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Out of the Ivory Tower, and into Reality

Intervention research as a mediating element between theory and practice

Abstract

Intervention research organises a process in which the people concerned can use the knowledge, experience and the research results of science to take the necessary action for their own practice. We think that the greatest challenge of modern society is to make decisions in complex and uncertain contexts. To do so it is useful for scientists and practitioners to cooperate in this process, to establish reflective hybrids to reach the best-considered and most reflected decisions that are possible. This article focuses on theoretical *and* practical challenges in intervention research, and on its mediating role as a go-between.

1 Introduction

Intervention research as process-based science[1] believes that a need exists for a science which "is prepared to examine increasingly concrete issues and social problems, and that be 'in an intervening respect'".[2]

Although many sciences claimed to intervene in a certain way, and some of them even used the term "intervention research", Heintel was interested "in a different form of intervention". In a partici-

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1 Peter Heintel, among others, captured the mood of the times and the demands of a pluralistic world and began back in the 70s with the development of a science, which would be able to cope with present-day demands. His efforts finally resulted in the foundation of a university institute for intervention research and cultural sustainability.
2 'in eingreifender Hinsicht', Heintel 2002, p. 2.

pative intervention "which would be deemed appropriate towards living beings, and in particular towards human beings, their social relationships and their systems"[3].[4] Rothman and Thomas used three types of "intervention research": "Interventions Knowledge Development", "Knowledge Utilization for Intervention" and "Interventions Design & Development".[5] These all belong to different types of applied research that search for an outcome that could be implemented in various areas of human service. Intervention research then moves "researchers who are interested in developing and testing new interventions"[6]. Heintel sees a third meaning of intervention research – in addition to "direct and indirect interventions", in which theory is translated more ore less directly into practice – which seeks a means of accompanying a process of self-reflexive preparation of the matter under consideration.[7] To do so we adopted a philosophical line of inquiry, more specifically we are following the philosophical tradition of the Enlightenment and of German Idealism. With our considerations we supply arguments to the debate on qualitative social research[8], which has been underway for decades and is nevertheless still current and meaningful. These arguments are intended to rectify to a certain extent the imbalance, which is still present, and to attempt to justify why turning to a practice-based science is a pressing need of the day.

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3 Heintel 2005b, p.1.
4 This is a description which is founded on the basic principles of qualitative social research (Action research, multi-dimensional fundamental research, counselling research, Grounded theory, Praxeology, etc.), since 'qualitative research' sets itself the task of describing the worlds people live in from 'the inside outwards'. In doing so the intention is to contribute to a better understanding of social reality and realities, and to draw attention to patterns of interpretation and structural characteristics (Flick et al, 2000, p. 14).
5 Rothman / Thomas 1994, 4–6.
6 Fraser / Richman / Galinsky / Day 2009, p. 4.
7 Cf Heintel 2003.
8 Cf among others: Flick 1995, 2000, 2007; Eberle / Hitzler 2000; Mayring 1993 also on content analysis 2003; Girtler 1988; Heinze 1995; Strauss 1998 and in continuation Glaser / Strauss 2005; Felt / Nowotny / Taschwer 1995; Kleining 1995; Lamnek 1995; Ahrens / Beer / Bittlingmayer / Gerdes 2011; Kelle 2008; Bohnsack 2000; Ernst 2010.

2 Principles

Principle No. I: The freedom of the "object under consideration"

Intervention research only performs in fields of research in which human beings are active. It is a fundamental principle that the "object under consideration" of intervention research is alive and free. It is the task of the scientists first to observe the ways in which individuals, collectives and systems make use of their freedom and self-referencing nature, or do not make use of it, and what is hindering them in turning their wishes into reality.

When self-difference is to be established that element of contradiction becomes evident which is located between a refusal to delegate freedom and the proposed role of the expert. This expert's role consists essentially of three qualities:

1. Making the offer to organise, structure and accompany those processes necessary for self-referentiality.
2. Offering experience of and comparisons with similar contexts to establish the correct timing.
3. Offering supporting theories for the purpose of mutual self-understanding.

So that theory cannot be accused of re-introducing old scientific procedures and its privileged status (lecturing and knowing better) via the back door, its character must change to allow ideas to be combined with regard to language and conceptualisation. At the same time theory must support decisions in favor of reduction, which in turn provide the distance necessary to begin anew or elsewhere, and to continue without becoming lost in endless self-references. The task of research thus moves away from the pure production of results towards a questioning movement which places the 'How' of managing social and cultural processes at the center. In its own understanding, intervention research believes it can help collectives and systems by accompanying them towards emancipation and enlightenment. The effort and responsibility for the success of such a process are however left to the system itself.

Principle No. II: Taking the borderline dialectics of systems into consideration

The objects under consideration are systems and they are dialectic in their borderlines. They are closed in themselves, and also not closed. For intervention scientists it is of importance that the objects under consideration should be systematic in character, because it is a matter of living connections, which are in constant movement, communicating with each other, interacting, entering into different relationships with each other, and taking up identifications, roles and functions.[9]

Principle No. III: The relationship to the research system

In intervention research relationships and trust are highly valued. As constitutional elements of research, which cannot be excluded, relationships are maintained and entered into by the method. Via feedback loops irritations, misunderstandings and ambiguities can then be identified and made understandable.

Each individual has to enter into the relationship. The following basic philosophy is valid for both the research partners as well as for the researchers: "Without self-observation, self-description, self-selection as the central theme there is no self-investigation, and without self-investigation there is no self-recognition and no self-confidence, without self-confidence no self-determination (Greek: 'autonomy'), without self-determination no self-control."[10]

Principle No. IV: Shaping the process

The quintessential feature of intervention research is that its central method is the shaping process, which in a series of steps produces different points of focus. It is this process which has the effect of constituting its own system through engaging fully with observation, self-observation, action and reflection.[11]

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9 Cf Heintel 2005b, pp. 129–131.
10 Krainz 2006, p. 18.
11 Cf Heintel 2005b, p. 137ff, Krainer/Lerchster 2012, Lerchster 2011.

Outside observations are made available in order to stimulate self-observation and reflection, which then serves as material for the further scientific work, and a "dialectic-dialogic" process is set in motion.[12] This is the fundamental difference between most types of action research and intervention research. While action research aims at enabling practitioners to become researchers in their own fields, intervention research maintains the distinction between the two systems: researchers and practitioners.

This sort of philosophy in practice can be identified as a basic principle in the tradition of group dynamics and is described as such by various authors.[13] The authors described an alternative political education with emancipatory implications[14], in such a way that research would also enable a different form of education.

Translated into practical research terms this means that, for example, when work is commissioned there first have to be investigations carried out to determine the relevant environment, with those affected being asked for their opinions, and so on. This material is then worked upon, put into context and compared with similar research, before hypotheses are established. Through the commission a system is constituted which can no longer take as its starting point separate, individual systems, because they are already placed in relation to each other.

Principle No. V: The question – a central issue in research

The close relationship between science and practice (transdisciplinarity) in intervention research gives it its distinctive feature, namely that the questions are presented to the researchers by those working in a given field. One could put it like this: people in practical working situations have a problem for which they ask or commission scientists to contribute solutionsf, i.e. provide results and answers. Intervention research, however, takes as its starting point the belief

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12 Cf Heintel ibid. pps 135–136.
13 Cf among others: Bradford et al. 1964; Pages 1974; Lapassade 1972; Krainz 2006; Lackner 2006; Heintel 1977, 2006.
14 Cf Lesjak 2009, p. 215.

that the relevant answers are already present in every person, and that they only need support with the "birth" of the solutions. This is transformed methodologically by the use of Socratic maieutics (Greek: midwife's art) as the dialogic technique.

Just as Socrates would have done, the researchers place themselves in the role of the uninformed, taking on the search for the hidden or concealed. The question is placed at the center of their actions. At this point the difference between the expert, endowed with rich experience and specialist knowledge, and the lay person arises. The experts and the lay people exist in an interactive relationship with each other - the lay person is not the one who knows nothing, but rather the co-producer[15] of knowledge for the expert(s). The hierarchical difference between experts and lay people is thus (where it is successful) transformed into a partnership, in which results and theories are generated.

Principle No. VI: Applied dialectics – dialectics as the motor of reality

Traditionally, dialectics - the method of statement and contradiction – is located in situations concerning opposing positions, which cannot be solved logically by coming down in favor of the one side or the other, i.e. that do not permit an either/or solution.[16]

With his philosophical understanding (synthesis), Hegel[17] differs from natural sciences in as much as classical logic tries to eliminate contradictions. In synthesis contradictions are suspended, whereby the concept of nullification has three dimensions: negare (to abolish), conservare (to preserve) and elevare (to elevate).

Reality is full of contradictions. Intervention research seeks a different relationship to contradictions. As applied dialectics it attempts to assign them a suitable place by organizing processes where contradictions meet each other, show mutual understanding and

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15 See Hörning 2001.
16 Cf Heintel 2005b, p. 138.
17 Cf Hegel 1986; Ludwig 2006.

respect for each other, and form their relationship with each other themselves.

Principle No. VII: The organisation of decisions taken in a process-ethical manner

Krainer and Heintel developed for this purpose a process-ethical model, which should be able to impart practical relevance to the human image (human beings as beings of difference and contradiction), which forms the basis of intervention research[18]. Thus, in order to construct collective or shared paths to a solution, there is a need for analysis of which contradictions the relational system is facing. With respect to the field of research, the task is "to examine the observed phenomena for contradictions, thereby continuing the phenomenonological search for clues that has already been started. This can be done by simply asking which fundamental contradictions are at the core of certain conflicts".[19]

The implementation of a process-ethical model depends on the establishment of social spaces, of an adequate communication structure, and consequently on the opportunities for offering those involved the time and space to be able to make sustainable decisions based on reflection.

Establishing the spaces alone is, however, not the whole truth. Processes of reflection and decision-making are based on the foundation of a well-ordered communication structure, for which, usually, systems require support from outside in setting them up.

This can occur in several different ways: the summarizing of interview results, the locating of contradictions, and the formulation of hypotheses and background theories by the scientists, which can in turn be placed at the system's disposal.

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18 Cf Krainer / Heintel 2010, p. 553ff.
19 Krainer 2010 (unpublished).

Principle No. VIII: Participation, co-determination and the expertise of non-knowledge

Based on the idea of a practical philosophy, the individuality of the object under consideration[20] is not only recognized and accepted, but is effectively the primary consideration. The task is to make people aware of this individuality, which is to be found in organizations as a collective identity, so that those involved can become capable of making decisions for/by themselves. This process of awareness building succeeds when self-enlightenment is seen as full involvement of those affected by the investigation and learning processes. A fundamental requirement is their acceptance of this different research approach, i.e. the voluntary use of science and the renunciation of dependency.

In addition it requires the acceptance and the understanding of the research partners for the relatively laborious organization of the research (ascertaining of the situation, feedback loops, coming to decisions, implementation), with the factor of the individual's "own time concept" playing an important role. Emotional learning processes are subject to their own rhythms and duration, and such "own times" cannot be predicted in the way classical science would do it.

This attempt at abolishing experts and lay-persons, together with the certainty that the research partner will have implicit knowledge, means at the same time that the latter will be faced with a demand for him or her to "become emancipated", "... those practical workers are 'forced' by the conflict to enter into self-reflection, to get to know themselves better, to get a 'clearer' picture of themselves, through creating communicative common ground for themselves."[21] Both the process of being guided towards self- or personal responsibility and to reflection, which represents an important contribution to one's self-enlightenment, and the "communicative collective"

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20 Strictly speaking, the concept of the object is imprecise in the context of intervention research, since it is concerned with the "de-objectification" of research and the "objectification" of emotion (visible in the contradictions).

21 Loc. Cit. p. 102.

structure are requirements which often enough in themselves represent a formidable challenge.

In our culture, self-examination and deliberation are still not required or fostered sufficiently, and consequently do not belong to the self-image of individuals, groups or organizations. Furthermore, the path to self-enlightenment is not always free of pain and in parts is an arduous and demanding journey to embark upon.[22]

Dependency versus interdependence, hierarchy versus collective leadership, certainty versus uncertainty, freedom versus coercion etc., these fields of tension have to be taken into account and reflected upon within a research process. This is true both within the system under investigation as well as between the research team and the research partners, and, lastly, within the research team itself.

Principle No. IX: The finite nature of truth

The logic of intervention research and its methods lie in cooperation, in mediating between different systems, organizing the dialogue, establishing communication spaces, integrating diverse systems of logic. In the course of the research process "a sort of 'collective soul' constitutes itself, (…) a common perspective, a common understanding are achieved, with the impetus and drive for action, goals and objectives, identification with the situation and motivation for follow-up tasks generally being shared"[23].

In intervention research, a broad spectrum of varying research strands from social science, group dynamics, philosophy, psychology and pedagogy, multi-dimensional fundamental research for basic causes, praxeology, or action research come together. United, in particular, in the conviction that "generating theory is a process".[24]

It is not about following dogmas or reaching agreement, not about formulating some ultimate truth. On the contrary, it is about allowing inter-disciplinarity to live and to have an effect. In the end

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22 Which in addition requires considerable amounts of time.
23 Heintel 2005, p. 152.
24 Glaser / Strauss 2005, p. 15.

there is a need to accept that truth is a finite quantity, because the results of science are only relevant for as long as all abide by them.

3 Case study

To illustrate the theoretical aspects that have been discussed above we will use two connected research projects from the context of public conflict management, focussing on the steps needed to implement research and its results and concrete challenges.

From 2001 to 2005 we were commissioned to accompany the biggest mediation project currently known with an intervention research project. In this mediation surrounding the construction of a third runway for Vienna airport a large number of issues were negotiated: noise pollution, night flights, distribution of flight traffic on different air lanes, agriculture, ecology, sustainability etc. All in all there were nearly 40 task groups, some of them further subdivided. More than 60 persons were involved in the process, constituting the following groups: mayors of the bordering municipalities, members of different citizens' groups, members of different residents-associations, representatives of the bordering states (Vienna and Lower Austria), certain districts of Vienna, different interest groups, chambers and national park management and political parties. 3 persons belonged to the mediation team, plus a lawyer from Vienna, who supported them after having prepared the mediation, and who finally became the process provider of the whole mediation. One result of the mediation was the need to establish a follow-up structure to handle further conflicts – the "Vienna Airport Dialogue Forum" (that later has been evaluated by us).[25] The research was commissioned (and finally paid for) by the Vienna Airport but our client was the mediation forum, the biggest forum for debate within the mediation structure in which all the participants took place.[26]

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25 The Dialogue Forum ensures that the results of the mediation process will actually be implemented and the contracts observed. Further it has to organize communication processes in which new conflicts might be negotiated, see Dialogforum 2012a and 2012b. http://www.dialogforum.at/jart/prj3/dialog_forum/dialog_forum.jart?rel=de&content-id=1140015437816&reserve-mode=active.

26 Falk / Heintel / Krainer 2006.

Implementation of shared knowledge of the research topic, task and methods

The first step of each intervention research project is the implementation of shared knowledge of the research topic, task and methods. First we have to find out what our clients really want to know and what kind of research results they expect to get. We interview our clients and later use these interviews as our first research materials[27] and finally suggest how the research process should be implemented in the given domain.

This means establishing a (new) culture of science, which accepts that there is no hierarchy of (science and practical) knowledge, but a need for cooperation in a process of co-creation of knowledge between scientists and practitioners.

Implementation of a mixed, inter- and transdisciplinary community

The second step in our research projects is the *implementation of a mixed, mostly inter- and transdisciplinary community*. For the Vienna airport project the research team consisted of eight people representing the following disciplines: philosophy, psychology, psychotherapy, jurisprudence, communication science, geography, economics and group dynamics. Our central partners in the mediation were the project manager responsible at Vienna Airport (especially for financial affairs and all questions of contracting) and the process provider. Then we negotiate a commitment with our clients about our main partners within the research field (both in financial affairs and in the concrete planning of our research project).

The culture lying beyond this believes in two basic ideas. First, that questions and problems of practical fields can be better understood if the different disciplines concerned are involved in the attempt to understand a social system (interdisciplinary research). Next, that it is useful to integrate internal knowledge about the prac-

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27 We write an offer in which we explain our methods, the (estimated) number of interviews, observations and the (estimated) need of material analysis.

tical field in the process of planning and steering research projects. This of course does not mean that clients get in the position to determine research-activities (to tell us what we should or should not, whom we should interview, observe and so on) but they are invited to participate in a reflected planning process (that sometimes has to negotiate conflicts as well).

Implementation of structures

The third step is very important for us. It is the *implementation of structures* for our research project within the concrete research area. Mostly we suggest arranging a kick-off meeting to start the research process together. In this session we introduce ourselves, present our research project, explain our methods (including anonymity) and try to find out what the interests of the participants concerning our research project are. Sometimes we rewrite our offer afterwards and add some ideas we gained from this step. This is an important meeting point, where practitioners and researchers (two different cultures) come together for the first time. It is very useful to discuss different fears or also prejudices people might have upon being confronted with research. It is a chance to talk about such questions, which might lead to trust. It could help to get scientists out of their normal anonymous state far away from areas of practice. But more than that, it helps to implement a research project as part of a practical field.

Implementation of a process of decision-making

In order to prevent a gap arising between two classes of knowledge, scientific and practical, we give regular feedbacks to our partners. In these feedback sessions we offer our initial findings and try to formulate our understanding of the process we observed or the structure we analysed or the information we have gathered until then. To do so, we use a language that is as close as possible to that spoken by the people concerned, therefore we use a lot of citations from the interviews and try to illustrate different positions in the original words that were used by our partners. Then we ask them to assess our ob-

servations, to correct them, to add important things and so on, until we achieve a moment at which all of them can agree to our common description of the social reality of the concrete practical field. In the next step the practitioners are asked to discuss consequences and arrive at decisions about how they will proceed. We do not make any suggestions in this part of the process but offer moderation, if they want or need it.

This seems to be the most important cultural change. First, because scientists agree to accompany a process of decision finding in which practitioners decide how to handle scientific results. Secondly, because practitioners get into the position to review our results, to decide whether those results fit the way they see their own social reality or situation, or whether it is useful to see it in a more differentiated perspective or not and finally, how useful it is to make forward-looking decisions for their further projects. That means that science has to agree to be reviewed by two different systems: an academic one and a practical one.

The biggest problem for most of the participants was the need for decision-making. It is not easy to come to decisions that will concern thousands of people for many, many years. Consequently they chose different strategies to escape: first they invited one expert after the other to get more and more (scientific) knowledge until they themselves (and we with them) became experts for special technical aspects (like glide slope angles); then they demanded several new task forces to discuss different topics seriously until the process became so complex that the reports of all the established groups could no longer be read by the participants and ourselves; finally they started to discuss opening the mediation for those who had been unable to join it, which in effect would have meant returning to the beginning. In all of these cases we gave the feedback that the strategies chosen could be used to prevent very difficult but necessary decisions. And we tried to talk about the emotions and fears they had. Most of them didn't like to face the fact that they would be responsible for the momentous decision they had to make.

Challenges and contradictions in inter- and transdisciplinary process orientated research projects

There are different types of challenges that have to be accepted in intervention research. Some concern scholars, some practitioners, some both of them.

"Planning" uncertainty

A first contradiction lies in the necessity to offer a research design, to calculate a project and to communicate research steps to clients if it is completely unclear how the process that should be observed will run, how long it will last and how complex it will get. Uncertainty cannot be planned but has to be taken in account for.

Different interests of clients

Both projects had two types of clients: the one who paid for it (Vienna Airport) and those who decided in terms of content. The latter were all the parties in the mediation forum (including Vienna airport), and in the second project the secretary of the Vienna Airport Dialogue Forum. With regard to content, we sometimes had to negotiate the budget, whereupon we found different interests corresponding to their expectations.

The balance between closeness and distance

The more cooperation between scientists and practitioners is handled the more the distance that is needed to observe things from an external perspective is endangered. Researchers in transdisciplinary projects seem to be in danger of going native in a too familiar way. They are allowed to join meetings but then are even invited for meals or to become friends or close to the family. This might help to get to information but it might lead to trouble as well, if they empathize too much and lose a clear view.

Conflicts in the research field that moved into the research project

Even when we simply focussed on the structure and organization of the mediation (and not their content) we became involved in an

unexpected way. Members of the citizens' groups criticised that we travelled from Klagenfurt to Vienna by plane. In fact every other way would have taken much more time or money (we got very cheap tickets from the airport). Nevertheless some of them threatened to refuse their cooperation with us (for example to give interviews). Finally it was possible to de-escalate the conflict but it was important to see and understand the problem.

4 Conclusions

The Klagenfurt model of Intervention research differs from other types of intervention research in that it aims to accompany processes of self-reflexive preparation in the matter of research and not to check how different interventions may have an effect on systems or how research results might be implemented into practical areas. It combines several methods well known from qualitative research and philosophical methods of developing theory. Since modern society has to search for decisions in complex and uncertain contexts it seems to be useful to establish reflected hybrids between science and practitioners.

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Dialogforum 2012b: Das Dialogforum stellt sich vor. http://www.dialogforum.at

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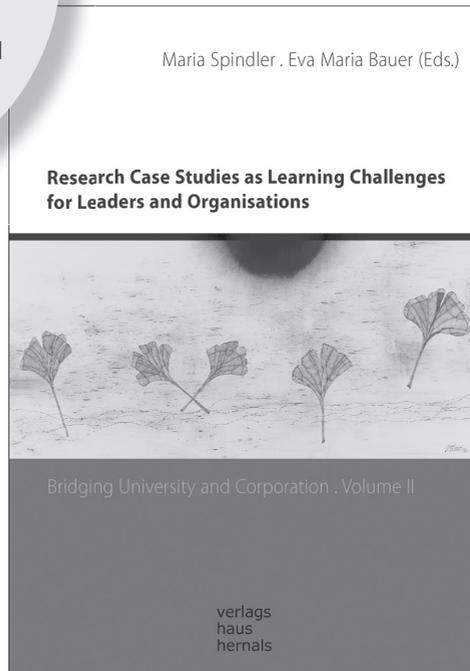
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