Exploring Workplace Innovation in diverse and low-skilled settings: reflections on using Critical Utopian Action Research

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Abstract

What are the strengths and weaknesses of applying Action Research to Workplace Innovation in low-skilled sectors? This article reflects on an Action Research project conducted in April 2021 with participant employees from an ethnically diverse and purportedly "low-skilled" workforce of a German medium-sized company. Using the novel Nordic research method called Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR), which emphasises utopianism, emancipation and democratic engagement (Egmose et al., 2020), the participant group was found to discuss perspectives and obstacles for workplace development. In the analysis and reflections, we present the methodological outcomes of the project and explore the nuances of implementing this specific method through the tensions between individual and group identity within "Workplace Innovation". After a short theoretical review to contextualise Workplace Innovation within discussions of diverse and low-skilled workforces, the article offers detailed descriptions of the CUAR process undertaken. Following analysis of the difficulties encountered applying CUAR to Workplace Innovations in this context, the article concludes by addressing the importance of adapting the procedure and exercises of (Critical Utopian) Action Research to small-sized research projects. It further illustrates the method's potential to promote a socially-driven and participatory approach to Workplace Innovation, whilst emphasising the need for more research projects in this area to be conducted for (and with) workforces considered both "low-skilled" and ethnically diverse.

Keywords: Workplace Innovation, Social Innovation, identity, Action Research, Germany

Introduction

Workplace Innovation has been little explored in the area of so-called "lower-skilled" jobs. This reflects the fact that the concept of Workplace Innovation is often synthesised into the management-based approach of Social Innovation, an arena concerning social value creation within organisations (Parés Franzi et al., 2017). In the political economy of the 2000s, such Social Innovation became more normatively oriented towards policy (Schubert, 2021), and was positioned as a response to two interrelating societal issues: unemployment of those marginalised by the labour market, and the need for high-skilled jobs to drive long-term growth. With these more policy-led interests in higher-skilled workplaces, however, the task of exploring and generating Workplace Innovations through research in more low-skilled sectors becomes challenging, at the level of both theory and method.

The ability of researchers to contribute to this area requires research methodologies that reflect the values they hope to stimulate in worker-led innovations. Methodologies which specifically seek to manifest these qualities do so by focusing on empowerment and the participation of diverse research subjects in working towards social change (Altrichter et al., 2002; MacDonald, 2012). Action Research forms a broad base of methods applied to the Social Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation domains (Tasker et al., 2012). More narrowly, new variants of such methods are being developed which combine critical theory (Karim, 2001) and "future research", applying social imagination and utopian idea generation to overlooked groups (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Detailed experiences of such novel methods, however, are few and far between. The price of this ambiguity is that it leaves the question unanswered whether the typical complementarity between Social Innovation and Action Research can hold when the aim is specifically *Workplace* Innovation and when the subject pool demonstrates high levels of diversity in low-skilled professions.

This article describes reflections on an Action Research project conducted in April 2021 with participant employees from an ethnically diverse and purportedly 'low-skilled' workforce of a German medium-sized company. Using the novel Nordic research method called Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR), which emphasises emancipation and democratic engagement (Egmose et al., 2020), the group of participants discussed perspectives and obstacles for workplace development. In the analysis and reflections, we present the methodological outcomes of the project and explore the nuances of implementing this specific method through the tensions between individual and group identity within "Workplace Innovation". After a short theoretical review to contextualise Workplace innovation within discussions of diverse and low-skilled workforces, the article offers detailed descriptions of the CUAR process undertaken. Following analysis of the difficulties encountered in applying CUAR to Workplace Innovations in this context, the article concludes by addressing the importance of adapting the procedure and exercises of (Critical Utopian) Action Research to small-sized research projects. It further illustrates the method's potential to promote a socially-driven and participatory approach to Workplace Innovation, whilst emphasising the need for more research projects in this area to be conducted for-and-with workforces considered both 'low-skilled' and ethnically diverse.

The research questions that the paper seeks to answer are:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of applying Action Research to Workplace Innovation in low-skilled sectors?
- How do social conceptions of identity in Workplace Innovation influence employees' ideas for workplace change?

Theoretical Background

In this section, we situate the concept of Workplace Innovation within broader streams of Social Innovation research, including by coordinating themes from the German and EU-level innovation discourse. From within these policy and research contexts, we derive a group-oriented perspective on low-skilled workers' identities which impacts the aims of worker-led innovations differently from the more individual-oriented (default) position.

Interest in Workplace Innovation is rarely directed at the ecosystem of so-called "low-skill" work. Low-skilled contexts can even be actively excluded by excitement over innovation (Mathieu & Boethius, 2021 p. 181). This is somewhat surprising considering that, in theory, the emergence of the modern "Social Innovation" discourse in the early 2000s was attuned to marginalisation of different kinds. Citizen-led solutions to social issues, in an era of declining welfare state funding, were an explicit policy exploration at the EU level; in theory, there is no reason why the associated features of bottom-up, collective and cross-sectorial strategies to improve societal outcomes (Howaldt et al., 2021, p. 5) would not apply to low-skilled work areas. In practice, however, at least three key barriers to the creation of a low-skilled/innovation discourse can be identified. Firstly, policy directives encouraging new forms of Social Innovation to increase employment appear to reflect the broader political economy context of prioritising higher-skilled roles because they form higher growth sectors (van Klaveren, 2004, p.16). Whilst such EU policies acknowledge that low-skilled jobs are gradually decreasing, and "lifelong learning benefits mostly the more educated" (European Commission, 2010), this attitude effectively treats low-skilled roles as operating in a liminal state, de-emphasizing the importance of worker-generated innovations while such roles exist.

Secondly, the association of low-skilled sectors with ethnic diversity emboldens the perceived challenges of managing "innovation" in such a workforce. Taking the case study's country of Germany as an example, in the last 70 years, Germany has experienced several migration flows which have resulted in a considerable workforce of those in low-skilled jobs from migrant backgrounds. After the end of the Second World War, Germany actively promoted labour migration because the reconstruction of the German economy needed a high number of human resources (Brodmerkel, 2017). Since 2015, many refugees from the Middle East looked for a new home in Germany, and by 2019, about 1.56 million people had joined the 11.23 million people living in Germany with foreign passports (Statista Research Department, 2020). Those with a migrant background were generally found to have lower qualifications

than Germans without a migrant background. In 2015, around 13% of this part of the population did not graduate from school, and 38% did not possess a professional qualification (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2016, as cited in Brodmerkel, 2017). Concerning the low-skilled workforce in Germany, its percentage of the whole workforce has reduced over the last 30 years and reached around 10% in 2016 (Eichhorst et al., 2019, p. 23) but remains an essential part of Germany's workforce.

Thirdly, the emphasis on higher-skilled jobs runs in parallel with increasing national and EU-level directives for "technology-centred vision[s]" of Workplace Innovation, intended to increase competitiveness in an increasingly automated stage of "Industry 4.0" (Kopp et al., 2016). As Kopp et al. argue, however, the hope for automated work sectors (particularly emphasised in the German context) has recurred at several points since the 1950s. Even when this was closest to reality, its priorities were not the profoundly social and relational sides to innovation management. Much of the discourse of "upskilling" in the research area follows a technological trajectory, even though the increasing professionalisation of roles offers a broader concept of social and technological innovation as interwoven, in contrast to "a one-sided technology-oriented perspective" (Kopp et al., 2016, p. 17). A perspective on Workplace Innovation "as an inherently social process" (Totterdill, 2015, p. 16), therefore, supports the ability of researchers to focus on the low-skilled context. This contrasts with a more rosy or airbrushed perspective on the future of low-skilled work by purely focusing on automation or on the higher growth potential of technological change for higher-skilled work.

Group-oriented identity of low-skilled workers

Across these three "barriers", we now explore a conceptual frame for understanding how the identity of low-skilled workers is approached in Workplace Innovation. Within the organisational focus of Workplace Innovations, changes in broader organisational culture are oftentimes theorised as behavioural adaptations: in other words, changes to individual action. Such organisations also support self-management by the employees based on learning, trust and equality through their structures (Oeij et al., 2018). Furthermore, these Workplace Innovations can be launched bottom-up by the employees or top-down from the leadership (Howaldt et al., 2016). When Workplace Innovation is specifically conceptualised for "'low skilled workers", research suggests that the focus is often on "training", despite low take-up by low-skilled workers. In the language of our discussion, this strategy to "innovate" the relationship between worker and employee focuses on the individual worker's competency. Wotschack conceptualises the needs of low-skilled workers to develop a "voice" as facilitated through continuous training. This stems from a recognition that changes in political economy, including "labour shortages or technological or organisational change" incentivise organisations to "invest in training of low skilled workers (despite the outlined barriers and independent from mechanisms of 'voice')" (Wotschack, 2020, p. 248). Whilst Wotschack includes "voice" alongside technology and various forms of innovation, it also has the tendency to become more narrowly defined as the capacity for low-skilled workers "to express and claim their training interests" (Wotschack, 2020, p. 258).

This focus on "individualism" can be identified as the dominant means of understanding the identity of low-skilled workers and to perceive their needs and capacities for innovation in individual terms. As described, this runs from the specific focus on conformity of the worker to the role through behavioural change, through to an expanded concept of workers claiming their "voice" to support greater autonomy in the labour market.

In contrast to this individualised understanding, focusing on the development of individual competencies, addressing the topic from within social innovation reclaims the role of group identities in seeking progressive outcomes. Grounded in collective identities that are not as straightforward as workplace roles, such identities may work without explicit engagement from organisational structures. Another way to frame this is to ask whether the emphasis placed on innovation is sociological or institutional: i.e. in workplaces as interpersonal environments of human culture, or on workplaces as primarily professionalised centres of individual labour. Research on collective bargaining, for example, finds a discourse of innovation present in the capacity of workers to diversify the terms of working contracts, conditions and relationships. Such a collective ability "to craft innovative agreements" is seen to require a "broadening of the bargaining agenda to [include] issues that have not necessarily been considered subjects for negotiation but that need to be part of a solution" (Hayter et al., 2011, p. 241).

Starting from the premise that low-skilled workplaces are more likely to manifest diversities (of language, culture and ethnicity), the place of group identities becomes vital to the relationship between work and innovation. This is important because different incentives and strategies might be required for specific groups to contribute to innovation, or (as in the above example) to widen the terms of collective bargaining to include other common subjects of concern to the specific group. This more collective view of Workplace Innovation is most clearly embedded within the domain of Social Innovation, and the related outcomes, processes and practises of social value creation (Moulaert & MacCullum, 2019). Whilst social innovation is applied to many different societal settings, Workplace Innovation has a more direct connection to organisational life, as well as to the success criteria applied to professional settings, in the sense of workplace culture, organisational strategies and structure (Howaldt et al., 2016). Typical outputs include better job designs and smoother teamwork (Oeij et al., 2018) or workplace design through, for example, employee meeting places for formal or informal discussions (Totterdill et al., 2012). Whilst there is an emphasis on top-down management intentionality, a strong line of thinking continues to emphasise that any changes can only be "*strategically induced* and participatory adopted changes [...] that lead to simultaneously improved organisational performance and improved quality of working life" (Eeckelaert et al., 2012, our emphasis). These elements intersect with the broader German and EU-wide discourse of Social Innovation, stimulated particularly by the work of research clusters around the European School of Social Innovation, who put questions of workplace change and technology in dialogue with social and political themes of citizen science and "workplace democracy" (Howaldt et al., 2021, p. 7).

Shaking-up the terms of employer-employee relations here intersects with the familiar Social Innovation mantra of novel solutions to difficult problems. Leadbeater's mantra on the need for socially entrepreneurial action to match "'underused resources" with "unmet" needs (1997) is thus given new life by worker-driven definitions of their professional context. Workers can co-define which of their resources are "underutilised" and enter into negotiations regarding whose "needs" are fulfilled by innovating around them. Identifying that the autonomous development of workers may be a more significant focus for innovation than work structures themselves (what we have described as the "sociological" approach, above) aligns Workplace Innovation more with democratic streams of social innovation. Relying heavily on research from the civil sector, this democratic stream nevertheless regards Social Innovation as "a tool for politicising the very spaces, which neoliberals have sought to depoliticise" (Montgomery, 2016, p. 19), an approach which encourages a dynamic definition of workplaces as contested spaces of power within which worker empowerment is crucial.

Methodology

Case description

The case company is a German service provider to the textile industry, which has existed since the 1930s and has a portfolio of 240 business customers such as social institutions, foster homes, hospitals, airlines, and pharmaceutical, food and catering businesses. The staff includes more than 300 employees with more than 30 nationalities between them. At the time of the research study (February 2021), Germans comprised the majority of the staff composition (39%), followed by Italians (19%), Croatians (8,7%) and Turks (7%) (Researcher fieldnotes, 2021). The rest of the staff had different European, African and Asian nationalities. The employees are grouped in small teams to work on different tasks at the specific workstations, working on different, large machines in a central hall, with one workstation after the other for cleaning, drying and folding the different kinds of clothes and textiles.

The work process at the company is itself highly industrialised and machine-based, with staff only responsible for small and simple tasks and without the need to be highly specialised. This low level of necessary qualifications contributes to the classification of the workplace as one primarily for a low-skilled and ethnically diverse workforce. Such classifications, of course, reflect much more on the intended roles than the broader capacities of those who occupy them. As one worker estimates: "80 per cent of the employees in general are not here because they are interested in working in a laundry, but because they have to." This worker's initial desire was to work in bridal fashion, but they adapted to the broad-based skill requirement of the workplace for pragmatic reasons: "I am honest. I came here and I had no work and I needed something quickly. I came here but still, I have to look, now I am here. My fault because I didn't learn anything. I have to put up with this work because I have nothing else" (Participant 2).

As this combination of ethnic diversity and low-skilled roles demonstrates, the capacity for workers to experience major problems in the smooth collaboration of the staff is high. The discourse of "in-groups" and "out-groups" has been used in organisational contexts to understand the ways that staff cluster around common identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, as cited in Joshi & Jackson, 2003, p. 280), as well as the collective perspectives that are generated by these common languages and reference points. Our bridal fashion worker's intimation that a high percentage of employees are not interested in the specifics of their work opens a vacuum for the opinions and feelings of staff-clusters to influence the company's running, and (crucially for this enquiry) the capacity to envision change. It is this combination of needs - how workers form collective impressions of their work together, and raise innovative change as a response to common issues - that motivates this research enquiry to explore an Action Research method.

Action Research in a participatory methodology

This research was concerned with analysing employees' ideas for workplace development through the lens of Workplace Innovation. On these grounds, Action Research was chosen as a research method emphasising participation and exchange between the participants and the researcher (Whyte, 1991, as cited in Eden & Huxham, 1996, p. 77). In this section, we give a brief background to Action Research in this context, then provide a more detailed account of the specific methods followed in the project.

Action Research is normally utilised within participatory methodologies. In the workplace context, this broader way of doing research is characterised by collaboration, dialogue and the designing of change-agendas to "free" participants from restrictive procedures and regimes (Creswell, 2007, p. 22). Participants can be included in Action Research in many ways, but in a crucial sense they must be supported to define problems associated with their experiences, and be supported to make changes in response. The development of the modern theory of Action Research in the 1930s and 1940s (Masters, 1995) reflected an increasing awareness that the marginalisation of groups could easily occur when their experiences were treated as isolated rather than collective (Adelman, 1993, p. 7), a situation often repeated by the hierarchical nature of the firm.

The orientation of Action Research towards participation and empowerment (Altrichter et al., 2002, pp. 127-128) are the most applicable to the interests in worker-generated innovation. Whilst research fields exploring alternative job-creation with expanded criteria of inclusion do attempt to bring participants into the research process, areas like that of social entrepreneurship have utilised Action Research rather less than might be expected (Tasker et al., 2012). Active participation is even more key because of the tendency of Workplace Innovation schemes to be seen as "technology oriented" and intended to "centralis[e] employee knowledge and experience" (Totterdill & Hague, 2004, p. 57). The impulses clearly

allow greater oversight in workplaces and (charitably) greater capacity to spread best-practices across a larger organisation. Yet, they also can treat innovation as a process which is not embedded in workers' wider experience. Action Research in this context places greater emphasis on a more public and open model of knowledge sharing, in which workers can explore "collective action grounded in dialogue, innovation, reflexivity and learning" (Fricke & Totterdill, 2004, p. 2): with "innovation" imbibing these other qualities which surround it.

Critical Utopian Action Research

Many who support Action Research for its emancipatory potential have been critical of "innovation" as a paradigm which works against such potential. Innovation here is seen as tied to the exploitative tendencies of neoliberal working conditions and, on this view, more radical change linked to "imagination" and "utopianism" is suppressed by innovation. The connection between innovation and a "productivist growth regime" has implications for creating a "break between people's life experiences and aspirations" and the working life they pursue to survive in societies which prioritise growth (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2016). It is out of these broader critiques of the complicity of workplaces in neoliberal conditions that Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR) emerged, as a subdivision of Action Research, intended to "creat[e] critical awareness about the necessity of change and pointing towards possibilities of democratic knowledge creation" (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014, p. 2). The method makes potent the capacity of action-oriented methods to be directed at research not "on" but "*for* and *with* people who define issues of pressing concern" (Egmose et al., 2020, p. 241). The theoretical and practical framework of CUAR is built by critical theory (Karim, 2001) and future research, including social imagination and utopian idea generation (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014, p. 2).

Utopianism is a key dimension of the approach and has a concrete stage in workshops, because participants are encouraged to create strong narratives about their visions (Egmose, Gleerup and Nielsen, 2020, p. 240). According to Wright:

> "[u]topia is thus both a nowhere place and a good place. It is the fantasy of a perfect world that fully embodies our moral ideals [...] The idea of real utopias embraces this tension between dreams and practice: *utopia* implies developing visions of alternatives to dominant institutions" (Wright 2013, p. 3, emphasis in original),

Therefore, the participants are invited to fantasise and create ideal situations that can be alternatives for present conditions. In our exploration of low-skilled workplaces, we see CUAR as particularly attentive to differences between groups (on the basis of, for example, ethnicity) to be a catalyst for thinking about better practices (Wright, 2013, p. 4). Additionally, a focus on "utopianism" is particularly apt for discussions of innovation: for utopian ideas to be realised, it is vital to create desirable, sustainable and achievable alternatives. Whilst this can manifest as interest in the sustainability aspect of what is generated (Wright, 2013, p. 8), "innovation" is primarily an investigation of the new and novel.

Thus, despite the more explicit engagement with the critical theory principles of "emancipation" in CUAR, part of our inquiry into Workplace Innovation is to explore the contested role of "workplaces" as spaces for innovation that are based on certain assumptions of identity formation, which go on to underlie CUAR as Action Research. CUAR is invested with high optimism around the chances of improvement for real problems, which are considered high because diverse experiences and opinions are exchanged among those dealing with the issues that the participants aim to solve (Wheeler et al., 2020, p. 47).

The method seeks to improve the circumstances and practises of both the researcher and the participants of an organisation or community; the development of the participants' competencies leading, through Action Research, toward social change (MacDonald, 2012). The emancipatory roots of Action Research are emphasised by researchers who highlight the influence of sociological concepts such as "life context", wherein "learning is connected to identity for the entire person: and not only to roles in systems or organisations" (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006). However, such highly individuated (almost phenomenological) accounts of worker identity say little about tensions with the collective dimensions of identity (language-use, ethnicity, nationality and skill-level). We return to these issues in the analysis.

Method: the Future Creating Workshop

The primary researcher initiated a Future Creating Workshop (FCW) with participants of a German mid-size company in April 2021. The initial mandate was to discuss opportunities for workplace development based on the current challenges of the staff's daily collaboration. Such workshops aim to allow the participants to create ideas and ways to implement these ideas (Egmose et al., 2020, p. 237). An FCW consists of three parts, which are the following: (1) the critical phase to exchange critique about existing practises; (2) the utopian phase to develop ideas to solve the problems; and (3) the realisation phase to develop plans to implement the developed ideas (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014, p. 4). The workshop occurred on one morning at the case organisation and lasted three and a half hours. Eight employees built the group of participants and differed in nationality, gender, age, and job tenure. Having differences in job tenure increases the possibility of sharing and comparing experiences and events which happened a long time ago with more recent ones in order to allow an analysis of their development over the time in the company.

P#	Nationality	Gender	Age	Job tenure (yr)	Job status
1	Portugal	M	29	8	team leader
2	Italy	F	31	11	team leader
3	Germany-Russia	F	42	15	team leader
4	France	F	57	8	machine worker
5	Portugal	M	29	6	machine worker
6	Croatia	M	26	3	machine worker
7	Syria	M	33	2	machine worker
8	Croatia	F	32	3	machine worker

Figure 1: Composition of the group of participants of the workshop

Apart from these characteristics, the group was also a mixture of three team leaders and five workers, allowing different levels of front-line experience to be present, seeking a diversity of approaches to, for example, problem solving. Furthermore, the participants all possessed a good level of verbal German language skills, as this was deemed necessary for the workshop to fully function with clear understanding and elaboration of ideas by all participants. Needless to say, this criterion does not permit employees with missing German language skills to participate, even though they might be in greater need of inclusion and workplace development. The researchers, being outsiders to the organisation, designated the company's operation manager to select the range of participants, intended to achieve a diverse composition of job tenures.

Ethical integrity is fundamental to Action Research, particularly the practises of informed consent, information given to participants in advance of the workshop, the right to withdraw, confidentiality, anonymity, and the researcher's role and dynamics with the participants (Löfman et al., 2004). In this study, the participants were informed about the workshop's content and had the opportunity to step out of the project before and during the workshop. All participants signed an informed consent including their rights and the researcher's responsibilities before the workshop started. They were also treated anonymously for research publications and company reports. Asking about personal experiences around topics such as diversity, inclusion, and collaboration could be seen as potentially provocative, or harmful. Thus, participants were never pressured to answer. In accordance with the democratic intentions of CUAR, the researcher sometimes felt it necessary to ask several follow-up questions to get more information from the group. Despite this, the group largely demonstrated ownership over the workshop, largely deciding its direction and focus. For

example, stages of the process that included ranking ideas attempted to facilitate this ownership for the group.

At the beginning of each workshop "phase", the objectives of the phase were explained. The first phase, the critique phase, aimed to determine the participants' emotions about the staff's daily collaboration. In line with the project's initial orientation around diversity management, the group discussed how they felt when thinking about the staff's daily collaboration in the light of its ethnic diversity. The participants chose different words that best described their emotions and explained their choice to achieve this. During the first brainstorming session, the group collected problems caused by the staff's diversity first separately in two groups and then in the round afterwards. The ideas were ranked to identify the group's most important problems. Engagement being the main principle of Action Research and CUAR, the workshop used exercises which allowed all participants to interact and exchange information in order that they could co-create their ideas. Brainstorming is an often used and known exercise to achieve idea generation as sharing ideas leads to additional associations in each participant (Paulus & Yang, 2000, p. 77). The method used in the second and third phase was similar to brainstorming.

The method for the utopian and realisation phase was called 'World Café' and is characterised by cross-pollination of ideas (different rounds of information exchange), possibility-thinking and collaborative learning. Due to its emphasis on creating actionable knowledge, World Cafés are considered a convenient exercise for Action Research (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, as cited in Fouché & Light, 2016, p. 29). In the utopian phase, the group reflected upon the question about what the staff's ideal collaboration looks like. Two smaller groups first thought about their ideas separately before switching their flip charts with the other group (cross-pollination) and discussing all ideas together in the big group. At the end of the exercise, the group ranked their ideas and the two highest-ranked ideas were further developed in the third phase, one after the other. The realisation phase was dedicated to the development of ways to implement the collected ideas.

The workshop ended with a feedback section. The participants evaluated a number of aspects of the workshop, such as the researcher's performance, the content, the exercises, and the group interaction by putting stickers on each aspect. The flip chart for the stickers being a bullseye, the stickers' position showed the participants' opinions from good to bad (the exercise is called bullseye technique).

Data management and data analysis

The full diversity of materials developed during the CUAR workshop were included in the data analysis. The data included a central audio recording as well as group posters, summaries and the "rankings of ideas" sheet. A photo documentation of all the posters allowed an additional analysis of, and reflection about, the produced material. The audio recording was transcribed. The focus being on thematic content instead of a detailed conversation analysis, breaks, stuttering and grammatically incorrect sentences in the transcript were adapted to form a clearer understanding and translation into English.

The data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Such an approach, as Braun and Clarke's oft-cited paper unpacks, has its processual ambiguities, but is primarily used for "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The method's focus on patterns was appropriate for identifying the participants' problems, ideas and wishes. To show the group's co-constructed idea generation during the Future Creation Workshop, the data analysis template for the coding process consisted of three different parts, one part for each phase of the workshop. The codes were reduced in two rounds, for each phase individually during the first round, and shortened, assembled and categorised independently of the phases in the second round. They emerged from the transcript itself. The process resulted in a list of interrelated topics, beginning with the feelings and problems over the group's wishes and ideas. Signs of hidden feelings, experiences and reflections also entered the analysis and the illustration of the process perspective.

Analysis

Having described the methodological underpinnings of the research, this section now moves to discuss how the recurring themes identified by an ethnically diverse group of employees of the case organisation reflects the theoretical framings of workplace innovation. The research and workshop aimed to investigate how this group imagined improving their daily experience of the workplace. The thematic analysis of the transcript and the other materials resulted in four main topics that recurred in each phase of the workshop. These were: (1) Group formation, (2) Missing German language skills, (3) Missing knowledge about colleagues, and (4) Negative attitude and behaviour. Figure 2 shows the interrelation between the themes of each topic throughout the workshop's three phases:

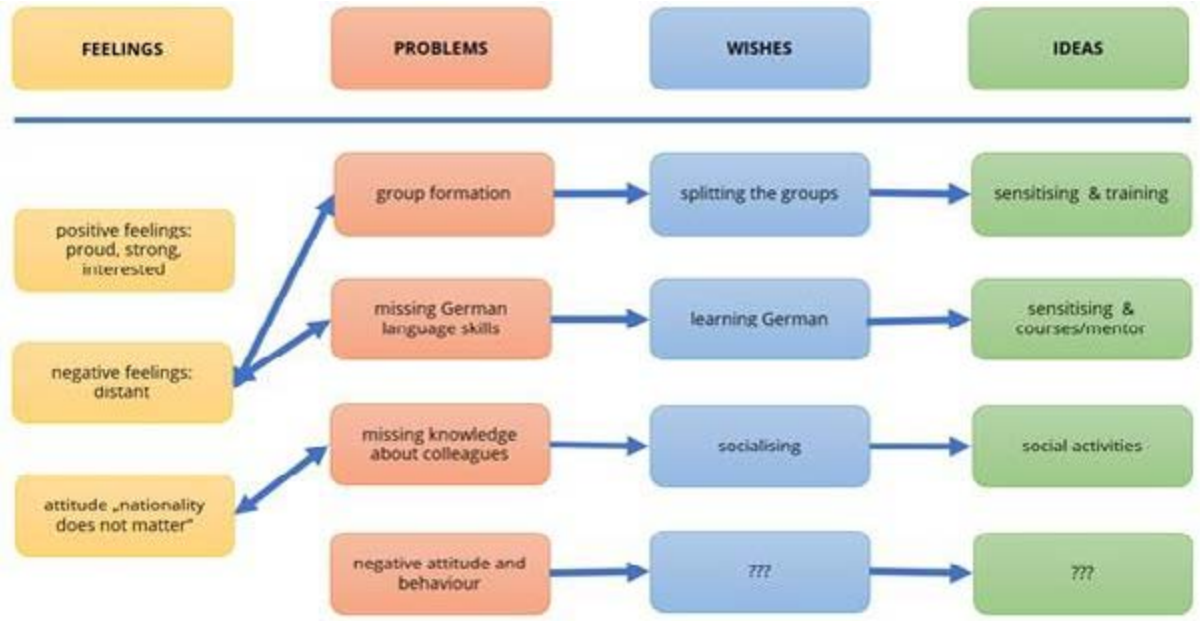

Figure 2: Result of the thematic analysis

The participants' issues and ideas can be put into context with the concepts and ideas of Workplace Innovation, especially in relation to the sociological emphasis of Social Innovation and Workplace Innovation.

Sensitising and training

The ideas of sensitising and training were raised in response to a perceived problem of group formation and a wish for splitting these groups in some way. During the workshop, participants raised the issue of a lack of mixing of people from different nationalities in different work shifts. Some groups consisted to a high degree of employees of the same nationality and only a few employees from other countries. In this context, the group wished for groups of employees from each nationality (Participant 2), suggested a more pluralised team composition in each role/workstation. This contrasted with the fact that groups or shifts were not routinely split, as management considered that they worked well at their stations; it was thus identified that training would be needed to prepare the employees to work at different stations.

As Hayter et al. (2011) identified within the research of collective bargaining, Workplace Innovation is seen as the capacity of workers to diversify the terms of working contracts, conditions and relationships. One part of Workplace Innovation is workplace design (Totterdill et al., 2012, pp. 247-248). In this case, adapting the shifts and the workstations to reflect worker diversity points to the hope of increasing organisational performance and employees' well-being (Oeij et al., 2018, p. 54). In the Social-Innovation-informed perspective introduced earlier, it was identified that workers (as a group identity) have the capacity to not only identify individual training needs (a question of boosting individual competency) but to collectively re-imagine both the "resources" they offer and the "unmet" social needs to which they might be directed. Intercultural training was even proposed to the group as a means to improve

intergroup relations and interactions (in the style of Ferdman) but, they were found to argue against training and argue for "respect" as a sufficient measure for dealing with other employees (Participant 2). As we derived from Wotschack, this calls for an attention to a broader notion of workers' "voice" than is typically found when this is interpreted as the autonomy to simply identify training needs.

Sensitising and courses/mentors

The second dominant problem emerging from the workshop was the lack of German language skill among some staff members. The "wish" identified was to improve such skills systemically and (in connected ideas of sensitising) through means of courses and mentoring. The background to this complaint is that the case company did not require their employees to learn German anymore. The disinterest in learning German is also shown by some employees' reactions when asked to speak German at work. The organisation already offered German language courses for free to some employees, but they did not attend them regularly. In the workshop, workers even suggested that the extension of the new employees' contracts should depend on their effort to learn German:

> "But then he might not be the right person to keep either. [...] That is then the next step. Either you learn this or you leave. For example, you could offer them a two-year probationary period, not a permanent contract. That means either you have learned something in these two years and we keep you. Or if you haven't learned anything, then we have to separate and then it's not right." (Participant 1)

According to the group, not improving at speaking German within a specific period of time should be considered a reason to end the employment contract.

Moreover, this attitude of the participants also illustrates that behavioural adaptation is one necessary key element that can also be promoted by self-management by the employees themselves through learning (Oeij et al., 2018). Even though, as mentioned above, the staff are interested in restarting the German language courses, they also praised the success of some employees of learning German at work with the help of employees, as in the following interaction.

> P2: My husband didn't know any German at all. He started working for us and in the beginning, he only worked with Italians.
> P4: Oh God.
> P2: That was very bad for him because he didn't hear anything, didn't notice anything. Then he started working with a Turkish man and the Turkish man understood that he had to teach him simple German and then things improved. [...]
> [...]

> P1: I learned most of it here at work because I worked with a good man who kept telling me "that's what they say". Nowadays that doesn't happen. You are Italian, then you go to the Italian group. You never learn the language then. [...]
> [...]
> P5: I learned most of it here at work. (Participant 7)

These reflections demonstrate the intermingling of social processes into ideas for transforming the workplace. The group not only advocated for greater language integration, but also discussed using "language mentors" who actively help colleagues to learn German. The group even developed the idea one step further by wishing for translators for each language working in the company and translating between different employees (Participant 4). In this manner, they imagined innovative solutions to their environment in terms of unifying figures to support communication: promoting language as an element of their working process over, for example, technological solutions to challenges in their environment.

The importance of language here has interesting implications for the role of individual "autonomy" in Action Research around Workplace Innovation. Action Research, after all, draws on the participation of autonomous individuals and, applied to Social Innovation, seeks to create as "innovations that are social both in their ends and their means" (BEPA, 2010, as cited in Moulaert & MacCullum, 2019, p. 31). This dynamic can be framed for Workplace Innovations as innovative improvements concerned with the employees' well-being at work (the "ends") happening through the employees' participation and empowerment (the "means") (Pot et al., 2012, p. 261). In a similar manner to the previous analysis, therefore, this provokes the concept of "voice" to be theorised in the Workplace Innovation context as a means of capturing the distinctiveness and authenticity of worker contributions. However, in contrast to the social/group dynamics of that section, workers' interest in mentorship and "translators" speaks to a more classic and individualist notion of "voice" as a synonym for autonomy.

Social activities

In the final, dominant problem identified, workers saw the lack of information about their colleagues as an issue, wishing for more socialisation and different forms of social activity.

According to practitioners and researchers of diversity management, intercultural training is the primary solution for improving an ethnically diverse workforce's collaboration (Ferdman, 1992, p. 358). However, when asking the case study group about introducing intercultural training, they argued against training and argued for "respect" as a sufficient measure for dealing with employees from another country (Participant 2). According to their discussion, social activities during or after work were more helpful for getting to know colleagues and their cultures and gaining the competence to deal with cultural differences than intercultural training. Such workshops are not feasible as the employees might feel forced to attend them

and as the motivation might be low to spend more time at the company. Consequently, daily interaction between the employees by asking questions about each other was deemed as a more promising way to get to know each other than workshops about the influence of cultural differences on the staff's collaboration.

Along with the mentioned sociological stream of Workplace Innovation, the autonomous development of the employees is said to be an essential piece of the staff's empowerment and the development of their collective bargaining. The participants clearly considered socialising vital to get to know their colleagues better and improve their relationship with them at work. They mentioned the idea of an entertainment room (Participant 2), the reintroduction of the annual trip for the staff (Participant 2) and the summer party. To get to know their colleagues better, an employee launched the initiative of playing football after work. Consequently, spending time in an informal way and comfortable surroundings is helpful. Such initiatives may be considered part of workplace innovations as they contribute to higher Quality of Working Life and more diverse relations among the staff (Totterdill et al., 2012, pp. 247-248).

Discussion

The first part of this discussion will focus on theoretical insights from the analysis. As the paper primarily has a methodological focus, the second part more extensively then discusses the methodological implications for CUAR in the Workplace Innovation context.

The complexity of generating innovative workplace ideas through "emancipatory" Action Research processes is demonstrated across the three examples of worker-driven diversification of team composition, the socialising themes of their ideas, and their strong emphasis on the application of German-language skills. In this case, a culturally diverse workforce who explored ideas for Workplace Innovation translated their desire for diversity beyond the Action-Research room. Whether the framing of the Action Research process therefore affected their articulation of diversity demonstrates some of the tensions found within the connection of Workplace Innovation to the democratic ideals of Social Innovation, described above. In the face of the opportunity for collectivity to boost workers' responsibility for innovations in their workplace, did this diverse workforce consider their workplaces as primarily sociable or professional spaces, with innovative changes designed to achieve either sets of ends? Such an ambiguity is reflected in the dual role of the German language in the above analysis. On the one hand, cultural diversity was seen as a great asset of the team atmosphere in which the workers felt themselves to thrive; yet, dominant perspectives on the requirement for German language skill appeared to place limits as to acceptably diverse 'voices' of the workplace. By externalising this tension, between an orienting principle of diversity and group-generated goals for improvement, the workshop improvement demonstrated diversities to Wotschack's focus on "mechanisms of "voice" (Wotschack, 2020, p. 246) in Workplace Innovation.

As previously mentioned, Action Research is a less regular method for analysing workplace innovation in relation to low-skilled roles, and CUAR even less so. In general, such workshops that depend highly on the participants' engagement and cooperation are open-ended, given that the result cannot be controlled by the researcher. After applying Action Research and a CUAR workshop for the first time in this context, the researchers felt that this research method resonated with the aims of an empowering and creative stimulus for social and innovative project ideas. As researchers, we liked the structure of the workshop, with its capacity to build a narrative over the three phases. Nevertheless, the research method being new, it is important to critically reflect upon the experiences made in relation to the promising principles of Action Research and CUAR as well as the contested success criteria for social science research in the Workplace Innovation domain. Therefore, this section is dedicated to a detailed reflection about the methodological outcomes of this Action Research project, starting with a reflection upon validity aspects.

Validity requirements in Action Research inevitably differ from those in other social science methods. External validity, such as replicability and generalisability, is not deemed a helpful quality criterion for Action Research (Burns, 2005, as cited in Tasker et al., 2012, p. 84). Within social entrepreneurship research, internal validity is rather more readily applied to action research projects. Whilst this domain's proximity to traditional "entrepreneurship" research might suggest more scalable or franchis-able forms of validity, scholars have continued to insist that action research in the area is regarded as context-specific and might only be transferred to other social settings to a certain degree (see, for example, Tasker et al., 2012, p. 84). As discussed in the analysis, for example, some workers took a rather hard-line approach to the need for German language training in roles, whose validity might only have been considered valid when put in dialogue with a wider selection of workers with different perspectives. In general, the dynamics of an "internal" validity typically benefit from further differentiation. At least five types of validity have been applied explicitly to Action Research: outcome validity, democratic validity, process validity, catalytic validity, and dialogical validity (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008, p. 426).

These five types of validity stand for the following objectives: (1) outcome validity stands for the successful solution of the problem; (2) democratic validity represents the involvement and contribution of the individual participants to the problem solving; (3) process validity secures a process leading to continuous learning, improvement, and capabilities for collaboration; (4) catalytic validity refers to the empowerment of the participant to understand and change their circumstances within and after the research; and (5) dialogic validity stands for the researcher's activity of asking for feedback about the interpretation of the findings (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008, pp. 426-427).

Every participant was equally invited to join the conversation, but some participants were more active in the discussion than others. It was difficult for the researchers to make the quieter participants open-up and contribute more, which would have demonstrated greater democratic validity. This also hints at a presumption, on the part of CUAR advocates, as to the

capacity of their intended participants to engage in a specific speaking register and discourse. It appears as a crucial validity dimension for CUAR that participants "can recognise academic analysis and engage in discussions" (Egmose et al., 2020, p. 421).

It was possible to witness an eye-opening moment when the participants realised that this workshop allowed them to express their struggles, talk to colleagues that they had never talked to before, experience colleagues with the same problems, and exchange ideas about possible solutions they support or have neglected. However, to the same extent as the participants' faces lit up, their smiles also disappeared when they understood that an implementation of all these new ideas might not happen, as it was to depend on the company's willingness to carry them out. When this reality hit the participants, a questioning of the meaningfulness and usage of the workshop seemed to start in their heads, which might have reduced their motivation. The implementation of the ideas by the company is not certain, neither for the research nor the participants, either before or after the Future Creating Workshop. Therefore, the accusation and critique of Action Research for leaving the participants disillusioned is justified and allowed, and leaves outcome validity as a quality criterion which is often difficult to achieve. It is also seen to lower the overall quality of the research, and highlights the difficulty of using participatory research methods such as Action Research in general. Consequently, negatively reviewed, it can be claimed that such an Action Research workshop only served for research purposes and did not have a positive lasting outcome for the participants. It can be questioned if the impulse for analysing current problems, openly discussing problematic issues with colleagues, and critically rethinking the circumstances (process validity and catalytic validity) is strong enough to overcome a possible disillusion caused by a missing recognition of their problems and implementation of their ideas by the company's management.

Outcome validity is a challenge to identify, given that the implementation of the workers' inputs is not knowable. A follow-up in the form of a new coming together with either one or all of the participants, or the company's management, has not happened. Hence, it is uncertain to the researchers if any changes have already happened or if the participants have actively asked the management for the implementation of their ideas if any changes had not happened yet. Hence, neither the implementation nor the participants' development can further be analysed in the long run as the research project ended earlier.

Moreover, the original concept for this Future Creating workshop was designed in a way that each phase happened on separate days with at least three or four days in between each phase to rethink the previous phase, analyse the data, and adapt the exercises for the new phase. Unfortunately, the company's management did not approve this concept as they could not release eight employees from duty for so many hours. Still, the researchers kept Action Research and the Future Creating Workshop as their method due to the participatory and utopian features which differentiates this method from other qualitative research methods. Therefore, given that the Action Research process only occurred over a single duration of three and a half hours, and not over a period of several weeks or even months as other

projects are, it is not known if there was anything approaching a lasting impact from the workshop. Some of the typically intended outcomes of Action Research (capacity building, empowerment or staff collaboration, considering Workplace Innovations independently from the workshop and the researchers) all appear challenged if the validity is seen as filtered through overly academic expectations for participant understanding.

In general, the validity criteria raised by Ozanne and Saatcioglu (2008) appear more difficult to apply to short-duration examples of Action Research, CUAR or Future Creating Workshops (possibly influenced by their contextual focus on "consumers" in contrast to limited project groups). Hence, it is nearly impossible to evaluate the validity and a project's success using these validity criteria.

Aside from the mentioned validity criteria, there are reasons to be sceptical about the utopian phase. Even though the identification of the participants' dreams and ideas is the main distinguishing feature of a Future Creating Workshop, there is little guarantee that a high number of broadly novel ideas will be generated, particularly as participants may have issues with expressing their ideas. Consequently, the expectation behind this second phase might be too high and idealistic. These are criticisms which can be levelled at critical theory-based work in general, but the division becomes more potent in relation to the broader theoretical background that we highlighted around low-skilled workplaces. Discourses and resources are innovation were found to be directed towards "upskilling" and influenced by the higher growth capacities of high-skilled sectors. The Nordic-inspired Critical Utopian Action Research can be seen as potentially elite in its discursive focus on "utopianism" and the pursuit of abstract values of "emancipation", at the behest of concrete solutions which are advocated for by workers in low-skilled jobs.

The FCW inventor's expectations are also unclear, making it difficult for the researcher to evaluate the participants' ideas and the workshop's success. When can an idea be considered utopian? If the ideas are too 'simple' or 'straightforward', should the researcher become active and suggest other ideas? However, a strong involvement of the researcher is not desired in order not to influence the idea generation by the group. Thus, the question arises of what the researcher can do better to facilitate the participants' idea generation process.

Emphasis on novelty in utopian idea generation also pushes against differing standards for democratic action and creative vision. Using exercises that require the participants to be very active and creative does not necessarily lead to success, particularly when not all participants are eager to contribute in such a way. Unequal willingness to participate in exercises might jeopardise the idea of a widely democratic idea generation, with every participant joining the discussion equally. Action research in workplace innovation appears to have previously managed these tensions by reaching for creative strategies where spectatorship is also considered direct part of idea creation, for example in the use of actors to generate interplay between "fiction and reality" in Utopian-like creation sessions (Banke et al., 2004, p. 275). Just as the researcher found it challenging to support idea creation by all of the participants,

(despite not all opinions being heard equally in the discussions) such strategies of more nuanced facilitation may still present challenges in the field.

Conclusion

We close this paper by drawing final conclusions about the methodological obstacles of using Critical Utopian Action Research in this case's context of a low-skilled and ethnically diverse workplace, as well as about Workplace Innovation and its connection to Social Innovation.

In terms of methodological conclusions, firstly, we assess that CUAR requires a more elaborated framework for researchers to apply it to small-scale projects, reflecting some central issues of scale in Action Research. Validity criteria and expectations for the outcome, the participants' contribution and the researcher's involvement, need to be stated clearly for a more precise evaluation and analysis of the method's outcomes and the research's success. So far, the evaluation of small-sized (Critical Utopian) Action Research projects appear rather too much based on the researcher's own interpretation of the events during the process. In this regard, especially for CUAR projects, the idea of utopianism needs to be explained in greater detail. Even though utopianism is the outstanding feature of CUAR, it simultaneously represents an ambiguity and potential weakness of the method. Moreover, the exercises used for FCW may benefit from being adapted to different types of participants. Role plays, games, and other exercises which depend on a high level of creativity or energy from the participants need to be rethought and adapted for less active participants, potentially drawing more on the politics of spectatorship. Since the researcher cannot anticipate in which way the participants will contribute to the exercises, the use of a pilot study gains importance. Consequently, methods for securing the research quality need to be developed to raise the acceptance and success of Action Research projects.

Secondly, this research has underscored the critical need to involve participants to achieve solutions that help them in the most appropriate way: one of the most important aspects of Social Innovation research. As Action Research is also built on the participation of the people in need, it is an appropriate research method for Social Innovation research projects. This workshop found out that the employees have different ideas and wishes than the organisation, for instance in terms of learning the German language. Designing an entertainment room, playing football after work, installing language mentors or organising more small or big social events are ideas for a more inclusive and smooth collaboration that might be new to the organisation's executives, and represent bottom-up introduced ideas. Hence, Action Research can be used to promote a socially-driven approach to workplace innovation and identify innovative ideas which go beyond organisational and technical improvements for strategic or structural changes to increase the organisation's performance and the employees' well-being at work.

Theoretically, the conceptualisation of a more group-oriented perspective on identity revealed certain organisational tensions in Workplace Innovation. Firstly, deriving from the

dual role of workplaces as social and professional spaces, many of the innovation ideas generated by participants sought to strengthen social relations in a manner which differed from management notions of the most "effective" team. Even whilst this increased collectivism might be understood by Social Innovation literature as a celebration of diversity and strengthened-bargaining-power for workers, the topic of German language learning demonstrated how workers might ironically demonstrate more conservative and exclusionary impulses, as they work-through the acceptable limits of integration in their workplace. As the methodological reflections make clear, small-scale Action Research projects which attempt to reflect diversity in their composition may run into these theoretical ambiguities, particularly when underpinning questions of validity leave the principles of workers' imagined innovations widely open.

Secondly, in the context of an emphasis on high-skilled workplaces and technological innovations, the ideas around language training generated by participants emphasised the ability of greater communicative competencies to develop respectful relations. Such "soft skills", as we might describe them, are familiar in the discourse of employee self-management (Oeij et al., 2018). Yet, our conceptual elaboration demonstrated these softer skills to be of lesser focus in the current discourses of workplace innovation, outside practises of "training" which are seen to directly benefit the current organisation. In dialogue with the methodological insights, this contribution prompts a greater need for researchers to support worker-participants in a more holistic expression of their identities through Action Research. This requires, for example, insulating the discourse of innovative "upskilling" (Kopp et al., 2016, p. 17) against an overly individualist focus which might only imagine workers getting better at the specific role they are occupying at any one time.

In a nutshell, this research has attempted to contribute to the fields of Social Innovation and Workplace Innovation by providing illustrations and critiques of an alternative approach like Critical Utopian Action Research. Such alternative methods go beyond positivist research schemes and attempt to place people in change of defining problems, and identifying wishes and ideas for improvement. Nevertheless, we deemed that the quality criteria for Action Research and CUAR must be further improved and especially adapted to small-sized research projects to strengthen the process and its results. As has been explored, both low-skilled and ethnically diverse workforces still represent an under-researched group in Workplace Innovation studies, to which the specific insights of the democratic stream of Social Innovation may be appropriately added for the benefit of these groups.

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