagogy of autonomy. Finally, it is characterised by a process of participation of the actors in the production of knowledge, with a view to increasing their control over their working situations [13] : its ambition is to reinforce the active citizenship [18] of the cooperators in their organisation.

We need to stress the importance of clarifying the researcher's position. First of all, it has a hybrid character, potentially a source of tension [2,11]. Thus, the creation of spaces conducive to cooperation and communication is essential to build a bridge between the shores of research and action [5]. Beyond the unequal relationships between researchers and actors, it is about establishing egalitarian relationships as a basic principle of the scientific process [13]. Next, the social survey [9] operationalises the IPAR approach. In order to develop practical solutions, the social enquiry - defined as praxis - intervenes as a processual tool favouring the emergence of a profusion of ideas from experiences. It is embodied in abductive reasoning, i.e. an iterative dynamic, between deduction, induction and abduction. The result is a continuous dialectic between experiences and knowledge, between observation and theoretical framework [15].

It is from these epistemological and methodological bases that we have built a social investigation in the form of IPAR.

Process & methodology

In this action research, it is the action that initiated our reflection, which today seeks to feed the action. This thesis is part of the tradition of the social economy [10], but rather unusual in economics. Doctoral research conducted by a researcher-employee, then an associate of Coopaname, this IPAR is defined on the basis of three dimensions: an explanation of the action and its actors, an application for the action and the actresses, and an involvement through the action and with its actresses [8]. In order to structure our reflection scientifically, I first produced a reasoned autobiography, which opens up the process of self-analysis pursued during the investigation [ibid.]. As for my position, it combines two roles (actress-researcher) within the same person, and is contractually translated by the ICT. The self-analysis of my posture, enriched by the experiences of other researcher-actors and doctoral students in ICT [4], proved to be essential to maintain a continuous reflexivity and a capacity of adaptation, in order not to lose the thread of the research.

We conducted a qualitative survey of three BECs as it was an exploratory analysis. The focus was on observation in order to analyse the regularities in time and space by means of a detailed description in monographs. The aim was to identify significant facts characteristic of the BECs' socio-economic models. In addition to the analysis of documentary resources, the survey includes semi-structured interviews, participant observations, observational participations and action research workshops to discuss the results.

The research then proceeds through four stages: theorisation, modelling, transmission and encapacitation. Inspired by pragmatist philosophy [9], the triad of abduction-induction-deduction enables reasoning to be shaped through a movement of recursive loops between theoretical understanding [15]. The in vivo situation brings out a set of significant ideas finally tested through a process of triangulation. Concretely, it took the form of eight cycles, between actions and reflexivity on action, which are themselves never strictly one or the other. The problematic is

therefore the outcome of a work consisting of testing ideas through a loop of reasoning. As a philosophy and a tool, the pragmatist IPAR survey carried out is also an outcome of the thesis.

The pragmatic dimension of our IPAR integrates an objective of democratisation of the knowledge produced. Consequently, we designed rules, means and spaces to make a dynamic dialogue between actors and researchers possible. The negotiation of the terms of the ethical contract between the actors and the researcher has made it possible to establish relations based on principles of equality and cooperation, which are however never acquired. This resulted in three contracts: a written legal contract with Coopaname, a tacit and oral contract with Oxalis and Artenréel, and a partnership agreement with CGScop. To discuss and transmit the knowledge produced, three types of tools, means and spaces were designed: a newsletter sent by email to the cooperators, 2. AR workshops for presentation and discussion of the results, and 3. a study report with the general confederation of the worker cooperatives. Finally, the results take several forms: an analytical grid to study the socio-productive dynamics of BECs, supported by qualitative and quantitative indicators to examine the evolution of their strategy.

In this part, I have shared my experience of IPAR, explaining the implementation of theoretical choices, whether epistemological or methodological, of the abductive reasoning specific to social enquiry, but also through its pedagogical, participatory and democratic dimension.

Limits

IPAR does not occur without tensions and difficulties, as much in the management of time and temporalities as in the posture and the critical view that the researcher must take of her results. The difficulties in its implementation are due to the complex posture of researcher-employee-member, its differences from institutionalised research standards and the conventions opposing actors and researchers. It also leads to a sometimes ambiguous relationship with actors. And its long temporality is laboriously articulated with the academic requirements of the doctorate, insofar as it includes the additional work of preparing AR workshops, newsletter, reports for the actors. Beyond the pedagogical and participatory ambition of IPAR, its implementation is hampered by insufficient resources and strong time constraints. Finally, one of the difficulties concerns the management of abductive reasoning in order to stop - at least for a while - the process of abductive loops. Its means to accept the fact that it is not possible to consider all the recent events. It is about limiting the study of evidence considered, to achieve a simplification of reality without reducing its complexity.

Inputs

Nevertheless, this approach is conducive to the understanding of atypical dynamics in the grey areas of employment and work, thanks to a reflexive process resulting from a double scientific and empirical validation, which reciprocally enriches the social economy with regulationist readings.

First of all, we show the strong interest of the IPAR which brings a pragmatic and cooperative dimension to methodological institutionalism. It allows us to think differently about the process of theorization by associating actors to scientific reasoning, thus overcoming the biases of modelling and normative analyses, and taking the opposite view of a posture of exteriority with respect to the field. The humility of the researcher [6] towards the actors establishes a fruitful dialogue between the conceptual tools of regulation theory and the singular practices of the BECs. In addition to the transdisciplinary dialogue in the social sciences, it is the prior indetermination of the theoretical framework that leads to inventive tinkering in the form of exploratory. This evolving analysis schemes is then capable of grasping the complexity of reality, by re-reading the established theoretical approaches. By introducing the IPAR approach into methodological institutionalism, we bring a pragmatic and cooperative dimension to the theory of regulation by proposing to think differently the process of theorising through the participation of actors in scientific reasoning.

We argue that the proximity between action research and pragmatism invites us to bring the action-research tradition in social economy into dialogue with pragmatist philosophy, in order to reinforce



the reflexive process of regular back and forth between action and research. Thus, in this research, empirical experimentation is essential in the conceptualization of exploratory analysis schemes capable of capturing the complexity of the observed facts. The IPAR is enriched by the principles and stages of social enquiry with abductive reasoning. This allows the structuring of a reflective process through the formulation of stylised questioning facts, the suspension of judgement, the introduction of new findings from fieldwork and theoretical inputs, which are then selected and modified. Finally, IPAR leads to the production of knowledge that is scientifically tested, operationally applicable, pedagogically translatable and democratically usable.

Finally, the IPAR renews the committed research in the social economy, by integrating in the production of knowledge, a continuous dialogue between researchers and actresses. In fact, the institutionalisation of university research, the acceleration of the production of knowledge, a demand for objectivity that values a posture of exteriority with regard to the fields of investigation and the measurement of the economic data of the results [16], engenders a "process of depoliticisation" [1] of research in the social economy and reduces the use of AR. On the contrary, this research contributes to a re-politicisation of AR in the social economy, as a fruitful approach to empirically grasp the experimental practices of actors. Finally, the issue at stake is the recognition of this approach in a network of researchers practising AR, with a view to renewing the scientifically valid frameworks of analysis, in particular to show the interest of a committed posture.

Conclusion

According to the ethical and epistemological principles of research in the social economy, the role of researchers in relation to actresses in the production of knowledge is "to give a positive content to the characteristic properties of the organisations that refer to this identity, in other words, to try to clearly discern their specific fields of effectiveness"[17]. It is therefore a question of reappropriating a practice historically anchored in the social economy. It is about re-politicizing the analysis of cooperatives, by experimenting with and demonstrating the fruitfulness of the singular posture of a necessarily reflexive researcher-actress. The framework of an IPAR constitutes this kind of approach.

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