Research as Diaconia: Commitment, Action and Participation

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Conventionally, diaconal research is conceived as research on diaconal practice. This article traces two separate yet parallel traditions that have shaped diaconal practice and influenced related research, in order to argue that research should rather be seen as diaconal practice in its own right. Such research, in order to *be* diaconal, needs to meet certain requirements: It needs to be morally committed to the cause of justice. It needs to be expressed as action. And it needs to be participatory and dialogical in character.

The first part of the article traces the roots of diaconal practice in liberation theologies, particularly its Freire-inspired Latin American origins. The second part explores in particular the southern Action Research, or Participatory Action Research (AR/PAR), tradition, which is also indebted to the critical pedagogy of Freire. AR/PAR as a methodology and as a research program involves and requires commitment to social justice This tradition also requires that research takes place through the active collaboration of all relevant parties – stakeholders – to a particular research topic. The third and final part of the article reflects briefly on how these traditions challenge and develop further present-day diaconal practice in the context of large diaconal service organizations, using the Oslo Church City Mission as a case in point. How can such an organization, we ask, integrate the systematic quest for knowledge in the diaconal endeavour, always posing the critical question of whose knowledge, or knowledge for the benefit of whom?

> *Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice.*
> *Kurt Lewin, 1946*

> *Without reflection, action is reduced to activism.*
> *Conversely, reflection without action is reduced to verbalism.*
> *Paulo Freire, 1972*

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Introduction: Research as Diaconia?

In Oslo, like in many, if not all, contemporary European cities, the face of social problems has changed remarkably over the past 10 to 15 years. One such change is the presence of migrants travelling periodically between countries in search of sustainable modes of subsistence. Their presence is partly a consequence of high levels of unemployment and the reduction of support available in the wake of austerity measures and finance crises affecting southern and eastern EU/EEA countries in particular. It is also driven by discrimination and marginalization of refugees and ethnic minorities in Europe. The

problems these transmigrants[1] experience are hitherto scantly described in systematic research. Indeed, the disaffection of these populations seems fundamentally expressed in disempowerment and voicelessness.[2] In the Norwegian context, however, practitioner organisations such as the Oslo Church City Mission point to forms and levels of poverty and marginalization that are peerless in contemporary Norway, including poor, exploitative and/or hazardous living- and working conditions, with serious repercussions for their health and well-being, and yet with few rights to health- and social services.[3]

This situation constitutes a call for diaconal action. *Yet, it also calls into question what, more specifically, diaconal action may or should be.* Is diaconal action here working to meet basic needs unmet by public services, such as shelter, food, and health care? Or is diaconal action in this context also to investigate, describe, and document, i.e. to contribute to the systematic development of knowledge of the kind that is needed in order to advocate effectively against discrimination, increase rights? What these questions invite is a critical discussion of the conventional understanding of diaconal practice and research that separates work to reduce suffering from systematic quests for relevant knowledge.

Conventionally, diaconal research may be taken as research *on* diaconal practice. What we wish to explore here is whether there is a sense in which research may in itself *be* diaconal practice. That is, we wish to challenge the assumption of diaconal research as something external and supplementary.

We propose that diaconal research, when conceived as itself *diakonia*, calls for research that combines the forces of individuals and communities in mutual, participatory engagement. Such research will include members of disadvantaged or marginalized sectors of society, researchers, and social workers in a joint effort to fundamentally alter the (dis-)order of inequality and injustice.

We will furthermore argue that the constitutive nature of language and knowledge provides the most compelling argument why research may be seen as itself diaconal practice. It is not only an activity that takes diaconal practice as its object of inquiry or of improvement: In giving shape and legitimacy to experience, and by sanctioning truth hence "create" reality, research *is* action.

From this angle, then, our ambition in what follows is to ask, in what ways, under what circumstances, on which conditions, and with which qualities and characteristics, may such action be diaconal? We argue that at the core of ques-

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1 Researchers have proposed to call the mobility described here by the term *transmigration*, in order to emphasis its transient and temporary character compared to the *immigration* to Europe of the 1970's and -80's, where the prospect of permanent residence was not as restricted as it is today. Schiller, N. G., L. Basch, and C. S. Blanc (1995); Schiller, N. G., and A. Caglar (2010); Schrooten, M., D. Geldof, and S. Withaeckx (2016); Wimmer, A., and N. G. Schiller (2003).

2 Hilden & Stålsett (2012).

3 Kirkens Bymisjon, (2013; 2016).

tions about diaconal research, are questions of *who*: *Whose* science, *whose* practice? *Whose* experience, *whose* worlds? More specifically, this means that questions about the functions and legitimacy of diaconal research become also questions about what is at stake in diaconal research and to whom, about who participate in it and in what ways, and about the relations between participants.

In presenting our argument, we start by investigating the origins of contemporary understandings of *diakonia*, as exemplified by the definition above. In our view, the influence of liberation theologies is central. Hence we turn in particular to the Latin American roots of this action-oriented theology. We proceed by examining certain social science research traditions, in which very similar notions of moral commitment, action and participation are central. By engaging these two, liberation theology and participatory action research, in dialogue, we attempt to elaborate what research as diaconal practice may mean. We include in our discussion a consideration of what we take to be conditions and possibilities for realizing such an understanding of diaconal research in our time, including contemporary forces that frame attempts at such a realisation in large diaconal organizations.

A Liberation Theology Foundation

Understanding diaconia broadly to be Christian social practice (cf. the title of this journal: *Diaconia. Journal for the Study of Christian Social Practice*), the issue of what is meant by 'Christian' and how this is reflected in the social practice that makes it deserve the name diaconia, is already a contested one. Contemporary diaconal practice and theory is to a considerable degree inspired and informed by liberation theologies. For instance, Kjell Nordstokke's influential contributions in a Nordic Lutheran context[4] have received a primary inspiration and direction from his work on Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff's ecclesiology.[5] In a German Catholic context, Herbert Haslingers' *Diakonie. Grundlagen für die soziale Arbeit der Kirche*[6], holds the liberation theology axiom "[preferential] option for the poor"[7] to be "… für den Glauben an den Gott Jesu Christi der Prüfstein seiner Wahrheit", and for diaconal praxis in society it is "eine unhintergehbare und nicht relativierbare Norm".[8]

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4   Nordstokke (2009, 2011).
5   Nordstokke (1996).
6   Haslinger (2009).
7   Gutiérrez (1996); Puebla, (1979).
8   Haslinger (2009) p. 385.

As is well known, central to liberation theologies is their commitment to the agency of the underprivileged, dominated, oppressed, poor – subjects with many designations – and the social, political and ecclesial action for justice. What is less often recalled, is the degree to which liberation theology in its Latin American version in its turn was inspired by the critical pedagogy of Brazilian Paulo Freire (1921–1997). In his ground-breaking *Pedagogia do Oprimido*, first published in Portuguese in 1968, Freire sees the 'oppressed' as having a "great humanistic and historical task", namely to "liberate themselves and their oppressors as well".[9] The power of the oppressors is paradoxically not a power that is strong enough to carry through this act of double liberation. "Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both".[10] In developing this claim, Freire distinguishes between what he calls *false* and *true generosity*, and warns against (false) charity as the hallmark modality of the latter. When the power of the oppressors at times seems to be mobilized in favour of the oppressed, so that the oppressors may appear generous, this will always show itself in the form of false generosity. This is so, because the unjust social order is what makes their generosity possible, and this injustice must be perpetuated, or maintained, in order for their generosity to be possible also in the future. True generosity, by contrast, fights the causes of the unjust order.

> True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the 'rejects of life', to extend their trembling hands. Real generosity lies in striving so that those hands – whether of individuals or entire peoples – need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which […] transform the world.[11]

This warning of 'false generosity' is an important critical note to the history and self-understanding also of diaconia. Liberation theology picks up this point, claiming that the 'oppressed' or 'the poor' also should be seen as the main subjects in ecclesial practice as well as in developing a relevant theory of theology. Gustavo Gutiérrez points out that the origins of liberation theology is what he sees as a "vast historical event: the *irruption of the poor.*"[12] Writing in the late 1960's, this 'irruption' or 'new presence' is in Gutiérrez' view principally characterized by a struggle to construct a just society in which people may live with dignity, and be "*agentes de su propio destino*".[13] This is the major 'sign of the times' which the Church/theology is called to interpret, but also in the light of which the Church is obliged to interpret its own foundation and

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9 Freire (1972) p. 21.
10 *Ibid*.
11 Freire (1972) p. 21–22.
12 Gutiérrez (1996) p. 22, italics in the original; cf. Gutiérrez, (1971, 1982).
13 'Agents of their own destiny', our translation, Gutiérrez (1971) p.10.

calling anew.[14] Liberation theology, then, seeks *to make the practice and re-sources of the churches operational in the struggle for justice* , including these practices and resources also in the *critical reflection on the world* in light of the Christian faith in God (theology).[15] How, then, could this be done? How can the underprivileged, also in terms of analytical, intellectual and academic resources, have a first and decisive say both in the practice aiming at the transforming unjust structures and in the practice of creating and developing critical systematic knowledge for this purpose?

In this task the influence from Freire is clearly present in Gutiérrez' early work.[16] Only the oppressed themselves can, Gutiérrez claims, actually express the denunciation ('*denuncia*') of the present state of affairs characterized by injustice, and the announcement ('*anuncia*') of the 'new', that which is in-the-making, which is possible, attainable through transformative action.[17] When Freire pointed to the need for learning how the formerly supplicating hands may become hands that transform the world, he underlined: "This lesson and apprenticeship must come, however, from the oppressed themselves and from those who are truly with them".[18]

Freire's expression, however, reveals one of the most difficult methodological questions in liberation theology, and hence in a diaconia that sees itself in continuation with its principal tenets. *What is the difference and commonality between the oppressed "themselves" and "those who are truly with them"?* How should the relationship between these be understood?

Clodovis Boff was among the first to elaborate systematically a methodological foundation for liberation theology.[19] He distinguishes between three forms of liberation theology: the professional, the pastoral and the popular.[20] Professional theology is academic, and its primary location and media are the academic institutions, scholarly conferences and scientific journals. Pastoral theology is more organically related to the practice of the poor in their faith communities, elaborated by grassroots-theologians: pastors, catechists, deacons and other personnel at the local level of the Church. They formulate pastoral programs, mediations and pedagogical pamphlets rather than scholarly theology. Lastly, the popular form of liberation theology is the one developed, expressed and practiced by local lay leaders and ordinary, often poor, members of the Church base communities.[21] Their primary channels are concrete

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14 See Segundo, 1991; Sobrino, 1989.
15 Gustavo Gutiérrez famously defines theology as "critical reflection on praxis in the light of God's Word." Theological reflection is seen as "the second act," following a particular historical experience and action Gutiérrez (1971) p. 28–29.
16 Gutiérrez (1971) pp. 122–123; 298–307.
17 Gutiérrez (1971) p. 301–302.
18 Freire (1972) p. 22.
19 C. Boff (1980, 1991, 1996).
20 C. Boff (1996) pp. 8–9.
21 CEBs, see, e.g. L. Boff (1986); Cook (1985).

action, discussions, bible studies, and symbolic events such as liturgical cele-bration.

Clodovis Boff's view of these distinct levels and their interrelationship is harmonious: "Each of these levels reflect the same thing: faith confronted with oppression. However, each of them reflects that faith in its own way…".[22] This distinction of different levels and forms of liberation theology practice was in general seen as helpful for clarification, but its presupposed harmony was, as one would expect, also challenged.

Another among the pioneers of liberation theology in Latin America, the Uruguayan Jesuit Juan Luis Segundo (1925–1996) is particularly known for his claim that '*liberation* theology' not only expresses a theology *for* liberation of the poor and oppressed, but in this undertaking also necessarily becomes a liberation *of* theology itself.[23] This self-critical perspective made him im-plicitly challenge C. Boffs' harmonious three-level schema. In his article "Two theologies of liberation" Segundo sees a development in early liberation theol-ogy towards becoming too uncritical and somewhat idealistic in its proclaimed adoption of the perspective of poor and oppressed themselves.[24]

Liberation theology's main task is to liberate theology so that it may be-come an effective tool for the liberation of the poor and oppressed. Awaking the poor from what Segundo sees as their passivity and fatalism is necessary in order to enable them to become agents for liberation. This is a process which Paulo Freire famously calls *conscientizão* ('awareness-creating), "…the neces-sary means by which men (*sic*), through a true praxis, leave behind the status of objects to assume the status of historical Subjects".[25] Thus, Segundo stresses that there is a need for a theology practiced *on behalf* and *in favour* of the poor. Yet, such theological practice cannot be expected to be realized exclusively *by* the poor themselves. There is, according to Segundo, an important distinction to be made between "the oppressed themselves" and "those who are truly with them", in Freire's phrasing.

From a different context and strand of liberation theology, namely the South African, this dilemma is addressed by Gerald West in his *The Academy of the Poor* (West, 1999, cf. West, 1995). West is a biblical scholar, committed to 'reading with' poor and marginalized persons and communities in the South African context. 'Reading with' is here referring to concrete practices of group readings of and conversations around biblical texts, undertaken in contexts of marginalisation and oppression. West is concerned with the power asymmetry in such undertaking, however: "My academic biblical training gave me power

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22 C. Boff (1996) p. 8.
23 Segundo (1976).
24 Segundo (1990).
25 Freire (1972) p. 128.

in the context of Bible study, as did my whiteness and maleness".[26] And yet West does not want to minimize his own presence and resources in this encounter. How can this tension be dealt with adequately and responsibly, then? Drawing more on political scientist and anthropologist James Scott and his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990) than on Freire's approach, West suggests that a certain kind of 'conversion' on the side of the privileged (in this case, the biblical scholar) is required.[27] This is needed in order to make it possible for him or her to become "*constituted partially* by the experiences, needs, questions and resources of such communities".[28] He claims that it is possible to strike a mutually respectful balance in this common undertaking. West warns against "(b)oth an uncritical 'listening to' that romanticizes and idealizes the interpretations of the poor and marginalized, and an arrogant 'speaking for', that minimizes and rationalizes the interpretations of the poor and marginalized".[29]

Although recognizing with Freire and Segundo the need for a critical suspicion in order to break the ideological hegemony of the powerful which tends to create a 'culture of silence' among the dominated, West, along with Scott, is "not so sure that this understanding is the whole story".[30] The 'silence' within such culture of silence is not necessarily what it seems – an uncritical repetition of or loyalty to the worldview of the ruling elite. Rather this seeming silence may entail manifold, creative and subversive strategies of resistance and resources for freedom and self-respect, Scott and West claim. These resources are seldom visible to the powerful, or the 'public', or not even to the sympathetic intellectual. Hence Scott calls them 'hidden transcripts' , which he sees as "a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant".[31]

This means that one should take for granted neither that poor and marginalized already know it all, or know 'better', nor that their knowledge is necessarily a mere reflection of the hegemony of those in power. What is needed says West, is people "…who are able to learn from the poor and marginalized, while simultaneously helping them to foster modes of self-education and struggle against various forms of oppression".[32]

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26 West, (1999) p. 26. For more recent developments in South African approaches to research on poverty and exclusion in theology, see e.g. Swart (2008).

27 Scott (1990).

28 West (1999) p. 36, our emphasis.

29 West (1999) p. 37

30 West (1999) p. 39.

31 Scott (1990) xii.

32 West, (1999). One should remember, though, that oppressed people's accommodation to the logic of domination, as well as their well-informed but 'hidden' non-conformity and strategies of resistance, may make them want to actively *resist* the emancipatory forms of knowledge that 'organic intellectuals' – or in our case, diaconal practitioners or researchers – offer them. This, obviously, represents a methodological challenge for a research *as* diaconia that we argue for in this article.

In sum, then, liberation theology's '*opción por los pobres*' as an ethical, methodological and theological *a priori* can thus be seen as implying several strong and challenging demands for a truly diaconal practice today. In particular, we may highlight three such demands: (1) The prior moral *commitment* (justice). (2) The priority of a transformative *praxis* in the realization of this aim or interest. (3) The *participatory* character of this transformative praxis, in which, as a consequence of the commitment to justice, the 'non-privileged' with regard to power and influence is given priority. Understanding research as itself diaconal practice means that these demands must be central also in the undertaking of research. Such ambitions are fundamental in the broad tradition of action research.

An Action Research Foundation

In the decades following the publication of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire's emancipatory vision of learning became an important voice in a broad movement in social science towards a reinterpretation of the very mission and remit of social research. This movement developed in proclaimed contradistinction to social research that was content only to register the state of affairs, thus even contributing, in the view of some commentators, to the *preservation* of status quo. The distanced and disengaged character of social science was seen as particularly problematic amidst growing inequality, injustice and "collapse of positive values and attitudes towards humankind and nature" engendered by globalising capitalist expansion and the geopolitical dynamics of power in the decades following WWII.[33]

Reacting against positivist and functionalist predominance, and in tandem with the broader societal critique of the late 1960s, social researchers in different parts of the world engaged in "a radical critique and reorientation of social theory and practice", to use the words of Columbian sociologist Orlando Fals-Borda, leading to the development of "alternative institutions and procedures for research and action focused on local and regional problems involving emancipatory educational, cultural and political processes".[34]

To give a history of the very diverse field indicated by the term action research is not our ambition here. We will rather dwell on some of the recurrent themes in the development of action research, and in particular the critical, emancipatory tradition often called "Participatory Action Research" (PAR)[35],

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33 Fals-Borda (2001) p. 27.
34 Fals-Borda (2001).
35 Although PAR is also the name of a specific methodological setup of action research, we use the term here, like Fals-Borda and others do, as a general denominator for the broad tradition of critical, emancipatory, Freire-inspired action research that is sometimes also called "the southern tradition" (Fals-Borda, *op.cit.*).

in order to clarify their impetus to a formulation of diaconal research as practice and to guide the consideration of the kinds of challenges that face research thus defined.

Building broadly on critical anti-colonial social thinkers of the post-WWII decades, Orlando Fals-Borda and others saw the transformative, if not revolutionary, aspirations of PAR as a new paradigm, and one, importantly, that brought questions of researcher-researched relations to the fore. This sentiment is echoed in Vilhelm Aubert's observation that social research had hitherto mostly been the study of under-privileged groups perpetrated by high-status, privileged members of society.[36] In contrast, and in ways that recall the debates in theology on the consequences of class relations and liberation for relations within the church(es), PAR as a methodology and as a research program involved and required commitment to, and solidarity with, the oppressed in their struggle for social justice. And like liberation theology, so PAR sought to reimagine and transform the relationship between involved parties.

As the terms action research and participatory action research indicate, these are programmes for research that place transformative action – in PAR traditions, *emancipatory* transformative action – as one of its defining characteristics. Seeking a new role for social research in effecting the requisite social change, these researchers found in the work of Paulo Freire the ethical and philosophical rationale for positing action as a moral imperative also for research. Freire took issue with what he called empty theory, viz. the activity of reflection without concomitant action towards change. Empowerment, he argued, is the process of coming to know and articulate an oppressive social order so as to change it. Qua practical philosopher of education and learning, Freire famously rejected what he called the banking view of education, in which only one party to the educational encounter was seen as learning, and which required of the pupil the passive adoption of the views and understanding transferred to her/him by the teacher. Hence an unjust social order is effectively internalised, Freire argued, through unquestionable "deposits and instalments" perpetrated by the powers that be, and the oppressed is bereft of the human capability to trust her/his own observations and reflections, and question the disposition of the social order accordingly.

Against this imposition of oppressive ideology on the consciousness of the poor, one which silences and pacifies them, Freire posits an emancipatory pedagogy that "moves the silenced […] into a quest to proclaim the world". Moreover, while the banking model asks of the pupil to adapt to the world, Freire asserts the need for a joint and dialogical process of becoming aware, one that entices to speak and to reflect, and spawns action to transform.[37]

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36 Aubert, (1970); see also Brattström (1983).
37 Berkaak (2003).

Taking their cue from Freire's assertion that "the silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world," participatory action researchers posited the need for research to be integral to popular action.[38] That is, they argued that for research to be able to act in the world' its action needed to emanate from the active involvement of all those for whom research was to make a difference. Only the victims of an unjust order, Freire held, can truly effect the broad social change necessitated by their oppression. Most varieties, then, of action research and participatory action research involve a conception of participation, and a participatory kind of action, viewing research as a kind of mutual, pragmatic engagement. AR/PAR advocates argue that traditional research posits the researcher as subject, acting upon the researched, who are therefore pacified as objects. Against this modality, AR/PAR requires that research takes place through the active collaboration of all relevant parties – stakeholders – to a particular research topic (e.g. the social problem or phenomenon in question).[39]

The decades that passed after the heyday of action research in the 1960s and 1970s have seen the elaboration of notions of criteria for valid knowledge and the political functions of research. This is due in no small part to the political struggles of the many new groups and movements that have advocated for recognition, liberation or civil and political rights (women's liberation movement, the disability movement, gay and lesbian rights movement, ethnic minority activism, etc.). Since the turn of the century it is perhaps reasonable to say that the ethos of empowerment and self-determination has been generalised to the extent that it cannot be ignored. It has also, however, and perhaps for this very reason, increasingly been understood as an *individual* project, for the customer of marketed goods, the user of services, or citizens of neoliberal, first world society. This can be seen in the empowerment of service users through legal guarantees of rights to participation in decisions concerning patients in the public Norwegian health service, ensured by the Patient- and User Rights Act.[40]

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38 Freire (1982).

39 One epistemological and methodological criticism of participatory action research has been that it, according to some, blurs the boundary between the roles of researcher and political actor, thus undermining an envisaged objectivity and detachment, both thought of as prerequisites for validity in research. Since the critique of positivist social science in the 1970s and the interpretive turn in the 1980s others have held, as do we, that the notions of attainable detachment and objectivity are illusory and therefore problematic in social science research. Rather than a pursuit of maximum attachment and *objectivity*, truth claims in social science rest on the ability to reflectively question and make transparent researcher *positionality*. Our main interest in this article is indeed to examine what a diaconal position entails, when method is considered as a morally bounded strategy and not merely an epistemologically perceived technique.

40 Helse- og omsorgsdepartementet (2017); for critical perspectives see e.g. Cruikshank (1996); Berkaak (2003); Askheim, (2012).

But for Freire as well as for the PAR researchers and liberation theologians inspired by his thought, the subjects of empowerment and participation were individuals qua members of *collectives*, i.e. qua an oppressed class. One may in this context justifiably question whether the individualisation of empowerment in recent years simultaneously undermines its potential as a basis for political mobilisation for societal change by understanding empowerment as the capacity and agency of individuals within a hierarchically ordered social structure.

A second comment relates to the assumption that research is either (embedded in) action or wholly detached from action. Today, in realization of the constitutive role of language and—in Foucault's sense—productive power of knowledge, research cannot ever be wholly detached from action; indeed cannot be but action. Before we reflect on how the demands of the parallel traditions of liberation theology and PAR challenge our present day understanding and practice of diaconia and diaconal research, we wish to point out that research is action in at least three different ways, each manifest also in research related to diaconia:

First, in line with criticism of positivist notions of science, our argument is that, since language is constitutive and, in that sense, creative, knowledge, too, is constitutive, creative, and therefore also positioned. Research, then, is action by laying claims to truth about the phenomena it describes. And to assess the diaconal character of research, one needs to ask whose realities, whose descriptions, whose identification of phenomena and questions pursued in research, and so on.

Second, research is action in its capacity to mobilise through creating shared awareness, including political self-awareness in social formations (i.e. in individuals and in groups; such mobilisation may involve creating groups where none previously existed). To define diaconal research, the central questions are again whose realities and whose interests, which collectives are tacitly or implicitly assumed, and who are overtly or covertly included or excluded from these communities.

Third, research is action by identifying, sanctioning and legitimizing certain courses of action, certain modes of organization, etc. The diaconal merits of research can only be evaluated by asking whose life situations and whose power will be improved. For instance, research may provide a knowledge base for how to prevent poor migrants from travelling to a certain territory, or knowledge on how to organize meeting places and resources that might enable poor migrants to best influence and improve their own living conditions, life prospects, etc. Again, the crucial questions are whose interests are promoted by the policy or course of action, and whose experiences are made decisive in justifying it.

These modalities of research-as-action has important variations in functions and ramifications. The task of fully assessing these variations, that is,

to understand the action involved in the three modalities, we argue, involves in every instance raising the issue of *who, for* whom, *with* whom and from whose *perspective*.

Research as Diaconia – Contemporary Conditions of Possibility

Across the three modalities we identified above, if the answer to the who-questions is the policy-makers, those in power, then it becomes clear that research may serve the purpose of governance, the exertion *of* power by those *in* power, and serve to uphold injustice, to stigmatise, marginalize. This was perhaps more obvious in Paulo Freire's Brazil, in which illiteracy was both rampant and at the same time grounds for formal exclusion of large segments of the population from democratic participation through political ballot. Today, or at least in democratic welfare societies, the difference between knowledge development in the service of governance versus research as an agent for emancipation and transformative change is more complex and less clear.

If, as we have argued above, the struggle against injustice remains a central task of diaconal practice – and not only the mitigation of inequality's consequences and care for its victims – then a main question for research as diaconal practice is this: *How can we make sure such research is indeed emancipatory, in a way that moves beyond limited practices that may (at best) serve individuals and groups well in altering their position in an unjust social order, and contributes towards a fundamental alteration in the constitution of that (dis-)order?* As our exposition of the main insights from liberation theology and PAR has shown, such research has to meet these requirements: It needs to be morally committed to the cause of justice. It needs to be expressed as (diaconal) action. And it needs to be participatory and dialogical in character.[41]

How can these be met within present-day diaconal work? Here we should remind ourselves of the broad variation of activities that today form the diverse field of concrete, diaconal programmes. Across this spectrum are activities with different objectives, framed by different assumptions about the relationship between knowledge and practice as well as expectations regarding research. These variations have repercussions for all three main elements in research qua diaconal practice: the politico-moral commitment, the imperative of action, and the requirement of participation.

For instance, when diaconal organisations today run addiction treatment facilities, commissioned by public health authorities, the most pressing demand on that activity with regard to the relationship between knowledge and practice is likely to be couched in the terms of best practice, i.e. evidence-based

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41 For an informative account of the use of PAR in a South African context, see again, Swart (2008), pp. 137–145.

practice, and expectations of quality assurance that enable the programme to document and report its results. In addition, in the Norwegian scenario, such an institution will be expected to involve users in service development, through user satisfaction surveys, quality committees, user councils and other channels. Such involvement may even be required by law or stipulated in the contract that underpins its operation. Yet, we may ask, beyond the participatory sentiment of user involvement: In such a scenario, what basis or scope is there to incorporate research as an emancipatory endeavour?

At issue here is the nature of the specific diaconal activity, as a practice relating users in certain forms of need to helpers, often with certain forms of expertise. It is for good reason that many treatment and care facilities seek to meet the requirement of user involvement through systems of representation (e.g. patient associations), since users may attend the service precisely because of reasons that impede participation, or make expectations of participation misplaced or inappropriate. We think here for instance of programmes charged with the treatment and care of people whose capacity for self-preservation is impaired, e.g. by severe mental illness or drug use. Even if empowerment serves as a guide for the individual therapeutic trajectory, empowerment understood as addressing the structural causes underlying individual suffering is not the main mandate of such institution and may seem beyond its capacity.

As another example, diaconia in many countries involves self-funded activities initiated in response to observed needs, in areas without public provision. The matter may relate to new, emergent phenomena, be controversial in public opinion, or for other reasons be seen as beyond the responsibility of the public welfare system, such as the case of poor transmigrants given in the introduction above. Here, the development and provision of service, as well as the struggle against exclusion, stigma and marginality, raises a need for knowledge development that is at the same time participatory and politically activist.

It is clear that the diversity of diaconal activities and programmes presents highly variable conditions for meeting the demands of commitment, action and participation in research. Hence, our contention is that across the spectrum of such variation, diaconal practice is in need of the muscle to conduct knowledge development that *transcends* the remit and capacity of particular programmes and activities. This lays a heavy weight of responsibility on larger diaconal organization and, we would say, rightly so; it leaves for the organization as a whole to provide the wider political contextualisation and promote and carry out due action. It therefore becomes imperative that the organization has the capacity to transcend "local" frames like the ones mentioned above.

This point bears emphasis, not least since diaconal organizations are today under contemporary pressures of their own. Amidst welfare reforms, austerity programmes and, at least in the Scandinavian context novel, reorganization of public, non-profit and for-profit sectors towards market or market-like welfare provision regimes, the desire to measure and document in the interest of

organization "market position" risks becoming predominant.[42] Against such pressures, we argue, there is an acute need for drawing new inspiration from the tandem roots of liberation theology and participative action research in order to see research, in the broad sense of investigating, describing, exposing, proposing solutions and trying them out, etc. as in itself diaconia. This particular kind of systematic development of knowledge – combining commitment, action and participation – is needed in order to fulfil the diaconal mandate today. This mandate obliges us to truly combat the societal forces that serve to exclude, disempower, impoverish and marginalize individuals and groups, such as the poor transmigrants of European cities.

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42 We think here of the range of methods promoted as tools for assessing the impact or worth of diaconal practice (e.g. Social Audit, Impact Measurement, etc. see https://eurodiaconia.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Briefing_Measuring_Social_Value.pdf), or even required by procuring public bodies (e.g. client satisfaction surveys).

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