The Production of Power in Organisational Practice – Working with Conflicts as Heuristics

Peter Busch-Jensen

Department of People & Technology, Roskilde University,

Roskilde, Denmark

Abstract

This article argues for the value of working with conflicts in social practice as resources for collaboration, learning and development. The interest in conflicts in social practice is rooted in a preoccupation with social power relations and how to understand and analyse power relations from a subject-science perspective. Following this interest, a methodological framework, best described as a kind of 'mobile ethnography', is discussed and exemplified through an empirical example. A preliminary conceptual framework for understanding power as a capacity for action is presented. The overarching ambition of the article is to consider what democratic collaboration and coexistence entails and how it might be supported conceptually and analytically by the notion of conflicts as heuristics for social inquiry and by the notion of power as a capacity for action and social participation.

The dilemmas of everyday life

Reading through the morning paper, we might frown with outrage if we come across a story about a local schoolteacher arrested for producing and distributing hard drugs in his neighbourhood. During the television series, *Breaking Bad*, however, millions of people held their breath whenever Walter White (a chemistry teacher producing and distributing hard drugs in his community), was almost caught by the police. This apparent paradox points to important and interesting aspects of social life. Of course, the ability to see problematic actions from 'the inside' doesn't necessarily mean they cease to appear problematic, but it often turns them into something less straightforward and therefore challenges our propensity to easily personalise social problems. This is simply because social phenomena that might seem wrong and indefensible from a detached third-person perspective, often transform into something more complex, recognisable and

understandable when we are invited to see how they are actually lived, felt, made sense of, and accomplished by human beings in their everyday life.

The opportunity to see the world from other people's perspectives enables understanding and sometimes even empathy with actions we may otherwise find strange, wrong or even despicable. Thus, the art of mimesis – of providing us with the opportunity to 'visit other people's lives' and follow people around their everyday life and its dilemmas – involves invaluable qualities of *life in common* and peaceful coexistence. This, I believe, is both a precondition *and* a challenge for social collaboration, communication and peaceful coexistence. It is also one of the reasons why methods are important, and in *any* form are permeated by questions of ideology, ethics and power. All social representations are imbued with questions of our relationship to 'otherness', not only because they distribute and illuminate *certain* perspectives and areas of the world, but also because the *way* they do this matters. In relation to this it is interesting to contemplate the absurd but undeniable reality that, in general, it is not psychology, or social science for that matter, that most frequently challenges us to put ourselves in someone else's place, or to feel with, and empathise with other people. Mainstream psychology simply has very little to say about what it is like to be a human being living with specific dilemmas, relationships, necessities, challenges and pleasures, and therefore, most of us have learned more from films and literature than we have from psychology about, for example, what it means to be an unemployed single parent or a drug addict, what it means to live with a loved-one who suffers from Alzheimer's, or what it means to raise children when working as a middle manager in a high-performance company. It is important that we recognise the depth of this illogicality, its vast social implications and the importance of correcting it. Of course, we might consider the qualities of films, theatre and literature to enable understanding and even empathy with actions we may otherwise find wrong or despicable, as demonstrating precisely the dangers of art and, in extension, the dangers of qualitative research, and we might thus interpret the example as a warning not to get 'too close to some parts of reality'. Certainly this is how some argue, and certainly, the capacity of films, theatre and literature to communicate a specific perspective of reality is not innocuous, however, the problem here is not and *cannot* be the interest in taking a closer look at the lived reality of social phenomena. Rather, the problem stems from the dangers inherent in the enhanced or even overexposed organisation of a stand-alone narrator-perspective of social reality. This is, perhaps, where art and science must differ.

A *scientific* attitude towards otherness is not a residue-free solidarity with this otherness. Taking people's perspectives seriously, therefore, does not entail a residue-free solidarity with their perspective. There is a need for empathy, but also a need for critical analysis. The term 'critique' and the discussion of what critical research and analysis involves, have for some time been dominated by two fears: a fear of distortion produced by too generalised a generality, and a fear of inadequacy produced by too situated and/or positivistic a localised focus. These concerns relate to the need for both 'closeness' and some form of distance, and the challenges of balancing the qualities of both, when studying social reality. The purely observational recital that never shares its informant's concerns often ends up with abstract representations of reality that seem strangely uninformed by people's actual lives and reality. Conversely, a total identification with this reality rarely contributes to more than descriptions detached from focus, or socially relevant analysis. A position must therefore be found that, so to speak, demonstrates empathy from a critical position and undertakes critical work also from a position of

situated understanding and empathy. The question is, how? This question and the methodological and theoretical themes to which it relates, act as the undercurrent of this article.

I first present my focus on conflicts as useful heuristics in social research and a meaningful element of social practice, one which points to the fundamental social connections and dependencies woven into the fabric of social life. More often than not the problem is not the conflict, but rather the tendency to consider conflict as (simply) problems: causes rather than something resulting from the worldliness of human life; differences in social engagements, standpoints, circumstances, and possibilities. To clarify the premise of my argument I proceed by presenting the theoretical tenets of my analysis. My theoretical footing is inspired primarily by a particular German–Danish version of critical psychology (Axel, 2002; Dreier, 2008; Holzkamp, 2013; Højholt, 2015) that is sometimes referred to as *a psychology from the standpoint of the subject* (Holzkamp, 2013). Research from this perspective can be described as *situated practice research*, and it entails the notion of social practice as *conflictual collaboration* (Axel, 2009). After briefly presenting my understanding of these concepts, I move on to discuss and theorise the concept of power. Firstly, because power is in many ways a product of the way we handle and arrange social differences and conflicts, it is difficult to discuss the phenomena of conflict without addressing issues of power. Secondly, *a psychology from the standpoint of the subject*, which argues for a situated approach to the study of social practice, might raise questions about how to get hold of the wider political and societal dimensions and power relations of social practice (see, for example, Mattes, 1999; Teo, 1999). It is an additional ambition of this article to present some provisional ideas about how to conceptualise power and how to capture its structural dimensions, when working from a subject science approach to social practice.

Power is often associated with the struggle for power, however, in this article I argue that this conceptualisation blurs an important mutualistic dimension of power that plays an important role in the conduct of our everyday lives and in social coexistence as such. Starting from the notion of power as a capacity for action and social participation, I outline an alternative vocabulary for thinking about power. The vocabulary is not meant to replace, but rather situate the adversarial conception of power within a broader framework, encompassing both 'power over' and 'power with' relationships.

Along the way and throughout the article I argue for the usefulness of studying power from a subject science perspective. My ambition is not to present an individualistic approach to social conflicts, neither is it to replace 'victim-blaming' by 'system-blaming'. My contention is rather that these realms are constructed by each other. What is important is therefore to better understand this co-construction, in order to make social changes that are meaningful at both individual and societal levels. To capture this co-construction I argue for simultaneous movements 'zooming in and out' of social practice and conflict. The methodological movements are meant to seek a means of conducting critical research in which involvement and analytical reflection are mutually constitutive, since through these movements the researcher finds themselves confronted with and empathising with different, and sometimes conflicting, practices and perspectives. In other words, the researcher is faced with a *dilemma*.

As described by Michel Foucault (1997), due to a long tradition of separating the question of knowledge from the question of power, we have for some time addressed the issue of

knowledge by questioning and testing its legitimacy. This *evaluative* approach to knowledge, however, not only constructs a risky separation of questions of knowledge and questions of power, it also spills into an *evaluative* approach to social problems, conflicts and perspectives that is both unfruitful and sometimes even counterproductive. The *evaluative* approach to knowledge invites us to address conflicts as *problems* that relate to whose perspective is or is not legitimate, or corresponds more or less with reality. Thus our attention is set on the separate perspectives rather than on their social geneses and meaning; on their legitimacy rather than their reality.

In this article, I argue for another approach to knowledge and social conflict, and it is in extension of this that I argue why and how conflicts and dilemmas might be helpful points of departure for social research. The article argues for the potential benefits of conceptualising conflicts as resources for learning and development, rather than as just problems. If we take the point of departure in a notion of conflicts as pointing to contradiction and dilemmas, we abandon a purely evaluative approach to social differences. Instead we are invited to examine how conflicting perspectives relate to power: to particular arrangements and *conditions* for action; to different *scopes of possibilities*, and to practices and social arrangements that sometimes, by their design, also *assign* more legitimacy to some perspectives than others. Social conflicts therefore *also* invite us to ask, about the extent to which the arrangements, of which they are part, allow their participants to develop *power with* each other or *separate power* for some.

Social order between consensus and conflict

Social order is often taken to be a precarious phenomenon upheld only by strong social institutions that sustain common norms, rules and values, which work to make sure conflicts do not pervade social life. This argument is based on an understanding of humans as inherently disorderly, so that life in common and peaceful coexistence presupposes strong social consensus. I call this the *consensus position*. Contrary to its logic, I argue that disorder isn't necessarily the result of people being inherently disorderly, just as instances of social collaboration aren't necessarily a result of social consensus. Rather the opposite tends to be the case. The ability to collaborate tends to spring from messy processes that allow people to develop appreciation and sensibility to differences and diversity, and take them into account. The practical reality of social collaboration and coexistence, therefore, isn't necessarily a shared epistemic apparatus, more often it is the continuous dialogue between, and exchanges of, *different* actions, contributions and perspectives that in the course of social practice shape each other into more nuanced and socially informed forms of knowledge, action, coordination and collaboration. Social collaboration isn't necessarily a function of consensus, therefore, just as consensus isn't necessarily a bulwark against social conflict and disorder. It might just as easily be a cause of them.

To be a skilled practitioner and confident decision-maker is not a matter of simply learning pre-existing ideas, it is also a matter of learning how to interpret a problem embedded within social practices and to know how to handle and respond to it accordingly. In this process one comes to see the world as others see it and to work with the resources that others use to act on the world. In other words, social collaboration brings forth aspects of what Anne Edwards has described as *relational agency* (Edwards, 2007). Relational agency involves the capacity to identify and appreciate *differences* of perspectives and conflictual aspects of ongoing practice. It is this capacity that enables

good practitioners to maintain, yet think beyond their own functional understandings and interests and relate them to the understandings and interests of others. These dimensions strengthen, and are strengthened by, processes that allow us to work with others in the pursuit of an ever-expanding understanding and interpretation of our reality and its problems.

From the viewpoint of the consensus position, conflicts are mainly seen as problems to be avoided. In contrast, I argue that a less dismissive understanding of conflicts might strengthen the processes that relate to the development of relational agency.

Conflicts as heuristics

Within the school of thought known as pragmatism, the most basic form of knowledge acquisition is neither understood to be induction (where one concludes from many singular observations to a general hypothesis) nor deduction (where theoretical hypotheses are tested on the empirical world), but *abduction*. Abductive forms of knowledge acquisition are similar to what John Dewey called 'enquiry' or 'inference to the best explanation' (Tanggaard & Brinkmann, 2012). We begin to use abduction when we are confronted with collapses in our usual ways of acting and thinking, that is, when something appears incomprehensible and events or observations lead us to stumble in our understanding. When this happens we might go for what Dewey (drawing on the works of Charles Sander Peirce, 1839–1914) described as 'the best explanation in the situation' (Dewey, 1938). For instance: 'I do not understand X, but if Y is the case, X might make sense'; 'I do not understand why some professional athletes choose to use doping and thus lie about essential elements of their lives. On the other hand, if it's the only way to stay within the sport they love, it might make sense'. The latter consideration exemplifies abduction, understood as an attempt to produce a 'best explanation in the situation'. At the same time, it exemplifies that abduction has a creative element of transcendence to it, since we actively think beyond our usual perspectives and perceptions and try to see things from new angles and viewpoints. The sociologist, Andrew Abbott (2004), focuses specifically on the creative element in abductive interpretation and talks by extension about what he calls *heuristics*: tools for creative processes; techniques and technologies we can use to get our imagination going.

What I am proposing here is a kind of abductive approach to conflicts in social practice, defining conflicts as heuristics rather than problems. By *heuristics* I mean *useful tools for thinking about our everyday life and practice in ways that encourage enquiry and curiosity in and across the various contexts in which we participate*.

Of course, social conflicts are rarely pleasant and sometimes problematic, and it is not my intention to argue otherwise. It is simply to say that conflictuality is a fact of life, since conflict is difference – difference of opinion, perspective, knowledge and interest. Furthermore, conflicts are always conflicts *about* something. They pertain to an engagement we *share* with others; an engagement about something that we, due to a common engagement, can have disagreements about. To study conflicts is thus not to study a singular perspective on social reality, but always to study this reality from plural perspectives. Nor is it to study social reality from multiple more or less identical perspectives, but to study it from the viewpoint of differences, contradictions and dilemmas. As previously mentioned, we must be careful to avoid the dangers of a stand-alone narrator-perspective, even when it appears to represent a group of people.

Theoretical footing

Today, a growing number of psychological theories adopt real-time practice as the starting point of social and organisational enquiry. This starting point, however, faces some recurring challenges. As authors as diverse as Marx (1967) Heidegger (1993) Wittgenstein (1953) and Foucault (1977*)* have clarified, the complex normative and political dimensions of social practice often constitute a scarcely notable background of our everyday life. As a result, the societal forces in the details of our everyday practice need to be drawn to the fore and made into a visible epistemic object in order to gain our attention. This article attempts to outline some provisional ideas as to how to do so, drawing on insights from different practice-theoretical approaches.

Over the last 10–20 years a growing interest in practice theory has emerged (Gherardi, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nicolini, 2013; Schatzki, Cetina, & Sevigny, 2001), partly due to its capacity to describe important features of the world as something that is constantly made and remade, that way presenting an epistemological vista that resonates with contemporary experiences of a world increasingly in flux and interconnectedness, and partly because of the 'practice lens' ability to offer remedies for a number of problems left unsolved by other traditions, not least the tendency to grasp the world in unsolvable dualisms (individual/society; body/mind; nature/nurture; theory/action; culture/materiality).

According to practice theory, the world is not 'sliced up' into, for example, individuals, organisations, classes, systems or discourses, but instead addressed as a messy landscape of interconnected actions and practices. This has its advantages, but also its challenges. One concerns how to define and delimit the object of research, another is how to conceptualise and differentiate scientific practice and knowledge from other practices and forms of knowledge, and last but not least there is the challenge of how to define and examine power relations and the phenomenon of societal structures.

Answers to these questions can be pursued in different ways. Some practice theorists follow the object of toll-mediated practice (activity theory, see for example, Engeström (1987)). Some follow the networks and actors of both human and non-human characters (actor network theory, see, for example, Latour (2014)). Some focus instead on the processes of learning and communities of practice (see for example, Brown & Duguid, (2001), Lave & Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998)), etc. My understanding of social practice is inspired by all these approaches but primarily by a particular German–Danish version of critical psychology, developed by, amongst others, the German psychologist, Klaus Holzkamp (1927–1995) and further developed by, amongst others, a number of Danish psychologists (Axel, 2002; Dreier, 2008; Højholt & Kousholt, 2012; Mørck, 2006; Nissen, 2012; Schraube, 2009). Critical psychological practice research follows the participants of social practice and tries to examine it from the perspectives of its participants.

Critical psychology

The version of critical psychology presented here originates from a critique of the dominant post-World War II psychological approaches, particularly those employing experimental-statistical methods, emulating a natural scientific approach to psychology. According to the theorists mentioned above, this approach has to a large extent established a psychology that ultimately creates a very limited idea of agency, and often loses sight of the societal and historical dimension of human subjectivity and psychology (Motzkau &

Schraube, 2014). In contrast, Holzkamp et al. (ibid.) proposed to reconstitute psychology as a science for, with and about the subject: '*a psychology from the standpoint of the subject*'. It is important not to mistake this psychology for a subjectivist approach. Flanking the concept of subjectivity is an accompanying concept of *conduct of everyday life,* meant to emphasise how a first-person perspective is both subjective, intersubjective and societal (Dreier, 2008; Holzkamp, 2013). Every day, each of us faces different requirements from different areas of life, and we must make an ongoing effort to integrate these requirements: we must work on a temporal integration of our various activities, a social integration of our social contacts and relationships and a professional integration of our job tasks and appointments (Holzkamp, 2013). Thus, as formulated by Højholt, it is important to note how our:

> Everyday life and its routinizations cannot 'live itself' – every day a subject must choose to e.g., get out of bed (or not), to organize the morning in relation to the tasks that need to be met elsewhere, and often coordinate with others who will accompany the children to school, who will buy the food, who can stay at that meeting so that I can catch the train, etc. Even routines must every day become prioritized and planned and persons make quite a lot of choices during 'an ordinary day' in order to adjust to other people and matters. (Højholt, 2015, p. 25)

The concept, *conduct of everyday life*, involves the way active human agency constitutes an often silent premise and background of social practice, pointing out, simultaneously, how this ongoing effort is social and 'cannot be reduced to just adjusting to given conditions and structures, since we are always in a process of conducting our life in *relation* to such conditions and structures – developing *our ways* of taking part different places, in order to live our life and influence significant contexts' (Højholt, 2015). Subjectivity, therefore, relates to a capacity for action that is both individual, intersubjective and societal, since it implies *arranging* conditions together with others, partaking in activities, pursuing ideas, and looking for new possibilities for action as well as sustaining the activities we have *with* others. To conduct our lives we must therefore investigate our own as well as other people's possibilities for action, and the connections between them, recognising that no action or practice takes place in isolation, and that people's opportunities for action are not the same.

We each have reasons for our actions (they are not reactions to conditioned stimuli) and these reasons are based in our first-person perspective, however, this perspective is personal *as well as* societal, because 'structures of social meaning, i.e., the pertinent conditions, flow into the premises for our subjective reasons for action' (Motzkau & Schraube, 2014, p. 7). Situated conflicts between people therefore often relate simultaneously to societal conflicts between groups and/or professions.

Practice research

Practice research recognises the situational and provisional nature of collective human activity and builds on the notion that practices exist only to the extent that they are enacted. The term *practice* here refers to a bundle of mediated object-orientated actions of organised sets of sayings, and doings and ways of relating..These bundles of actions that I call 'practice' have a history, a social constituency, and thus a perceivable normative dimension, that allows participants to have a contestable yet relatively clear idea about what constitutes competent forms of action, what goals and objectives are considered

legitimate, what needs to be learned to develop one's actions and some – formal and/or informally – institutionalised (yet contestable) rules and procedures, that support and guide our actions. In short, a practice can be defined as a socially recognised form of activity, with a normative character, performed on the basis of what its participants learn from each other, in a more or less acknowledged fashion, which is always sustained at a collective level (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nicolini, 2013). Consequently, every performance of a practice carries with it a possibility of change, and every situation contains by definition more possibilities than those that are acted on (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Similar to much action research, practice research therefore invites the researcher (and practitioners) to pay attention not only to the world as it is but also to how it came to be as it is, and how it could be (or have been) different (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). What needs to be explained and examined is thus not only change but equally importantly the phenomenon of order and stability.

That said, to depict social reality as a cluster of practices is not an invitation to relativism. First of all the effects of our action and arrangements have real consequences for people and their opportunities for action. Secondly, it is exactly because of this, because our world is constituted of interrelated practices, that our reality can become resilient and difficult to change. Due to our interconnectedness, specific arrangements and relationships – and their attendant forms of acting, thinking and feeling – easily gain the status of holding our world together; they become something we consider indispensable and part of the natural order.

To engage in practice research is not to discard a notion of a material reality that matters and both enables and restricts our capacity for action. What needs to be avoided, however, is *essentialism, reductionism and reification* (Sibeon, 2004), such as presupposing a unity or homogeneity of phenomena (e.g. globalisation or taxonomic collectivities such as 'women', 'men', 'the working class' or 'Muslims') that does not reflect the practical reality of such phenomena (essentialism); or making the illicit attribution of agency and subjectivity to entities, such as 'society', 'the state', 'social movements', and so on, when in fact such entities are not actors or subjects, and 'have no identifiable means of making decisions, let alone acting on them' (Sibeon, 2004, p. 5). Situated practice certainly relates to wider arrangements of practices, which we might call structures. These structures should, however, not be seen as invariable preconditions of action, but rather as variable outcomes of human action. Any meaningful hypothesis about the constraints imposed by these conditions must therefore be based on analysis of how these constraints and conditions are brought into use, modulated and (re)produced by subjects in specific situations, since without this use they would not exist. This is why it makes sense to argue for a subject science approach that examines social practice without references to a priori levels of hidden structural movers or motives, if not for other reasons, then because people simply tend to stop listening if you claim to know their reality or reasons for acting better than they do themselves. To assign to people or society unconscious motives, ideologies or interests therefore rarely invites the constructive dialogue intended and/or needed.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. First I will present an incident I experienced during empirical study. Space does not allow an exhaustive description of the study, however, I hope to use the example first to discuss some defining aspects of social practice and finally to present a theoretical framework for thinking about power as a capacity for action, and to enrich the discussion of how to study power from a subject science perspective. The example stems from a qualitative case study I undertook some

years ago in a large Danish advertising company (Busch-Jensen, 2011), during which I tried to study power relations from a situated practice perspective and ran into the problem of empathising with quite different and sometimes very conflicting adversarial perspectives.

Don't mess with our food!

The vice-president of the advertising company, 'Michael', invited his different project teams on a regular basis to engage in ongoing 'trimming exercises': trimming budgets and streamlining processes. The clients of the company were often large American corporations that demanded annual growth rates in customer calls and sales and it was Michael's job to make sure these demands were met by the project teams. Michael actually liked this part of his job, since he was good at it and there were not usually problems when dealing with the teams of graphic designers, key-account managers, copywriters, programmers etc. That year, however, it was time to turn to the much-treasured in-house-kitchen-and-reception staff to get them on board 'the lean-think', as Michael liked to call it. He arranged a meeting with the manager of the kitchen and reception staff, *chef de cuisine* Paul, and explained to him his ideas about cutting budgets, the need to renegotiate all the contracts with Paul's suppliers, the need for increasing efficiency etc. Paul listened patiently and then, to Michael's surprise, insisted that he would only cooperate if it did not involve anyone being fired, and said that if it did, he would be the first to go. Paul also started talking about labour unions and so on, and Michael was shocked. The meeting turned into a quarrel and no solution was found, partly because Paul and his staff also serviced other companies in the building. Even though Michael had hired Paul, he couldn't simply dominate the situation and fire Paul. Furthermore, the next day, when the hundreds of employees came in early to enjoy their freshly brewed coffee, home-made muffins, fresh fruit, jams and other goodies, all they found were slices of banana and lumps of dark bread. Lunchtime was no improvement and by two o'clock that afternoon all hell had broken loose with outcries from all over the house. Paul then sent out an e-mail explaining the situation as a 'response to managerial demands for budget cuts'. Michael panicked, and pleaded with Paul to restore normal procedures. The whole thing ended with much ado about nothing, except that Michael had turned into 'the bad guy'.

To grapple with conflicts and dilemmas

Organisations are comprised of clusters of practices put together by chains of action, in which different people are involved on the basis of different types of jobs, responsibilities, and contributions, and thus at one and the same time involved and engaged in the same 'thing', while simultaneously being engaged in different things: different situations, job-tasks, and contributions, under different conditions and with different things at stake.

As the many participants in an advertising company try to solve their daily work-tasks, they might be working with, calling, mailing, thinking about or visited by numerous people: a project manager, who wants to draw attention to a deadline; a colleague who needs some information; a technician who is repairing a coffee machine or a printer; a client or a supplier who wants to discuss details about a project or a delivery; or one's partner whom one needs to pick up the children from school, since an urgent task has unexpectedly arisen.

Facing countless possible breakdowns, each of us must continuously add, integrate and coordinate new expected and unexpected elements and connections into our activities and practice. We must set out to explore, again and again, the many and varying elements and connections – relating to multiple people and practices, inside and outside our immediate situation – that need to be knitted together and coordinated in order for our work to proceed. This work of constant coordination, makes up and makes possible an important part of what we call 'work', 'society' and 'life'. Some of it becomes routine, but part of participating in practice is always to learn about, and how to handle, connections and relationships we hadn't previously considered relevant. The latter was part of Michael's experience that day, and the question it raised was *how* to deal with it and *what* and why the elements, connections, people and practices in question were not knitted together and coordinated in a helpful fashion for the participant's work to proceed.

After spending almost two years spending time, conducting interviews, making participatory observations, attending meetings, reading documents etc., in regular contact and dialogue with both Paul and Michael, and many other people in the company (graphic designers, copywriters, key-account managers, programmers, kitchen staff, middle managers etc.), I gradually came to understand more pieces of these puzzles. As I tried to decide what to think of them, however, I also found myself entangled still further in a dilemma. I understood and even sympathised to a large extent with the reasons – the concerns, worries and considerations – behind Paul's response and actions, however, the same could be said about Michael's.

Spending time with Paul and the kitchen staff, I had come to learn about the passions and practical concerns that guided and affected their daily practice and mutual collaboration: the local knowledge and reason-discourses their practice afforded, and the mastery, creativity, coordination and engagement that went into their work, not to mention the business, and the patiently determined forms of cooperation on which it depended. I had begun to gain an understanding of all these matters, which had previously seemed simple or strange to me. I had also come to learn how the employees of the company really valued the quality of the food they were offered and how they emphasised its importance for their job satisfaction, corporate reputation around town and so on, and how this praise was a crucial part of the meaning and fun of working in the kitchen. Furthermore I had noticed how the same employees often spoke of a 'we', that included kitchen staff, but how this 'we' looked quite different when viewed from the kitchen; how work hours and attitudes towards work were very different; how kitchen and reception staff were the only ones not invited when the others went to Iceland, and the following year to South Africa, and how all kitchen and reception staff – unlike the other participants – were members of a union with a long tradition of speaking about leaders and workers, and the inherent conflicts of interest between them. Finally, I had come to learn also about a number of less visible and informal relationships of friendship and collaboration that were also part of the everyday kitchen practices and how Paul, in the conflict, had considered how some of these friendships and alliances might be used to put pressure on Michael if he did not retreat from his position.

At the same time, from spending time with Michael, I had come to better understand his ideas about constant trimming and restructuring, and how they related to similar yet different understandable concerns that guided *his* practice; concerns woven into a continual engagement with *other* people, practices, and sections of the world. In other words: I had come to learn more about the local knowledge and reason-discourses that

guided Michael's daily activities, and the mastery, creativity, coordination and engagement, that went into his work, which had *also* previously seemed strange to me. I had observed some of his many tough negotiations with the company's most crucial client, who demanded a constant growth rate in order to continue their cooperation, and the concerns and stress this afforded about potentially having to fire people on a large scale, if the company did not engage in constant efficiency improvements. I had come to see how the ability to handle such concerns without faltering related to common ideas about one's employability as a leader, and furthermore I had learned how these processes simultaneously related to another important project, the establishment of a graphic department in Dhaka, Bangladesh. This project had been established in collaboration with, and financial support from, the Danish Foreign Ministry, on the condition of implementing a total quality management system, CMMI, and engaging in ongoing processes of streamlining, since, according to the Danish government, the ability to document such engagements would improve the ability to attract British and American investors and partners, which was part of the Danish Foreign Ministry's strategy for helping Danish companies engage successfully in the global economy.

These and many other connections and relationships were part of the conflict in question. They seemed to constitute a hidden braid of commitments, concerns and obligations from which the participant's subjective reason-discourses had been forged, and thus part of the reality of the situation in question, and the barriers and potentials within it. More importantly, to my mind, all this meant that posing the question of whose perspective (of 'what needs to be done to sustain and/or develop the workplace') was valid and correct, and whose was not, seemed absurd. Both Paul and Michael, and in fact all the participants (the graphic designers, receptionists, copywriters, kitchen staff, CEOs, key-account managers etc.) had valid justifiable and relevant knowledge and perspectives on the organisational practices I was learning about. Furthermore, from what we might here call 'the common case perspective' (for example 'the good advertising job') their differences and disagreements did not appear random, but in fact expressed a *shared* engagement and interconnectedness. Examining and linking the different perspectives in and with the organisational practice therefore provided both myself and the participants with an opportunity to expand our understanding of the *differentiated* reality of the organisation, taking us on a cross-contextual journey through the many different perspectives it afforded and the different contributions it required.

Social practice as conflictual collaboration

The determining impingement on most knowledge produced in the contemporary Western world is that it be objective, non-political, impartial and above partisan belief. In theory, I have no quarrel with this ambition, however, the reality of it is much more problematic. The premise of, and lesson learned from, studying conflicts as heuristics is that all knowledge stems from some form of engagement in the world, and the experiences that result from it (Højholt & Kousholt, 2012). So far no one has devised a method or form of language or experience that cancels these terms and, for example, detaches people, including academic scholars, from the circumstances of their life, the fact of their involvement in specific relationships, situations, social positions, beliefs and so on. We must, therefore, understand all knowledge as knowledge that 'speaks' from a particular standpoint in the world, that is: neither from ''nowhere' nor from 'everywhere', but always from 'somewhere'; from a particular engagement in the world. The idea that certain

participants can create a superior knowledge of reality that overrules the knowledge of others cannot therefore be justified. Each perspective partakes of the truth and is valid as such, but is at the same time partial, that is, incomplete and containing blind spots. It therefore makes sense, following an argument made by Erik Axel, to conceptualise practice as a form of *conflictual collaboration* (Axel, 2002, 2009). The conceptualisation involves a somewhat controversial view of science and its purpose. Firstly, *truth* is not seen as a thing to be acquired, but rather understood as a way, a practice, of keeping social conversations, imagination and curiosity going, in open processes of collaborative social enquiry. Secondly, true and useful descriptions of our social reality are therefore not seen to be the reductive and general descriptions, but rather those that make us better at seeing and conceptualising connections, links, complexities, dilemmas and differences that matter to people (Haraway, 1988; Højholt & Kousholt, 2012). It is to this end that it makes sense to address conflicts as heuristics.

Zooming in and out of social practice

To work with conflicts as tools of discovery, we need to *zoom in* and disclose the unknown terrains of the *details* of people's actions and practice: the tacit knowledge, passions and practical concerns that guide and affect people's participation in social practice; the local knowledge and reason-discourses this participation affords, and the mastery, creativity, coordination and engagement that goes into matters in that practice that would otherwise seem simple or strange from a third-person perspective. As a number of studies have shown, practices are rich with complex situated processes of both learning, coordination, identity work and dilemmas (Axel, 2009; Dreier, 2008; Højholt & Kousholt, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Mørck, 2006; Nissen, 2012). What distinguishes these studies is that they enter practice, not from some philosophical point of view, nor from a mostly historical, sociological or politically informed set of data, but instead they proceed by 'zooming in' on the *details* of our everyday life, providing sophisticated tool kits that help us see how we actually continually engage with, adjust and adapt to each other and the world, and how we, in so many ways, learn and learn together, in and about the world. That said, it is important to note how these processes of *zooming in* simultaneously constitute movements of *zooming out*, that is, empirical-analytical movements, that allow us to simultaneously see the connection between the here-and-now of the immediate situation and the 'elsewhere-and-then' of other situations, and – through these movements – the broader relationships of, for example, power, politics, and social structure and the causality of which situated practices are part (see, for example, Mørck, 2006; Nissen, 2012).

As the conflict between Michael and Paul demonstrates, the zooming in and zooming out are different aspects of the same movement, and therefore, they should *not* be understood from, for example, a theoretical juxtaposition of micro-equals-agency and macro-equals-structure, since the point is rather the opposite, namely to conduct research with people in ways that allow one to see how the particular and the general, the situated and the societal dimensions of social practice and everyday life are interconnected. Ironically we need to look around the individual to really see it; just as we need to look across situations to actually understand them, and need to take people's actions and perspectives into account to study the actual workings and formations of social structures and power relations.

One practice always constitutes the resource for the accomplishment of others and vice versa. Zooming in on a specific situated practice therefore *simultaneously* constitutes

movements of zooming out, that might, for example, demonstrate how problems often depicted as individual, are in fact also rooted in the problematic ways in which organisations and society are organised (Huniche & Mørch, 2009). To study this requires a kind of 'mobile ethnology', to use a phrase coined by Nicolini (2009, p.7), or, if we prefer, 'a hermeneutics of practice', that invites us to see how what is going on in an immediate situation relates to what is going on elsewhere, zooming in and out of the actual work and how local accomplishments of practice are woven into broader relationships to form the societal conditions of daily life (Axel, 2009). Conceptualising conflicts as heuristics invites us to engage in such 'mobile ethnography' or 'hermeneutics'. It invites us to study conflicts by tracking the connections to which they relate, and the differences that reside and matter within them; and to track them from a first-person perspective, following people, practices and problems as they actually present themselves and wherever they actually take us.

Working with conflicts as heuristics also relates to issues of power. This becomes clear, not only as soon as we take into account how one practice always constitutes the resource for the accomplishment of others, and how our ability to participate in social practice therefore relates to how others are able to participate in social practice and vice versa, but also since studying practice allows us to see that people aren't just engaging in practice with different perspectives, needs and interests, but that at the same time they participate with different opportunities for action at hand; with different social appreciation, acknowledgement, stakes, rewards and consequences.

To embrace a notion of 'knowledge as situated' is to acknowledge, simultaneously, that participation in social practice is not innocent. Engagement in social practice engages us in specific doings, sayings and ways of relating, since practices reside within complex practice-structures that constitute practically anchored clusters. Through these clusters participation is connected to specific conditions and affordances, woven into a number of contexts, materialities and practices. These interconnections can be both restrictive and empowering, depending also on one's position in a given practice.

Power concerns our ability to participate in social practice. To 'phase out' power is therefore not an option, since power relates to processes in which we are all entangled, everyday, when, by our actions and daily handling of practical matters, we partake in the structuring of our own and other's conditions for action (Højholt, 2012). The *analysis* of power relates to *how* this arranging takes place and with what social effects. If all social practice is internally fragmented and subject to multiple interpretations, the production of social distinctions and differences – and the differences they make – becomes a fundamental question to the way we develop power, our social capacity for action. If practice is tentative and ever-changing, we need to ask how it assumes a sense of durability. Also, if all knowledge is situated, we need to ask how some perspectives on our reality gain status as more general perspectives on our reality, and how particular participants, activities, contributions and perspectives grow in importance, capacity and visibility – and to what effect for others.

In order address these questions, the rest of this article is organised as follows. First, some analytical definitions and distinctions, regarding the concept of power, will be presented in a model in order to clarify the premises of my argument. I will then return to the empirical example, both to elaborate it, using the presented analytical distinction, and to discuss the analytical framework and then elaborate on it further. Finally, I will conclude with some

preliminary overall remarks regarding the theoretical tenets of my argument, and my attempt to discuss social conflicts as heuristics.

Power as a capacity for action

In Western-liberal societies, our discourses of power have to a large extent been adversarial. This is also reflected within social psychology, where the phenomenon of power has mainly been discussed within critical theoretical traditions, not least within Marxist theorising, critical theory and (post-) structuralism, portraying power mostly as something relating to domination and the obstruction of social justice. Of course, as a central concept within Western psychology and social theory in general, the study of power has been approached in many ways, yielding many different and valuable insights. Some theorists have focused on the different forms that power takes and the resources that permit its exercise, such as money, violence, habits, gender, politics, authority, law, knowledge, or even charisma. Some have explored the complex relationship between the distribution of power and the processes of social consent that legitimate various social institutions and arrangements. Others have examined the changing ways that power circulates throughout societies, constructing both governmental institutions and forms of subjectivities in historically specific ways (Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1977). The list, of course, goes on. For obvious reasons, a review of the rich complex body of literature on power is beyond the scope of this article. The focus here is merely to relate the previous discussions, and how we tend to think about conflicts, to the topic of power and how to conceptualise it from the standpoint of conflicts as heuristics.

Highlighting important issues of domination, inequality, control, and coercion, prominent power theorists from various sides of both the political and disciplinary spectrum have proposed definitions of power that move within the boundaries of a 'power as domination' paradigm. For example, the influential political scientist, Robert Dahl, conceptualises power as: 'A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do' (Dahl, 1969, p. 80), in extension bringing to our attention issues of inequality and 'forms of persuasion' (ibid). Others then challenged the behavioural terms of this definition, arguing how power over others can also be exercised in more subtle ways that involve a mobilisation of consent in a manner that prevents some people or groups from advancing their own self-identified interests, that way cultivating, for example, what Marx and Engels (1967) referred to as 'false consciousness', or exercising what Gramsci referred to as 'cultural hegemony'. As argued by Gramsci (1971), in any non-totalitarian society, certain cultural forms and ideas predominate over others. The form of this leadership is what Gramsci identified as hegemony. Similar thoughts also echo in the work of Foucault and his notion of power/knowledge as a superior exercise of power that works through effectuating dynamics that secure compliance by discursively framing the dominant scope of thoughts and desires. As Foucault (certainly in other ways difficult to place in a 'power over' model) argued, we should 'base our analyses of power on the study of the techniques and tactics of domination' (Foucault, 1977, p. 102).

The ambition here is not to place Foucault or others within a neat little box of 'power over' theorists, in fact, my aim is to dissolve such dichotomisation, however, to do so, we must first clarify the scope of the field, and to this effect it is important to note how the counterpart to a 'power over' vocabulary isn't a notion of 'where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). Even though *resistance* to domination seems to constitute its opposite, it remains within a vocabulary of struggle and adversary that makes

it difficult to clarify the *distinct* contributions of an alternate 'power with' vocabulary.

Approaching conflicts as useful heuristics, implies a conceptualisation of power as a capacity for action and participation in social practice. Power is therefore a necessary concern of psychology that resides primarily within the ways we cooperate and arrange ourselves in relation to (each) other. Power can simply be understood as an ability to make things happen – be a causal agent, and initiate actions and change – and how this ability is individual, yet at the same time social and societal. What follows from this approach is that questions of domination, control, competition and (in)equality are *aspects* of power, but do not remotely cover its territory. Persons or groups of persons might expand their capacity for action by exerting 'power over' others, however, it is also possible and common to expand one's capacity for action by exerting 'power with' others, that is, by seeking 'joint power' rather than 'independent' power, *integrating* needs and perspectives rather than seeking domination and/or compromise. After all, conflict is a fact of life, since 'conflict is difference – difference of opinion and interest' (Follett, 1995, p. 67), therefore, in the words of Follett: 'the essential of common thought is not that it is held in common but that is has been produced in common', since 'the core of social life is not likeness but the harmonizing of difference through interpenetration' (1998, p. 34). The *ideal* way to resolve conflicts, is therefore neither *domination* nor *compromise*, since the former only satisfies one of the parties, and the latter brings nothing new to the situation, but in fact leaves the tensions unresolved and potentially all parties unsatisfied. The *ideal* use of conflict is therefore *integration* (I put 'ideal' in italics here, since, as I wish to show, we still need to clarify the practical reality of the topic).

From the point of view of many 'power with' theorists, the relevance of analysing power is exactly to dissolve ideas of incompatible interest, inherent conflict and speech forms of adversary and criticism. The vocabulary of 'power over' theorists is therefore seen as part of the problem rather than part of the solution (see, for example, Cooperrider, Ludema, & Barrett, 2001; Druckner, 1995; Gittell, 2012; Mintzberg, 1995). Conversely, from a point of view of many 'power over' theorists, the 'power with' vocabulary is out of line with the central meanings of power, given the point is that power is exercised *over* people and pertains to aspects of inequality between them. On an immediate level, these approaches therefore seem incompatible. In practice, however, neither can be left out, if we want to understand the development of power in social practice.

When we collaborate with others, we are in fact not necessarily giving up on our powers, but rather creating the possibility of expanding them. At the same time, making collaboration possible sometimes presupposes confrontation. On a fundamental level, power thus relates to a much wider field of social interaction and coexistence, than a strictly adversarial vocabulary invites us to examine. To clarify this it might be helpful to outline a conceptualisation of power that helps capture this complexity, not in order to oppose or replace a 'power over' vocabulary of adversary with a 'power with' vocabulary of what we might term 'mutualism', but rather to point to the need to integrate them into a unified framework, *that encompasses both 'power-over' and 'power-with' relations* as interdependent necessary aspects of democratic ways of exercising and developing power.

From a subject science practice perspective, the categories 'power with' versus 'power over' are not mutually exclusive. The categories simply refer to different ways of obtaining power, in this case meaning expanding one's capacity for action and social participation. 'Power over' is one form of action, but not the only one to pursue. People

who are collaborating in a more 'mutualistic' manner are also expanding their capacity for action and therefore developing 'power with' one another. In this line of reasoning a first analytical distinction therefore presents itself between adversarial and mutualistic power relations, between 'power over' and 'power with' interactions. Both these forms of power can unfold within a spectrum of symmetrical or asymmetrical relationships. This distinction must therefore be added to the considerations. On the one hand, it is a factual strategy and possibility within asymmetrical relations to expand one's capacity for action by controlling others, however, one might also pursue domination in more symmetrical relationships that make it harder for one adversary to dominate the other. Such symmetrical relations might therefore invite the adversaries to abandon their pursuit of domination, seeking compromise in its stead. On the other hand, in a similar manner, the 'strategy' to expand one's capacity for action through collaboration and integration can play out in both symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships, resulting in two additional analytical distinctions. Collaboration between equals pursuing mutualistic integration of interests might result in their 'mutual empowerment'. On the other hand, asymmetrical relations, for example, in the form of 'assisted empowerment' of a less 'powerful' agent, is also possible, for example, in the form of a nurturing relationship between a parent and a child, the relationships of apprentices between newcomers and old-timers in a company, progressive taxation or affirmative action policies by which people or a group of society who are assisting others to empowerment. In summary, the argument adds up to the following distinctions presented in the model below (inspired by Karlberg, 2005).

POWER AS A CAPACITY FOR ACTION			
ADVERSARIAL RELATIONS 'power against' competition		MUTUALISTIC RELATIONS 'power with' collaboration	
ASYMMETRY 'power over' coercion domination oppression	SYMMETRY 'balance of power' stalemate compromise	ASYMMETRY 'assisted empowerment' education nurturance assistance	SYMMETRY 'mutual empowerment' collaboration creation synergy coordination

Figure 1.

The model above provides a simple framework and some basic analytical categories for talking about the complex field of power understood as a 'capacity for action'. It is important to note first hand how this capacity, and thus power, is both personal and social, related to both agency and social arrangements. The theoretical framework should thus not be read into a simplistic individual-social dichotomy, even though we should not lose sight of the distinction. Our identities are rich and complex precisely *because* they emerge within a rich and complex nexus of practice relationships, communities and contexts, and

it is within this nexus that *problems* of power reside. The framework presented does not describe power as problematic in itself. Such a proposition would, in fact, be absurd, since power, as Hannah Arendt puts it, 'corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert' (Arendt, 1969, p. 44). To conflate power with domination therefore limits our understanding of human reality. The problems of power therefore relate to power as such. They relate to how power, people's capacity for action and participation, is arranged and distributed *between* people.

The conflict

If we apply the presented vocabulary to the empirical example, we can say that the situation refers to an attempt by Michael to develop his capacity for action in relation to specific job tasks and engagements by inviting employees and project teams to identify with, join and collaborate in these engagements and their development. From the perspective of Paul and his staff, however, the situation turns into a conflict, since Paul does not acknowledge these engagements as being automatically his as well, and secondly he understands Michael's attempt to develop *his* capacity for action as potentially reducing the ability of Paul and the kitchen staff to maintain and develop what *they* consider important: *their* engagements and capacity for action. On an immediate level the conflict refers to a confrontation between two individuals and their capacity for action in specific contexts and practices, however, zooming in and out of the situation demonstrates how both of the participant's engagements are also anchored in social and societal relationships and orientations. The conflict does not only affects and *also* refers to a number of other people's practices and engagements – contexts, practices and engagements that we need to take into consideration if we want to understand why the participants engage in the conflict in the first place. In addition, Michael and Paul's capacity to *deal* with the conflict – their perspectives of the situation and their capacity for action in the situation – likewise refers to a number of social connections and arrangements that both limit and strengthen their scope of action in the situation.

As mentioned earlier, the conflict unfolded within the context of a number of prior situations in which Michael, without being challenged, had assigned to various other work teams a number of processes of streamlining, restructuring and cost savings. I would describe these processes as instances of power through domination, not only on the grounds that many of the participants involved experienced them as such, but also on the grounds that they factually turned out to develop separate power rather than mutual power, since they resulted in dismissals, less job satisfaction, and a weakened sense of agency, security and capacity to participate for most of the designers, programmers, copywriters, key-account managers involved, while at the same time making it easier for management to hire, fire, outsource and reorganise. There is an additional aspect of these developments that furthermore specifies what is meant by 'integration of perspectives' and distinguishes 'power with' relations in social practice, from 'power over' forms of collaboration.

A recurring theme in the participant's reports of the described developments was how the practitioners understood the meaning and importance of these developments from a professional orientation. The questions, concerns, joys and dilemmas raised by the participants were raised on the grounds of a preoccupation with 'doing a good job'. To 'do a good job', however, was about more than just performing the given tasks; it also involved attempts to address more long-term and community-related aspects of the work: creating ads that provided good information to the end-users, addressed their actual needs,

were funny and/or intelligent, and might spur debate and reflection. To 'do a good job' therefore presupposed the ability to search out information from other places, to be able to inquire - across the various teams, groups and professionals – about the users of a given product and their everyday lives; about the market and its development and about the perspectives and interests of the clients and how best to try to influence and 'challenge' their ideas.

This orientation persisted throughout my material, and to me demonstrated a significant interweaving of professional pride, meaning, identity and sociality. To make a difference and make a difference to others was a central part of what it meant for the participants to be good practitioners and active professional agents, however, the described developments challenged this ability and put in place a social arena in which many felt increasingly divided between being a professional agent or becoming no more than the operative of some system; of procedures and systems developed elsewhere for efficient and cost-effective workflow. This distinction between being an agent and being an operative, was at the heart of the concerns I encountered, and precisely exemplifies the difference between organisational development on the basis of 'power with' relations and organisational development on the basis of 'power over' relations. To develop 'power with' requires that we *integrate* perspectives. To do this is not about disbanding, ranking or prioritising differences of perspectives, contributions and expertise, however, it is about developing understandings and forms of collaboration that *accommodate* the differences and the value and relevance of the *different* professions and contributions, perspectives, expertise and professional traditions.

When examining these dynamics, it was difficult not to see the differences between how the kitchen staff responded to these challenges, compared to the other participants, and how they seemingly also related to different forms of sayings, doings and ways of relating with others: for instance, a quite different approach to labour unions and sharing information with one's colleagues, about, for example, one's wage, work hours and frustrations. It seemed such differences also contributed to different capacities for action in different contexts and situations, demonstrating in turn why it makes sense to refer to *power as a practice*.

Zooming in and out of the participant's situated perspectives and actions brings to light a number of other connections of a practical, organisational and discursive nature: connections to organisational arrangements, and the numerous in-house relationships of both a formal and informal nature, but also connections to juridical practices, financial practices, labour market relations, and political agendas and partnerships, all of which are woven into the situation and flow into the premises of the participant's reasons for action. This is why, paradoxically, we need to look around people to actually understand them, just as we, paradoxically, need to study people's situated actions from a first-person perspective to see the actual workings of broader power relations and power structures, not as something individual *or* structural, nor as something external, different or 'super-phenomically' attached to practice, but as something emergent in the practices in which we engage, since power *is* practice.

When equality leads to disempowerment

Applying the presented vocabulary to the example, we might say the conflict constituted a failure to develop joint power through mutual collaboration, since the situation is conceived, or in fact might rather constitute, an attempt to develop a separate capacity for

action through domination. Domination fails, however, since for a number of reasons the relationships in the situation turn out to be more symmetrical than initially imagined. The situation thus turns into a conflict that in turn ends in a deadlock. So, to go forward, a compromise is established: Michael is authorised to review and renegotiate all supplier contracts, but apart from that must leave the kitchen staff in peace and abandon the idea of dismissals. During my remaining year in the company both Paul and Michael described their relationship as strained, unpleasant and unproductive, and both interpreted this as a result of a catastrophic failure on the part of the other to collaborate. In a sense both were right, however, the question of whether the conflict was wrong is more complicated.

Even though power inequality, inequality in possibilities for action, may be oppressive in contexts of adversarial power relations, we need to bear in mind how such inequality might lead to empowerment when coupled with mutual interests of collaboration and integration. Thus inequality as, for instance, an organisational principle often equated with oppression, is not undesirable per se. It depends on the situation, since the development of power also resides within social collaboration and includes everyday activities of, for example, care, nurturing, teaching etc.; in short: the possibilities of being powerful in ways that simultaneously enhance the power of others. We need to take this into account, since it allows us to interpret the conflict not only as a failed attempt to develop separate power through domination, but simultaneously as a missed opportunity to develop *mutual* power through acting in concert and engaging in *integrating* differences of perspective in a creative and mutually beneficial and illuminating fashion, potentially into more complex and socially informed understandings of the participant's organisational reality and more socially informed forms of collaboration.

By making this argument I hope to bring additional distinctions into focus that clarify further complexities, namely potentially negative aspects to power *equality*. Power equality is clearly a desirable condition in integrative forms of collaboration, leading to mutual empowerment, however, as the model argues and the example demonstrates, in adversarial power relationships, symmetry can also become dysfunctional, since it potentially results in stalemate situations and/or compromises that bring nothing new to the relationship, and thus preserve the tensions and mutual frustrations as resources for both future and expanding conflicts. Thus equality in adversarial relationships, for example in the form of compromises or deadlocks, might turn into a barrier to solving serious problems, in fact diminishing the power of all participants, and their capacity for action. This is not to say that the conflict between Michael and Paul should have been avoided, but simply to point out that *symmetrical* relations might also paralyse social situations, and thus disempower people rather than empower them.

Inflating the analytical distinctions with dialectics

The table presented earlier and its distinctions provide a simple framework for thinking and talking about the complex field of power as something that relates to people's capacity for action in social practice, in both restrictive and enabling ways. The diversity of the concepts demonstrates that an exclusive focus on 'power over' relations is insufficient, and furthermore reduces the relational aspects of power to a question of its distributive aspects: asymmetry vs. symmetry; inequality vs. equality, ignoring the equally important distinction between adversarial *and* mutualistic forms of coexistence. In extension, the model permits additional distinctions that help clarify some complexities. For instance, even though power inequality may be oppressive in contexts of adversarial

power relations, inequality can lead to empowerment when coupled with mutual interests of collaboration and integration. Inequality and hierarchy are thus not undesirable per se, it depends on the situation. The model also reveals potentially negative aspects of power equality. Although clearly desirable in integrative forms of collaboration, power equality might be dysfunctional in adversarial power relationships, potentially leaving behind mutual frustrations as resources for future situations. The model provides a vocabulary by which these broader patterns regarding power can be recognised and discussed. That said, it is important that we challenge the clarity and inherent dualisms of the distinctions, and stress how, from a subject science practice perspective, 'power with' and 'power over' relations are neither mutually exclusive nor always easy to distinguish. To help do this, I will return to some theoretical tenets of critical psychology, which allow further observations regarding the empirical example.

The philosophical foundation of critical psychology builds both on Hegelian dialectics and Marx's social theory and theses on Feuerbach. While these sources of inspiration bring different aspects of, and contradictions in social practice into focus, they share an understanding of conflicts and contradictions as inherently dynamic and transformative. Dialectics, already in its original Greek meaning, deals with processes in which knowledge gains ground through struggles between opposing views. Both Hegel's philosophical psychology and Marx's class analysis, by extension, developed a fruitful concept of contradictions as key aspects of social change.

A classic example that falls into these tenets is Hegel's 'Lord–bondsman' dialectic (1977, p.111–120). In this passage, Hegel demonstrates the inherent psychological contradictions in situations, in which one masters the other, only to find that such lordship makes the very recognition he had sought impossible, since the bondsman, in this state, is not free to give it. In relationships of domination thus reside tension, which again invites transformation. We find an equivalent point of departure in Marx's dialectic analysis of capitalism as a dynamic, change-accelerating, crisis-ridden system. My point is that the distinctions I have presented are merely meant to be analytical, but in practice, power relations are dynamic and not necessarily clearly distinguishable from each other. Not only do social relationships have the potential to transform into something qualitatively different; each relational form might also be interpreted differently depending on how we approach the situation, just as different relations of power often coexist within the same social processes. For example, mutual integrative collaboration in a corporation might be motivated by ambitions to dominate the market or outperform other challengers. Similarly, as analysed by Lave and Wenger (1991), processes of collaborative learning between newcomers and old-timers often move around contradictions that constitute developmental dynamics in social practice, such as tensions between continuity and renewal; dynamics in which old-timers and newcomers must balance the potential for mutual learning and future competition, since what the above model refers to as 'assisted empowerment' might also develop into adversarial relations.

Each concept in the model marks potential tensions and dynamics. It is therefore important to stress that they are analytical rather than ontological and always refer to complex situated dynamics and interpretations. In extension, we must therefore take a further look at the vocabularies of mutualism and domination and how in practice they relate to, depend on and sometimes conflate with each other.

Integrating the vocabularies

As the empirical example demonstrates, participation in social practice is not innocent. Participation invites us to engage in specific doings, sayings and ways of relating that afford particular embodied perspectives of 'what needs to be done'. We are taking *part*; that is, we engage and deal with *specific* practices, people and concerns. Social practice is therefore ridden with distinctions, blind spots, dilemmas, and even hierarchies. To examine social practice, we therefore need to consider how practice is to some extent internally fragmented, and subject to multiple interpretations, and more importantly, we need to bear in mind that no knowledge or engagement 'speaks' from 'nowhere' or 'everywhere', but always from 'somewhere'; a *particular* engagement in the world (Højholt & Kousholt, 2012). What follows from this is that no form of agency or integrative perspective of mutualism is able to transcend the risk of partiality and thus be guaranteed to safeguard against the possibility of domination and exclusion. Similarly, no 'power with' vocabulary or methodology – for example, of positive psychology, mindfulness or appreciative inquiry – can be or should be seen as fundamentally distinguishable from and contrasting with a 'power over' vocabulary.

In practice, it often turns out to be quite difficult to determine the best course of action and quite important to pay attention to the fact that many organisations, based on principles of mutual empowerment, still operate within a wider framework of competition, so that integrative collaboration might, simultaneously, be an element to strengthen the domination of others. Confronted with, for example, redundancies in companies or problems relating to the inclusion of children diagnosed with learning difficulties in schools, it is therefore often quite difficult to decide the best course of action and sometimes truly zero-sum situations occur, that leave no place for a creative win–win solution. For this reason vocabularies of both struggle and collaboration are necessary parts of the ambition to make generalised agency and democratic power with others possible.

Democratic power is simply not a thing to be acquired, rather, it refers to ongoing processes and descriptions of our social reality that make us better at seeing and conceptualising connections, dilemmas and differences that matter to people. It is not a particular practice, but a way of participating in practice. It is a way of keeping social conversations, imagination and curiosity going, in a process of ongoing social enquiry. Keeping conversations going is sometimes a struggle, however, and since integrative collaboration first requires mutual interest in collaboration, engagement in social struggles is sometimes a necessary part of addressing issues of power and pursuing democratic forms of collaboration, and what we call democracy.

Concluding remarks

As mentioned earlier and described by Michel Foucault, due to a long tradition of separating the question of knowledge from the question of power, we have for a long time addressed the issue of knowledge by questioning and testing its legitimacy, flanking our interest in knowledge with a preoccupation with concepts such as illusion, falsification, and ideology – for example, driven by objectivism, positivism, technicism, and so on (Foucault, 1997). This *evaluative* approach to knowledge, however, not only constructs a risky separation of questions of knowledge from questions of power, it also spills into an evaluative approach to social problems and conflicts that is both unfruitful and sometimes

even counterproductive. Firstly, because people simply tend to stop listening if you claim to know their reality better than they do, and secondly, because it tends to fixate our attention on the separate individual perspectives rather than on their contextual social geneses and meaning; on their legitimacy rather than their reality. Separating knowledge from issues of power, however, leads to practices (scientific practices included) that might in fact disempower us all.

To a certain extent, the argument presented above aligns with a Foucauldian conception of knowledge, as something inseparable from issues of power. I have tried to present a conceptual framework for talking about power along these lines of thinking. That said, the framework also departs from Foucault's work, since it argues for a more situated approach to social practice, that in turn, to my mind, allows greater attention to inter-subjectivity and to people as active agents. The framework therefore invites an alternative point of departure for examining social conflictuality and coexistence.

When questions of knowledge and power are brought together, any attempt to understand social conflict by simply evaluating the legitimacy/illegitimacy of the different perspectives involved seems highly insufficient. If all knowledge stems from a particular engagement in the world, all perspectives reflect a lived reality as well as blind spots and omissions attached to this reality. This is not to say that all perspectives are equally fruitful and helpful in a situation, however, it does mean that social problems and power relations relate to the ways we arrange ourselves in relation to others, rather than to the legitimacy of particular perspectives and the persons presenting them. Of course, individual actions and opinions matter and make a difference, but the point is that they are hard, if not impossible to change if this in effect reduces people's capacity to participate in the practices of identity, belonging, community, and self-preservation that they are engaged in. Social conflictuality is therefore not a matter of problematic attitudes and opinions. More often social conflictuality concerns people's situated capacity and conditions for social participation. Consequently it is not very helpful to address social conflicts as problems relating to whose perspective best corresponds with reality, as if social reality was unambiguous. It makes better sense to consider conflicts as questions relating to power: that is, as questions about how and the extent to which our actions, practices and social arrangements allow people to pursue *power with* each other, rather than just separate power for some.

References

Abbott, A. (2004). Methods of discovery: Heuristics for the social sciences. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Arendt, H. (1969). On violence. San Diego: Harvest Books.

Axel, E. (2002). Regulation as productive tool use. Roskilde: Roskilde University Press.

Axel, E. (2009). What makes us talk about wing nuts? Theory and Psychology, 19, 275–295. Doi:10.1177/0959354309103542.

Brown, J., & Duguid, P. (2001). Knowledge and organization: A social-practice perspective. Organization Science, 12, 198–213.

Busch-Jensen, P. (2011). Fleksibilitet og fællesskab – frembringelsen af nye former for fælleshed i moderne arbejdsliv. Afhandlinger i Ph.d-programmet i Hverdagslivets Socialpsykologi.

Cooperrider, D., Ludema, J., Barrett, F. (2001) Appreciative inquiry. The power of

the unconditional positive question. In P. Reason and H. Bradbury (Eds.) Handbook of action research. (pp. 189–200). London: Sage Publications.

Dahl, R. (1969). The concept of power. In R. Bell, D. Edwards, & H. Wagner (Eds.), Political power: A reader in theory and research (pp. 79–93). NY: The Free Press.

Dean, M. (1999). Governmentality. London: Sage Publications.

Dewey, J. (1938). Logic – the theory of inquiry. New York: Henry Holt & Co.

Dreier, O. (2008). Psychotherapy in everyday life. NY: Cambridge University Press.

Druckner, P. F. (1995). Introduction. In P. Graham (Ed.), Mary Parker Follett.

Prophet of management (pp. 1–11). District of Columbia: Beard Books.

Edwards, A. (2007). Relational agency in professional practice: A CHAT analysis. International Journal of Human Activity Theory, 1, 1–17.

Engeström, Y. (1987). Learning by expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit.

Follett, M.P. (1995). Constructive conflict. In P. Graham (Ed.), Mary Parker Follett. Prophet of management. District of Columbia: Beard Books. (original work published 1925)

Follett, M.P. (1998). The new state: Group organization the solution of popular government. The Pennsylvania State University Press. University Park, Pennsylvania (original work published 1918).

Foucault, M. (1977). Truth and power. In C. Gordon (Ed), Power/knowledge. (pp. 109-134). NY: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1978). The history of sexuality. London, England: Penguin Books.

Foucault, M. (1997). What is critique? In S. Lotringer, (Ed.), The politics of truth. (pp. 41-81). Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Gherardi, S. (2001). From organizational learning to practice-based knowing. Human Relations, 54(1), 131–139.

Gittell, J.H. (2012). Introduction. In M. Godwyn & J.H. Gittell (Eds), Sociology of Organizations. Los Angeles, USA: Sage.

Gramsci, A. (1971). In Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith. (Eds) Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci. New York: International Publishers.

Greenwood, J.D. & Levin, M. (1998). Introduction to action research. Social research for social change. Thousand Oaks, CA, London and New Delhi, Sage Publications.

Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. in Feminist Studies, pp. 575–599.

Hegel, G.W.F. (1977). Phenomenology of spirit. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Heidegger, M.(1993). Letter on humanism. In D. F. Krell. (Ed.), Heidegger. Basic Writings. (pp. 213–39). New York: Harper & Row.

Holzkamp, K. (2013). What could a psychology from the standpoint of the subject be? In E. Schraube & U. Osterkamp (Eds.), Psychology from the standpoint of the subject: Selected writings of Klaus Holzkamp (pp.46-60). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Huniche, L. & Mørck, L.L. (2009). Kritisk psykologi. In Leksikon for det 21 århundrede. Retrieved 01/04/2015 from http://www.leksikon.org/art.php?n=5143

Højholt, C. (2015). Children's conduct of life and social conflicts about children. In C. Højholt & E. Schraube (Eds.), Psychology and the conduct of everyday life. London: Psychology Press.

Højholt, C., Kousholt, D. (2012). Om at observere sociale fællesskaber. In M. Pedersen, J. Klitmøller, & K. Nielsen. (Eds), Deltagerobservation: en metode til undersøgelse af psykiske fænomener (pp. 77–90). København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.

Karlberg, M. (2005). The power of discourse and the discourse of power:

Pursuing peace through discourse intervention. International Journal of Peace Studies, 10(1), 1–23.

Latour, B. (2014). An inquiry into the modes of existence. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1967). The German ideology. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Mattes, P. (1999). Postmodern challenges to the conservative anchoring of critical psychology. In M. Maiers, B. Bayer, B.D. Esgalhado, R. Jorna, & E. Schraube (Eds.), Challenges to theoretical psychology. Ontario: Captus University Publications.

Mintzberg, H. (1995.) Some fresh air for management. In P. Graham (Ed.), Mary Parker Follett: Prophet of management (pp.199–205). District of Columbia: Beard Books.

Motzkau, J. & Schraube, E. (2014). Kritische Psychologie: Psychology from the standpoint of the subject. In I. Parker (Ed.), Handbook of critical psychology. (pp. 280-289). London: Routledge.

Mørck, L.L. (2006). Praksisfællesskaber. Læring og overskridelse af marginalisering. Roskilde Universitets Forlag.

Nicolini, D. (2013). Practice theory, work and organization. London: Oxford University Press.

Nissen, M. (2012). The subjectivity of participation. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schatzki, T., Cetina, K.K., & Savigny E.V. (2001). The practice turn in contemporary theory. London: Routledge.

Schraube, E. (2009). Technology as materialized action and its ambivalences. Theory & Psychology, 19(2**)**, 296–312.

Sibeon, R. (2004). Rethinking social theory. London: Sage Publications.

Tanggaard, L. & Brinkmann, S. (2012. Hvad vi taler om, når vi taler om kreativitet. Nordiske Udkast, 40/2, s. 3–16.

Teo, T. (1999) Dialectics of critical psychology in Germany. In M. Maiers, B. Bayer, B.D. Esgalhado, R. Jorna, & E. Schraube (Eds.), Challenges to theoretical psychology. Ontario: Captus University Publications.

Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1953). Philosophical investigations. Oxford: Blackwell.

About the author

Peter Busch-Jensen is currently based at Roskilde University. His research centres on modern worklife in relation to psychological work environment, organizational learning, cross-professional and cross-institutional collaboration, management and politics. His research includes research on qualitative methods, practice research and teaching, and research on the use and meaning of modern information and communication technology in relation to learning, management, democracy and power. Furthermore he is currently involved in the larger research project: 'Children's inclusion in school as conflictual collaboration between families, teachers, school-leaders and legislation'.

Contact: Department of People & Technology, Roskilde University, Email: peterbj@ruc.dk