Qualitative Studies
Vol. 11, No. 3, 2026, pp. 15-44
ISSN 1903-7031

Practice research as Organizational Development: the role of co-research and critical psychologies in collaborative development of social work practices and organizations

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This paper explores how insights from critical psychologies and practice research can have a broader impact through their mobilization in developing organizations and practices that deal with complex psychosocial development. It draws on a practice research project conducted at a Danish residential care institution for young people, demonstrating how collaborative organizational development processes mediated by critical psychological theories can support the co-construction of professional knowledge and the development of new professional discursive practices. The project fostered a shift, where professionals moved from individualizing, relationship-focused theories, discourses and practices to more contextualized and empowering approaches to understand and facilitate young people's development. Key outcomes include the emergence of a shared professional language, enhanced reflective practice, and collective learning, highlighting the potential of practice research as a framework for empowering professionals, improving practices and developing organizations.

Keywords: Practice Research, Organizational Development, Social Work, Critical Psychology, Participatory Action Research, Co-Research

Introduction

Practice research, developed from the German–Scandinavian tradition of critical psychology (GSCP) and a range of other critical psychologies, has contributed to social change for more than four decades. Critical practice research distinguishes itself from mainstream psychology through two intertwined strategies: developing theoretical and

empirical insights into complex social issues and by engaging people in the co-development of practices and organizations (Bank, 2016; Højholt et al., 2018; Nissen, 2004; Kousholt et al., 2026). Critical practice research is closely aligned with traditions such as Participatory Action Research (Cornish et al., 2023) and Organizational Development (OD) (Cummings & Worley, 2015), sharing a commitment to involve people as active co-researchers, integrating their knowledge and perspectives. This contributes to the destabilization of existing power relations and knowledge hierarchies (Phillips, 2025) and the development of more just, empowering, and response-able organizations and practices (Cummings & Worley, 2015; Haraway, 2020; Raffnsøe et al., 2022).

The tradition I term *critical practice research* draws on different *critical psychologies* – such as GSPC, narrative psychology, social constructivism, and post-structuralism – that are critical of positivist psychology and the tendency to individualize problems and difficulties in existing practices. In response, critical traditions can help move beyond a narrow focus on the individual through an understanding of psychological and social difficulties as linked to (unjust and discriminatory) social conditions, and identify ways of overcoming these problems (Dreier, 1999; Højholt et al., 2018; Phillips, 2025). However, there is a fundamental challenge concerning generalizability and relevance: How do insights from practice research contribute to the development of other practices? To explore this challenge, this paper asks: *How can methodologies, theories, and insights from critical practice research support organizational development?* The underlying assumption is that practice research has significant yet largely untapped advantages, especially in relation to "loosely structured" psychosocial practices addressing human development. This research question was investigated through an organizational development project involving staff and management at a residential care institution for young people. The project was organized as practice research, using collaborative workshops to support development and qualitative interviews to evaluate the process. Workshops, group work, meetings, and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, providing empirical data for both the development process and research.

In this article, I first describe the complexities of social work and how practice research and critical psychological theories can help to organize and develop social work

and similar practices. This is followed by brief consideration of the question of how theories can be integrated in practice, where I argue that practice research has important advantages over other strategies for organizational development. To substantiate this claim, I then describe and analyze the organizational development project, discussing the findings and their implications.

Social work and the role of practice research

Social work shares many of the same challenges, complexities, and tensions facing other psychosocial practices and is a central field for Danish practice research. As such, it can serve as a prototypical and relevant case for investigating how practice research can contribute to the development of more qualified and empowering organizations, practices and a more just society.

Social work deals with inherently complex problems, characterized by competing and conflicting definitions of problems and solutions and by fundamental uncertainties, where there is no single decision that is clearly best (Fuggle et al., 2016; Rittel & Webber, 1973; Samsonsen & Turney, 2017). At the organizational level, social work exhibits a low degree of institutionalization, with aims, objectives, and methods that are only partially standardized. This is especially true in Denmark and Sweden, where social work and psychology are characterized by minimal regulatory standards and procedures, and a relatively low level of external oversight compared to other countries (Magnussen, 2018; Kousholt et al., 2026). These conditions give social work professionals and organizations significant autonomy, enabling them to develop practices that are responsive to users' needs and societal conditions. However, this autonomy underlines the need for professional discretion to navigate complex cases and decisions. Previous research has indicated that these are not just individual competences, but capacities that are collectively developed and practiced (Forkby & Höjer, 2011; Kongsgaard, 2024). Adding to this complexity, social work is shaped by diverse scientific and societal discourses, institutions, and legislation that can combat but also reproduce and entrench existing inequalities.

In response, many Danish practice research projects within social work have collaborated with organizations (Bank, 2021; Nissen, 2018; Nissen & Friis, 2020; Schwartz, 2007, 2017), grassroots movements, or mutual-help organizations (Mørck,

2010; Mørck et al., 2026; Nissen et al., 2009; Kousholt et al., 2026) that identify as progressive alternatives, often drawing on critical psychologies. When comparing critical practice research to other approaches to practice development, such as formal education, supervision, or the implementation of evidence-based standards from positivist psychology, two intertwined strategies can be identified: the situated *collaborative organizational process* and the use or development of *critical psychological concepts and theories* (Cornish et al., 2023; Greenwood et al., 1993; Mørck & Nissen, 2005; Nissen, 2000). A significant strength of practice research is the *organizational process,* where professionals and researchers engage in collaborations to co-develop new, more empowering ways to understand and address difficulties and to improve organizational practices. This process is often closely tied to the development or application of theory.

Traditional positivist psychological theories and concepts view psychosocial difficulties as individual problems or deficits. In contrast, critical psychologies have an empowering or emancipatory potential because they are based on relational and dynamic ontologies (e.g., dialectics or process ontology) and reconceptualize "individual difficulties" as complex psychosocial processes co-produced by (problematic) societal conditions. For instance, learning and developmental difficulties are understood as products of marginalization and a lack of participation in social practices (Dreier, 2008; Schwartz, 2017). Similarly, drug users' reluctance to participate in treatment is not solely attributed to a lack of motivation or to addiction but tied to stigmatizing practices, places and structures (Bank, 2016; Bank & Roessler, 2022). In the following, I further explore the role of theory.

Theories and concepts in professional practice: regulatory or flexible standards?

While different traditions agree that theoretical concepts can guide practices, they disagree on how and for what purpose. Conventional positivist psychology often operates under the assumption that standardized methods, concepts, and knowledge should be used to regulate practices, resulting in more transparent and effective standardized interventions. In contrast, critical psychologies take a more situated and critical approach. From a *post-structuralist* perspective*,* psychological concepts enable specific ways of seeing, thinking, and acting within institutional practices. They have "looping effects" (Hacking, 2007) as they reify (theoretical) categories and descriptions as "objective

realities," which in turn influence the behavior and self-identity of those being classified (Bank, 2016; Dean, 2010; Rose, 1998). Consequently, psychological theories and concepts play an important role in governing subjects and practices; they can individualize problems, resulting in stigmatization, or, conversely, support empowerment and development (Raffnsøe et al., 2022; Rose, 1990). Parallel to this, critical psychology shares the view that theoretical concepts can shape practices. Nissen and Mørck (2019) understand theory as an artifact that "*is the primary practical form of abstraction that generalizes action possibilities (cf. Holzkamp, 1973). In GSCP, it becomes clear that this is not merely a 'technical' issue, but part of a wider project of transforming not only understanding, but also, in the same process, practices, and everyday life*" (Nissen & Mørck, 2019, p. 198). I interpret this as an understanding of concepts as artifacts that mediate between the general and the specific. In this view, theoretical "*abstractions are not endpoints but tools, whose utility and implications are realized […] as they provide possibilities of thinking and doing that had not been immediately reflected in the "sensuously concrete" everyday experience. Through this process, concepts mediate and reconfigure experience…*" (Nissen & Mørck, 2019, pp. 198-199).

As such, theories and concepts can play a crucial role in organizing practices, making it increasingly important to consider how they co-construct problems and which institutional ways of seeing, thinking, and acting they enable. As discussed above, in positivist or critical-realist traditions, theories and concepts tend to co-construct problems as individual pathologies. Such problematizations can be relevant but can also become discriminatory and an obstacle to development and change. This is especially problematic in social work and other areas addressing complex and context-sensitive psychosocial problems. Even institutions that are strongly influenced by humanist, democratic, and progressive values can (implicitly) apply individualizing theories. In the empirical analysis, I will show how a preoccupation with deficits or relationship significantly limits what can be seen as and worked on as pedagogical goals.

Conversely, concepts from critical psychologies have the potential to empower by highlighting difficulties and developmental opportunities as psychosocial processes linked to participation in social practices (Dreier, 2008). Importantly, these concepts do not "prescribe" specific definitions, identify causal links between problems, symptoms, and categories, or enforce specific ways of thinking or acting. Rather, they can be

considered "flexible" or "user-oriented" standards (Bank, 2016; Nissen & Barington, 2017) that can that can be used to mediate reflection and dialogue and help professionals analyze problems and make decisions. The use of critical theories can be understood as a situated critique that "engages in everyday experience, thought, and action, including their partiality and contradictions. However, not in an individualistic-personalizing way, instead it tries to make them understandable in their socio-historical connections and contexts" (Schraube, 2015, p. 542).

How can psychological concepts contribute to organizational development?

I now return to the central question of how concepts derived from practice research and critical psychologies can be used to develop and organize practices outside of full-fledged research projects. Nissen (2009) proposed that research-based empirical descriptions and theoretical models can serve as prototypes for similar practices. However, it remains unclear how this should be done. Safe to say, social workers, managers, and policymakers engaged in social work rarely read academic literature. Disseminating knowledge via scientific publications is thus an ineffective strategy for implementing theoretical concepts in organizations. To address this issue, I will briefly discuss the two main types of strategy for professional and organizational development in Danish social work.

The first group of strategies encompasses educational activities such as formal education, that primarily occur before an individual begins working in a specific field. Although these activities are beneficial for building knowledge and skills, one significant drawback is that they teach skills, methods, and theories that often remain abstract and detached from the complex and contradictory realities encountered in practice. Additionally, in fields such as social work that entail collaboration between professionals with diverse backgrounds and theoretical frameworks, it can be difficult to apply (psychological) theories to effectively guide and enhance practices. Due to space constraints, I will not explore these challenges here. However, my practical and academic experience in the field, including regular interactions with students, professionals, and academics, as well as the empirical case outlined in this paper, strongly suggests that many social work professionals have limited knowledge of fundamental theories, concepts, and methods despite having a relevant educational background.

The second group of strategies includes organizational practices such as ongoing supervision, thematic workshops, and courses. In the Danish context, ongoing supervision is the most common practice. Supervision is understood and practiced in many different ways (Beddoe et al., 2016). In most countries, the supervisor's role has formal managerial authority, holding social workers accountable for the quality of their work (Lietz & Rounds, 2009; Magnussen & Svendsen, 2018) by enforcing compliance with procedures and instructions and using monitoring and feedback to apply the most effective and ergo correct solution to a given case (Field & Brown, 2019). Beddoe (2010) criticizes this approach, arguing it represents bureaucratic management that minimizes errors but neglects the uncertainty essential to social work's goal of empowering individuals and groups in troubled positions. Meanwhile, supervision in Scandinavia is primarily conducted by someone from outside the organization, often initiated and organized by social workers and paid for by management (Bradley & Höjer, 2009). In this context, the primary purpose is learning, often described as "personal–professional development." Several studies are critical of such approaches where supervision is organized by those being supervised. Egelund (1999) and Egelund and Kvilhaug (2001) argue that such an approach does not sufficiently support or follow up on learning. Ahrenkiel and Andersen (2003) discuss how a focus on the supervisee can contribute to the individualization of social problems and make development a personal matter between a caseworker and a client. Both traditions of supervision primarily focus on individual cases and professional development rather than on *organizational learning and development* and capacity building (Magnussen, 2018; Cottam, 2018; Cummings & Worley, 2015; Schilling, 2019).

As we have seen, previous research indicates that neither education nor supervision is an adequate strategy for fostering organizational learning and development. There needs to be greater focus on developing and facilitating collective discussions of professional knowledge and pedagogical strategies to qualify everyday decisions and practices in settings ranging from social psychiatry residential institutions. Otherwise, there is a risk that such decisions will instead be based on personal beliefs and organizational doxa.

This article's central argument is that these inadequacies can be overcome by integrating critical psychological theories with processes of involvement and co-

construction of knowledge from practice research, participatory action research, and organizational development (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Greenwood et al., 1991) to develop a generic "model" for *organizational learning and development* when working with psychosocial development. Articulating this as *organizational development* emphasizes the importance of developing collective capacities and new ways of collaborating within an organization that can support professionals in navigating their work's inherent complexities and uncertainties and develop more empowering practices.

Practice research as organizational development

I designed a practice research project with two objectives: first, to facilitate learning and organizational development by enabling professionals to use theories to guide their work with young people in a residential care institution, and second, to investigate this as an organizational development process. In contrast to practice research in the GSCP tradition, with its focus on the co-development of new theories, I explicitly drew on existing theories to explore how they could aid and empower professionals in their work. This choice was made to explore the broader potential of practice research methods and critical psychological theory, by investigating how this approach could be used by non-researchers to support organizational development. I will now describe the residential care institution, the research process, and the outcomes.

The case of "the Farmhouse"

The Farmhouse is a private Danish residential care institution for young people (13–18 years, extendable to 25) facing diverse challenges, including behavioral, social, academic, and identity-related difficulties, often combined with cognitive issues or diagnoses such as ADHD/ADD. It is staffed by a manager, a working manager, and eight social workers, four of whom have formal pedagogical qualifications. Management described the institution as well-functioning, with dedicated and experienced staff who had established good relationships with residents. However, they also experienced challenges and recognized the need to develop their practices. We decided to address this on an organizational level by introducing a theory-based vocabulary for discussing their work and framing it as a practice research project for the reasons described previously. Methodologically, this involved a flexible and iterative design that was open to input,

negotiation, and transformation throughout the process, and a strong emphasis on local knowledge, collaboration and double-loop learning, where competencies are developed and built up within the organization (Cummings & Worley, 2015).

Co-construction of organizational knowledge: producing narratives

We began by planning and conducting four full-day workshops, where we chose to involve management and staff as co-researchers. To situate the process within the organization and engage all participants, we co-produced detailed narratives of prototypical cases that they encountered in their work, including the challenges they faced with young residents, how they dealt with them, as well as the reasons, thoughts, and institutional doxa behind their actions. This was inspired by narrative approaches in organizational studies (Czarniawska, 1997), social work (White & Epston, 1990), and psychology (Bruner, 1990; Sarbin, 1986). Collective storytelling produces narratives that connect detailed descriptions of staff practices and actions with their embedded meanings, which are not always explicit or accessible for those involved (Bruner, 1990). Generating shared organizational narratives about prototypical cases also provides a common frame of reference, which Forkby and Höjer (2011) term collective memories. This is especially important in cases such as this where there are no methods, standards, theories, or "grand narratives" guiding practice, where there is little managerial control, and where much of the work is one-to-one between a social worker and a young resident. Shared organizational narratives create a foundation for the staff's collective reflection on their work, serving as a steppingstone to analyzing cases with psychological theories. I selected theories that helped to understand both the specific cases and had a general relevance to facilitate new ways of thinking, talking, and acting in response to various institutional challenges. In subsequent workshops, we presented theories and showed how they could be used to analyze practice. However, we recognized that it was not enough to merely present theories and analyses if the social workers were to use theory to analyze their practice. To facilitate learning, the workshops included staff collaborating in plenary and in smaller groups where they selected new cases from their work. By analyzing these cases using the presented theories, they developed new ideas for dealing with the challenges they faced. The following section provides greater detail regarding certain aspects of this process.

The organizational development process

Negotiating the problem: from individual pathologies to contextualized development

At the first workshop, we presented the process and overall goal for the practice research project. We then conducted a collective mapping exercise, asking staff members what they perceived as the main challenges in their work and what they would like to focus on. This resulted in the identification of the following common challenges and focus points

- "Some young people are difficult to reach and do not accept offers of relationships or social interactions."
- "Some young people only establish relationships with one specific social worker."
- "Relationships: What constitutes a good relationship and how can it be established?"

As we see above the staff understood the primary challenges as to do with relationships, both as individual characteristics *in* the young people (difficult to reach), the nature of relationships and how to engage young people *in relationships.* The centrality of relationships for their practice is evident in the staff's discourse, in interviews, at the workshops, in our discussions with management, and on the institution's website, indicating that this is a common-sense doxa in their practice. This is not surprising given that psychological theories such as psychodynamic theory and humanistic psychology are part of common-sense folk psychology (Bruner, 1999), offering useful concepts for understanding how relationships facilitate learning and development (e.g. Gergely et al., 2002; Rogers, 1969). However, a narrow focus on the individual and (dyadic) relationships can be problematic. Schwartz notes the prevalence of an individualistic understanding within special education that is tied to the medical model of individual pathologies (Egelund & Jakobsen, 2009; Schwartz, 2014, 2017, 2018): "Categories that designate the 'troubled' and 'traumatized child' have been widely used in residential care, indicating that problems are to be understood as inherent in the individual child (e.g., Whittaker, Fernandez del Valle, & Holmes, 2015)" (Schwartz, 2018, p. 171). According to critical psychologies, this can result in neglecting how development and learning are produced through participation in and across social practices. This is especially important for young people as their development includes changed and more independent participation in societal practices.

Assuming a position as experts, our first "intervention" was to suggest that, while relationships are very important in this type of work, they are a *means* to facilitate development, not a goal in themselves. The staff agreed and proposed several new challenges that we could explore. These included: *facilitating young people's democratic education (Bildung), navigating one's own life, maintaining a positive self-image, the capacity to tolerate being in relationships, being part of a community, and practicing collective care.* As facilitators and researchers, we considered these topics relevant to young people's development but felt that a higher level of (theoretical) abstraction would be helpful. Informed by social practice theories (critical psychology, cultural historical activity theory, and situated learning theory), we proposed *development* and *(increased) participation* as internally connected analytical categories. We presented these theories and their understanding of learning, development, and participation as dialectical psychosocial processes in which individuals learn and develop agency through their (increased) participation in social practices (Daniels, 2004; Dreier, 2008; Lave, 2008). In this way, we incorporated the social workers' specific concerns and perspectives, as well as the institution's overall pedagogical goals, in a more general theoretical framework for understanding development. It should be noted that the staff had no prior knowledge of these theories and concepts but found them meaningful in relation to their practice.

Practice and action research emphasize the importance of respecting and working with the local knowledge of those involved. However, this does not imply a non-critical approach or seamless adoption of their perspectives (Brydon-Miller & Ortiz Aragón, 2018; Mørck & Nissen, 2005). In this case, we positioned ourselves as experts and actively guided the staff toward more contextualized perspectives on learning and development. We believe this approach is empowering, countering existing individualizing psychological discourse that can position young people as troubled and providing staff with new concepts for understanding and analyzing their pedagogical work, thereby generating new action possibilities

Workshop 1: producing cases, organizational narratives

Based on this theoretically informed framing, we asked the professionals the following question: *If the aim is to facilitate development through (transformed) participation, what is a good example of this in your work?* Several examples were discussed, and an example

concerning how they engaged residents in physical exercise was chosen for further analysis. In brief, the case was about how young people who had previously spent most of their free time playing computer games alone in their rooms now trained together in the residential facility's fitness room. During a plenary session, we spent approximately 20 minutes producing a detailed narrative of this process. Ken, the staff member with primary responsibility for the exercise project, stated:

> Ken**:** You could say that at one point it seemed like the young people weren't really a cohesive group whereas now, a sense of community has developed. Something has been built up around these shared interests [...]. If you look back just six months, there has been a huge development. They actually enjoy spending time together now. They've built something where they've realized that it can actually be fun to go out and do something together, even though other things are pulling them away. [Gaming is referred to here as the main thing that "pulls" the young people away.]

We then asked the staff what specific initiatives and actions they had taken during this development, but even those most heavily involved in the project struggled to describe their actions. To develop more detailed narratives and engage all staff members, we encouraged all participants to contribute their observations and reflections.

> Christina: Where I can clearly see you are really succeeding is in keeping them motivated through a humorous approach, persistence, good energy, and preparation. Ken, you can spend an entire week telling them that when I come on Thursday, we will exercise. On Thursday, we exercise. You are very good at preparing them and keeping them committed. I think that's definitely part of why the exercise has been successful.

I encouraged Ken to elaborate:

> I: I am curious about what you describe as this energy—this lightness or humor. Could you elaborate on this? Do you have a concrete example from the previous week?
>
> Ken**:** I don't know… maybe it's just the kind of jargon I can join in with.

Clearly, Ken struggled to articulate his professional practice Such difficulties are common in social work and other loosely structured practices, where staff are not necessarily required to o reflect on or describe their actions. This challenge is also recognized within practice research: "Developing reflexivity may be uncomfortable and challenging, and good PAR projects create a supportive culture for processing such discomfort" (Cornish et al., 2023, p. 4).

We strove to overcome these difficulties through collective knowledge production and by gradually developing and supporting a new culture of professional discourse. Another challenge was maintaining focus. During plenary discussions, staff frequently shifted rapidly between different topics and explanations, repeatedly interrupting the conversation with jokes and humorous remarks. The humorous banter contributes to a positive atmosphere and is part of how staff organize their work, intertwined with their use of affective strategies (Bank, 2016, 2021). However, the jocular conversational style may also hinder professional and organizational development by diverting attention away from the topic of discussion and making some staff members reluctant to contribute. These affective aspects will be explored in a forthcoming article. We also explored two additional cases at this workshop illustrating how staff helped transform young people's participation before agreeing to work theoretically with the exercise example at the next workshop. This case was chosen as it generated the most engagement among the staff and offered a detailed description, allowing theory-based analysis.

Choosing and presenting concepts for theoretical analysis in workshop 2

I analyzed how staff facilitated the residents' participation in exercise, by drawing on social practice theories (all based on dialectical ontologies) and the concepts of *participation* from critical psychology (Dreier, 1999), *learning* and *legitimate peripheral participation* from situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and *zone of proximal development* and *scaffolding* from cultural-historical activity theory (Vygotsky, 1978).

We began the second workshop by presenting the theories and concepts used in this analysis, illustrated through common cultural examples. For instance, we used the example of teaching a child to ride a bicycle – a developmental task familiar to most Danes – to explain Vygotsky's notions of *scaffolding* and *the zone of proximal development*: The child must be in *the zone of proximal development,* be physically and

mentally ready, have access to a bicycle, and receive adequate support (scaffolding) from an adult. Initially, the child needs extensive support/scaffolding (engaging and motivating the child, calming potential anxiety, physically supporting the child's balance and direction). However, as the child gradually masters different aspects of riding the bicycle, the adult can gradually reduce their support to facilitate the child's learning and independent mastery. After presenting the theories and concepts, we analyzed the description of the exercise case from the previous workshop.

Analysis of the exercise case

In brief, our analysis of the shared organizational narrative regarding identified *objective conditions*: that the institution had a gym and staff who were personally engaged in exercise. We showed how the staff *scaffolded* the young people's gradual engagement and participation in physical exercise. As mentioned above, one strategy to motivate residents was to encourage a shared expectations that staff and residents, as Ken say they "should exercise together, and that it would be enjoyable and fun." To achieve this, Ken used his relational competencies to "infect" the young people with positive energy and expectations of being together, gradually creating a set of norms and a *community* around exercise. Initially, this involved extensive work and *scaffolding* by staff, with few young people participating; however, they gradually became more active. Applying the concept of situated learning, they moved from *non-participation* (gaming in their rooms) to *legitimate peripheral participation* (accompanying others to the gym), to *full participation* (actively training, taking on independent tasks and roles related to the activity (e.g., choosing music or helping each other), and toward *expanded participation*, arranging to go to the gym together at their own initiative, as well as starting to participate in other common activities. The following section returns to a focus on organizational development and collaborative learning. It provides a detailed description of the developmental process and outcomes through a discussion of the situation prior to, during, and after the project, alternating between excerpts from interviews, description of the process, and my reflections.

The project's outcome

To evaluate the project, we conducted semi-structured interviews with staff and management, lasting between 45 and 97 minutes. The interviews were conducted four months after the final workshop to strike a balance between investigating the long-term effects on the organization and ensuring that the respondents could still remember the process and articulate how it had shaped their current practice. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded thematically, and categorized into five main themes. This paper discusses the first four themes: the complexity of the work; difficulties in their work; comparing development strategies; the effect of the project. The fifth theme, humor and affective strategies, is the focus of a forthcoming paper

Complexity and difficulties: the initial situation

In the following I present and analyze the process chronologically, starting with descriptions of the complexity and difficulties staff encountered in their work *prior* to the project:

> Susan: It's not really like any specific pedagogical tools were being used. I mean, the Farmhouse is a place where you work in a relationship-based way, and I've found myself sitting there thinking: Okay, so the only tool I really have is myself – and what am I actually doing? Because honestly, I don't know.

> Steven (working manager): Because so much of it is intuition and experience built up over many years across the whole group collectively [referring to the staff] [...] But it's just so hard to capture.
> Mike**:** Precisely, because so much of our work can seem kind of invisible. Because relational work is hard to explain. I mean…
> Susan: [comparing the job to working in a kindergarten] You could say it is kind of like a puzzle inside your brain where the pieces fall into place every time a small child succeeds at something physical [in kindergarten]. But here, it just becomes this huge mess of a puzzle, because they are young people and because it's psychological. Does that make sense? […] I think I'm a little surprised by just

> how long it takes before you feel that you've actually achieved something. And that thing about not really being able to measure it until the very end.

When the staff describe how their work is challenging, they articulate how the challenges are tied both to the fact that psychological development stretches over an extended period of time, rendering it "invisible." and to the processual nature of relational work, which is based on "intuition and experience," making it difficult to articulate and discuss. The absence of organizational standards, theories, methods, or "pedagogical tools" to guide their practice adds to the difficulty of ascertaining the impact of their everyday work on young people's development. As discussed, the only recurrent "standard" is an unspecified reference to "relational work" that, from a critical perspective, might function as a black box (Latour, 1987) or empty signifier (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) in professional discourse. It appears to be a pedagogical strategy, but its emptiness and openness to interpretation make it difficult to articulate and discuss their work.

> Steven (working manager): Just […] deciding which course we should take – I've realized how difficult that can be. Because we come with so many experiences – as fathers, as mothers, as well, all kinds of things in our own lives, our experiences with our own parents, and just the support around us. All of that plays an enormous role.

The lack of shared professional vocabulary meant that the staff primarily relied on their personal experiences, thoughts, and values to guide their work. As Kristina puts it, "the only tool I really have is myself," while Anders refers to their personal "experiences – as fathers, as mothers." In this way, their work becomes individualized as the young people's development depends on the staff's *personal* capabilities and identities, placing the staff in a precarious and vulnerable position. This also adds to the difficulty of engaging in discussions, incorporating professional knowledge and expertise, and developing a common approach.

Organizational development mediated by theories: the process

A central argument in this paper is that professionals can use psychological concepts as "tools" and "devices" to create an analytical distance to their practice and subjective experiences, and through this develop their practices and organizations. In the first

workshop, theoretical concepts were used to shift the focus from individual difficulties to contextualized development. In the following, I analyze our attempts to integrate theories in professional practice as mediating tools through multiple iterations between practice and theory. As described, we co-developed organizational narratives and, during the second workshop, presented theory that was used to analyze two different cases in plenary (riding a bike, exercise), thereby scaffolding the staff's understanding of the theories and how they can be used to analyze practice as "situated generalizations" (Nissen & Mørck, 2019). Following the presentation, participants were divided into groups, each selecting a case that was central to their work. They analyzed these cases collectively using theory and presented their cases and analyses in plenary.

Informed by critical psychologies emphasizing that theoretical work and learning are situated practical activities (Lave, 2008; Nissen & Mørck, 2019), and aligned with an understanding of professional discretion as collaborative practice (Forkby & Höjer, 2011; Kongsgaard, 2024), we considered it essential that the social workers practice theoretical analysis as a situated collaborative activity within an ecologically valid setting. In this way, the smaller, "safer" groups provided an opportunity for everyone to contribute and collaborate, while *also* providing a "model" they could use in the future to discuss and analyze their work. The managers recognized the potential of this approach, highlighting the effectiveness of group work compared to traditional supervision. Steven (working manager): "Everyone gets to work here... we make the most progress when we work in that way – in small groups, intensely for half an hour, then we talk a little and go back to working again."

As researchers, we were surprised by how difficult the staff found it to discuss their practice in theoretical and analytical terms. Concepts such as scaffolding and legitimate peripheral participation are part of the curriculum in formal pedagogical education and are used extensively in pedagogy. We therefore expected analyzing cases with these theories to be a relatively straightforward task, allowing us to quickly move on and introduce new and more complex theoretical understandings. However, this probably says more about us as researchers than the staff.

As the staff attempted to use theory to analyze their practice, it became clear that this was more challenging than anticipated. If the concepts were to be useful as *tools* that "provide possibilities of thinking and doing "(Nissen & Mørck, 2019, pp. 198-199), we therefore

needed to proceed at a slower pace. We collectively decided to modify the process and dedicate the remaining workshops to analyzing cases in plenary and small groups using the theoretical concepts we had already presented. Aware of the challenges of translating theory into practice, we co-developed the idea that, during their daily handoffs between shifts, staff and management should make a conscious effort to use theoretical concepts rather than simply sharing practical information To support and sustain this, we agreed that they should record these "overlap conversations" – a "sociotechnological anchoring" that served a dual function of reminding staff to integrate this new way of thinking and communicating in their daily work and documenting the process for research. We also encouraged external supervisors to use some of the concepts and theoretical frameworks during supervision sessions. Management was also an integral part of the project and used the concepts in their daily conversations with staff. The process spanned six months, including the four workshops and an ongoing focus among staff and management. Ten months elapsed between the initial workshop and the final interviews.

Seeing how much work and support was required to integrate these theoretical concepts as part of the staff's professional vocabulary was eye-opening for both management and us as researchers. This suggests that the challenges involved in the process of integrating theories or methods in organizations may often be vastly underestimated and indicates why traditional approaches to organizational learning and development, such as lectures, theme days, and courses on different methods, can have limited effect without extensive support.

The emergence of professional discursive practice and culture

Regarding the project's contribution to organizational development, a significant and positive development that all the participants mentioned was the emergence of a more professional vocabulary for reflecting on and discussing their work.

> Matt: I think it has been incredibly good. In the sense that we have incorporated some professional concepts. Concepts that… how should I put it? Make things a little more transparent. Because [now] we know what we're talking about when we talk about scaffolding. And I can feel that it's being used in everyday life. And when we're uncertain about something – "why are you doing that?" – then it's

> like… we say, "we're providing a bit of scaffolding here," or "we're removing a bit here." And the zone of proximal development and all those kinds of things.

A significant "technique" in this development was the use of concepts to help social workers focus on and discuss specific tasks and details. The most striking example occurred during the third workshop, where the staff used 20 minutes analyzing and discussing how they could provide scaffolding for a resident in learning how to order pizza from the local pizzeria for the communal pizza night.

> Jake (manager): … it really makes a difference when you discuss those details, because everyone contributes their input, and those discussions help everyone become better. I just think that has improved our work with individual young people.

Ordering a pizza might seem like a trivial and insignificant goal, but the staff viewed it as a crucial step in the young person's development because the ability to call a doctor, social services, or other relevant institutions is a prerequisite for living alone and taking care of oneself. This task was a step toward learning to do that within the resident's zone of proximal development. The theoretical concepts helped professionals be more specific when discussing details of their work, revealing to staff opportunities for scaffolding residents' development and linking everyday tasks to broader development goals. Several respondents mentioned that the new professional discursive practice also allowed discussion and disagreement. Although these discussions could become animated and even heated, personal opinions and emotional responses played less of a role than previously.

> Ken: There can be disagreements… Yeah, during staff meetings, if I say, "I really fucking disagree with that." […] Uh, 'I don't think that really happened before. People used to just sit there and nod along.
> Mike: Well, it might especially be with such… Like… When you're frustrated for example. Yeah. Then quite often we also talk about what… Where is the young person right now? And how can we best support him through his problems? And

> that helps us get away from the emotional side a bit. You know what I mean? Like… from our own feelings of frustration. And those things you sometimes just do intuitively… That… It keeps us sort of in that professional bubble.

Interviews with staff and managers strongly support the claim that the process facilitated a change in the staff's professional discursive practices. Initially, we observed the staff using individualized, dyadic, psychological, relational and, to some extent, deficit-based discourses in which the young residents were constructed as problematic – for instance, as someone who "does not accept offers of relationships or social interactions," which staff identified as a common challenge at the first workshop. This discourse was gradually supplemented and to some extent replaced by a more context-oriented professional discourse informed by critical psychological theories. The emergence of this professional discourse, which Mike terms a "professional bubble," is mediated by theoretical concepts such as participation, zone of proximal development, and scaffolding. These concepts enable staff to collectively discuss and analyze young people's development and difficulties and to formulate common goals, subgoals, and support strategies linked to broader developmental goals and trajectories. I interpret this as a fundamental epistemic shift that transforms the young people's potentials, developmental processes and trajectories, and their need for support into epistemic objects that can be theorized and articulated. This allows professionals to reflect on them and to design and conduct pedagogical and psychological interventions, both collectively and individually. Staff and management noticed the emergence of a changed professional discursive practice, whether during staff meetings, when developing new procedures for documenting and structuring their work, or during discussions in conjunction with a theme day on mentalization.

Not only did the project change the professional discourse among participants, it also contributed to a more trusting and open professional culture. As Matt says, staff members now "dare to speak up and discuss issues in a professional way." This shift helped social workers move away from a practice rooted in their own personal experiences and getting caught up in – their personal emotions and frustrations. Embracing a more theoretically informed professional discourse does not mean that personal experiences, intuition, or the ability to develop authentic and trusting

relationships with residents are unimportant, but instead embeds them in such discourse, which offers new possibilities for facilitating young people's development.

Concluding reflections

This paper has investigated how practice research, with its dual focus on involving participants as co-researchers and utilizing critical psychologies, can support organizational development. I have drawn upon traditions that emphasize a "strong participatory approach" and view participants as not only a source of knowledge, but as active co-researchers who can potentially be involved in all parts of the research process (Cornish et al., 2023; Greenwood et al., 1993; Mørck & Nissen, 2005; Nissen, 2000). Decisions regarding which actors to involve and to what extent depend on various factors, including the internal and external conditions, challenges and aims of a given practice or organization.

In the Farmhouse project, we decided to involve management and staff as co-researchers in knowledge creation (producing and analyzing narratives) and the organization and evaluation of the project. I consider this is an example of how a co-research approach can increase engagement and facilitate organizational development by involving participants from the early stages of a project through a bottom-up process that grounds the project in their everyday practices and first-person perspectives. Compared to more individualistic forms of (co-)research, data collection and practice development, it is important to stress the significance of the epistemic shift from focusing on the (personal) experiences of co-researchers to *collaborating* with co-researchers to co-produce knowledge and analyze their practices. This involved moving beyond individual knowledge and learning into an organizational domain of collective knowledge production and collaboration. This can contribute important methodological insights by illustrating how knowledge, psychological theories and analytical competencies can be co-created, applied and developed to foster lasting organizational learning and development (Argyris & Schon, 1974 Cummings & Worley, 2015; Oreg et al., 2013). However, one must also consider the challenging nature of the co-research position as articulating and analyzing practice can be difficult and can call into question both personal beliefs and institutional doxa. It is therefore crucial to pay close attention to the process and develop and nurture a supportive culture (Cornish et al., 2023).

Furthermore, it is important to understand organizations, organizational development and participatory practice research not as discrete entities but as a process – as ongoing collaborative practice in which co-researchers continually reproduce and develop ways of discussing, thinking and acting within the organization (Argyris & Schon, 1974). In the current project, the co-researchers' limited theoretical knowledge required an extended collaborative learning process where they explored how to describe challenges, analyze them using theory and present the results to peers without assistance from researchers or management. Using terms from the theory of situated learning, they progressed from peripheral to expansive forms of participation (Lave, 2008) as they developed analytical competencies that became rooted - and practiced - in the organization as collective capabilities.

As mentioned, we chose not to involve the young residents in the project, which can seem counterintuitive when conducting participatory research. This issue was given careful consideration, before deciding that, given the organization's current level of "maturity" and the lack of a common theoretical vocabulary, it was necessary to focus on developing the staff's discursive practice and organizational culture. In our view, this approach offered the greatest potential to support the young people's development as countering the individualizing tendencies that we observed in the organization served as a prerequisite for involving them at a later stage. Additionally, the young people's limited engagement in and experience with collective discussions, both in their individual educational trajectories and during communal meetings at the institution, indicated that involving them in the process would demand extensive resources that we deemed neither feasible nor in the immediate interest of either staff or residents. One limitation of the project is that we did not investigate the direct impact of a changed professional discourse on the residents. However, our analysis strongly suggests that, following their participation in the project, the professionals engaged in more context-oriented and empowering discourses, thereby expanding their possibilities for understanding, scaffolding and empowering the young people's development. Future research should further investigate this impact, for example by focusing on the links between everyday organizational discourses and practices and young people's developmental trajectories, preferably by involving them as co-researchers.

General relevance: A prototype for organizational development.

This article stems from a critique of how learning and development are traditionally approached in organizations and practices supporting psychosocial development. One problem is that traditional educational activities often focus on teaching *individuals* methods, theories, or academic knowledge *separated* from the organizational contexts, local knowledge and communities of practice in which they are to be used. This can result in various shortcomings, such as the uncritical use of theories and methods, insufficient responsiveness to complex and ever-changing challenges within the organization, a failure to support professionals in qualifying their daily practices and the individualization of complex social problems among both professionals and "clients."

This article has suggested that methodologies from critical practice research – in particular co-research and critical psychologies – are a promising alternative to more traditional approaches. Such methodologies and theories are not imposed on practices by external parties or used to prescribe specific ways of thinking or acting. Instead, they are introduced as analytical tools or flexible standards that professionals can use to analyze and reconfigure their knowledge, discourses, and everyday practices. (Bank, 2016; Nissen & Mørck, 2019).

In line with the aspiration of participatory forms of practice research and related approaches to organizational development, I have argued that critical psychologies have significant potential in countering the individualizing tendencies inherent in many psychological traditions and psychosocial practices. They can also be a significant tool in mediating and developing organizations, discourses and practices that empower professionals and their "clients."

In relation to the question of generalizability and relevance, it is important to recognize that practice research, organizational development and efforts to support psychosocial development are complex, situated and context-sensitive practices. The insights that this project has generated thus constitute a possible prototype for organizational development that might be relevant to many similar loosely structured practices. However, O.D. projects should be developed and adapted in close collaboration with participants as co-researchers.

To build on these insights, future research should investigate the potentials and limitations of co-research and critical psychologies for organizational development, for instance by

conducting multi-site, longitudinal collaborative practice research in and across different organizational contexts. Such research can contribute to a more processual understanding of how the ongoing organization of practices is intricately intertwined with, and can contribute to, developing more empowering practices and organizations.

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