The Transformation of Participation

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The Transformation of Participation

Employee participation, influence and the working environment

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Introduction
The point of departure for this contribution is the surprisingly simultaneous growth during the last 10 to 20 years of two phenomena. One is comprised of new forms of management focusing on human resources, involvement of employees, job autonomy etc., the other is made up of an increase in psychosocial work environment problems as witnessed in surveys of employee contentedness, increasing absenteeism because of stress and other psychological problems, increasing numbers of work-related mental disorders and increased exclusion from the labour market due to psychosocial problems at work.

As regards Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries both tendencies, increased participation and increased psychosocial problems, have been clearly documented. But also at the European level these tendencies seem to prevail, and North American research points to the same. The immediate question that arises is whether the ruling paradigm for the understanding of the relation between the psychological job demands and the mental health of employees, based on R. Karasek's and T. Theorell's demand-control model, has lost its power of explanation. Has the context, by virtue of socio-cultural processes of change, modern, flexible forms of organisation or other issues, changed so much that it no longer applies that increased job control through influence and skill discretion compensates for increased demands? This question asks for closer scrutiny. In addition, and at a more general level, the question arises as to whether employee participation, including the employees' influence on their own working conditions, is still at all capable of ensuring the quality of the working environment, as traditionally assumed and to a large degree reflected in the regulation of working conditions and industrial relations.

In this article the theoretical foundation is presented of a new Danish research project investigating the meaning of employee participation for the quality of the working environment in different organisational contexts of modern working life. By means of case studies in a series of different trades, including both private and public entities and covering traditional industrial production, low and high quality service work and very knowledge-based work, the following questions are investigated

a. What characterizes employee participation in companies with a good and with a bad working environment, respectively?
b. How is participation in its different forms and levels connected with the quality of the working environment?
c. What mechanisms are concretely at work in these connections?

The main hypothesis is that employee participation in both its direct and indirect forms correlate positively with quality in the working environment. At the same time a secondary hypothesis is at hand assuming that in certain contexts a negative connection may be at work. The main hypothesis is founded on previous research, commented below, and concerning the psychosocial work

environment it is specifically founded in the demand-control model, which in this way is expected still to have some explanatory value. Participation carries the potential for employees to control the work process and to influence the demands so that a proper balance between demands and challenges of the work and the resources of the individual may be achieved. Research confirming this picture is constantly being published (Siegrist 2006, Egan 2007, Christensen 2008). However, if participation is subjected to a rationale of utility, is strongly oriented towards productivity, subsumed by the values of the company, individually organised and without collective influence on the workload, the secondary hypothesis may hold. Increased job autonomy and task variation may prove insufficient to maintain the balance between job demands and individual resources. The attractive side of flexibility may turn into 'the greedy working life' (Hochschield 2001), and team organisation may have 'negated' the function of the "workers' collective" to regulate the yield and load of the individual worker.

Central concepts

For the purpose of this article, the Scandinavian concept, working environment, is preferred to the Anglo-Saxon, occupational health and safety, and thus embraces the broader definition of the concept enshrined as embedded in Scandinavian legislation. This legislation is based on what is called 'the extended concept of health', where a satisfactory working environment is seen as conditioned not only by the absence of risks to health and safety, but in a positive way maintains healthy working conditions, and as such includes a dimension of well-being. This concept would seem relevant to the present discussion of the quality of the working environment where absenteeism, job changes and injuries founded in psychological strain have increased steeply in number. Furthermore, it is reasonable to argue that when employees, at least in a Scandinavian context, are asked about their views on the health and safety conditions of their job their answers are based on this broad concept rather than the more narrow categories of the health and safety professionals (Andersen et al 2007).

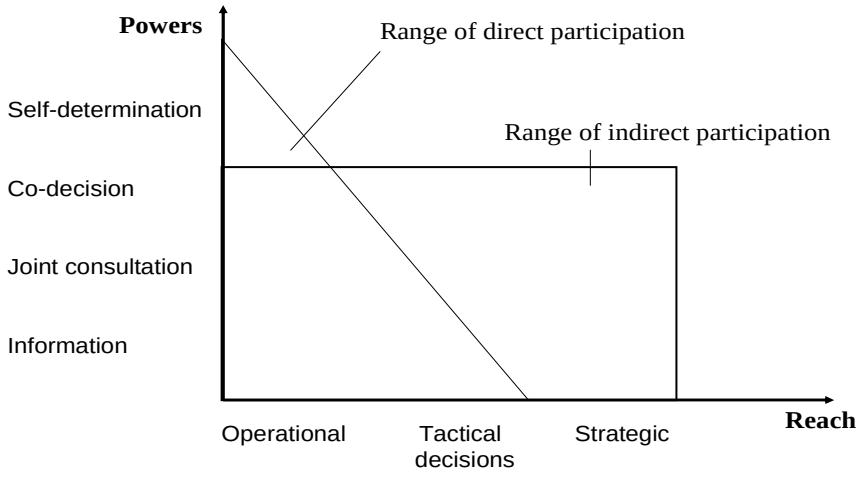
The concept of the working environment is divided into the physical environment, including physical, chemical and biological influences and risks, and the psychosocial environment, including the mental or psychological influences and risks. The concept of psychosocial working environment is chosen when the focus is shifted from the effects on the individual to the influencing factors in the environment, where the social relations of the workplace, culture and organisation of work are important. Siegrist and Marmot (2004) define the psychosocial environment as "the socio-structural range of opportunities that is available to an individual to meet his or her needs of well-being, productivity and positive self-experience" (p. 7)

Employee participation is about the participation and influence of employees in the decisions which are made in companies at different levels. In the international literature a distinction is made between indirect participation, where influence is exercised by elected representatives (shop stewards, safety representatives, worker directors) and direct participation, when workers in an immediate way either individually (e. g. in the form of job enrichment) or in groups (teamwork) take part in decisions. It is a tradition in international research to conceive of participation as based on different fundamental rationales that in different historical contexts have been more or less dominant. These rationales are in the main forms expressed by a 'democratic' or 'humanistic' rationale, a 'social-integrationist' rationale and an 'efficiency' or 'utility' rationale (Hyman & Mason 1995, Knudsen 1995, Heller et al 1998, Markey et al 2001). Indirect participation (also named 'employee participation'), which is based on the influence of unions and legislation, is connected with an institutional-reformist political tendency and thus the integrationist rationale,

while direct participation (also named 'employee involvement'), which is predominantly initiated by employers, is based on a liberal historical tendency and oriented towards the utility rationale..

Employee participation can further be categorised in accordance with its intensity, which by Knudsen is defined as a function of the powers possessed by employees in the participation and the scope or level of decisions encompassed by the participation, which may be expressed in terms of decisions at operational, tactical and strategic levels. The concept of intensity in this way accumulates more of the concepts that are used in the literature, e.g. Marchington (2005), speaking of 'degree', 'scope' and 'level' of decisions and participation. The relations between the intensity of indirect and of direct participation can be shown as in the figure below (after Knudsen 1995 and Busck 2007).

The intensity of participation



The figure illustrates that direct participation at the operational level, i.e. in decisions pertaining to concrete job performance, may mean maximal participation and influence; namely as self-determination or self-management, while indirect participation may (but certainly not always) conversely mean participation and influence in strategic decisions, e.g. about the growth or reduction of a company. The latter might be the case in companies encompassed by the German legislation on co-decision or the Scandinavian institutions of works councils and worker directors.

Tendencies in the development of the working environment and employee participation
Concerning the physical working environment, the strain put upon employees has been characterised by a more or less constant presence in Denmark as well as in the rest of EU throughout the last 10 to 20 years (Arbejdsmiljøinstituttet 2006, Labriola et al 2007, European Foundation 2006a&b), which may be surprising in the light of the general tendency to outsource manual, strenuous jobs globally. However, concerning the strains of the psychosocial working environment, a clearly increasing tendency is visible among Danish and European employees (Ibid, Siegrist 2006). Stress is, together with fatigue second only to back- and muscle-pains as the highest scoring risk factors in the European Working Conditions Surveys of the European Foundation in Dublin in 2000 and 2005. Reasons for stress at work are named as increased job demands, insufficient job autonomy and 'coping-capacity' of the employees compared with the time pressure (Houtmann 2005). In both 2000 and 2005 as well as in Scandinavian surveys, increased work-speed

and –intensity is found. In another study based on the 2000-findings it is found that job autonomy in general has increased throughout Europe, but not sufficiently to compensate for increased job demands. Subjected to an analysis based on Karasek and Theorell's demand-control model, the study finds that the psychosocial strain is increasing among employees in the EU, especially among workers whose jobs are localised within the 'high-strain quadrant' (high demands, low control) (Dhondt 2002). Danish research has documented that about one third of all absenteeism, premature pensioning and early retirement pay in Danish companies is connected with a bad working environment, where especially the indications of a deteriorated psychosocial work environment are referred to (Lund et al 2003).

During the same period as the psychosocial work environment has gained a much larger influence over the health, well-being and absenteeism of employees, a significant development has taken place in the forms of management and work organisation. In a complex process connected with the transition of the industrial society into an information- or service society, Japanese superiority in the manufacturing sector, globalisation and the introduction of neoliberal lines of thought a new orientation of Western world companies' ideals and rationales of control has taken place. The importance of using human resources to enhance productivity has come into focus, and an organisational strategy of rationalisation has taken the place of or supplemented a technological strategy (Limborg 2002). At the same time flexibility has become the password for companies' growth in a changeable and competitive environment (Hvid & Hasle 2003, Sennett 1999), as illustrated by the figure below.

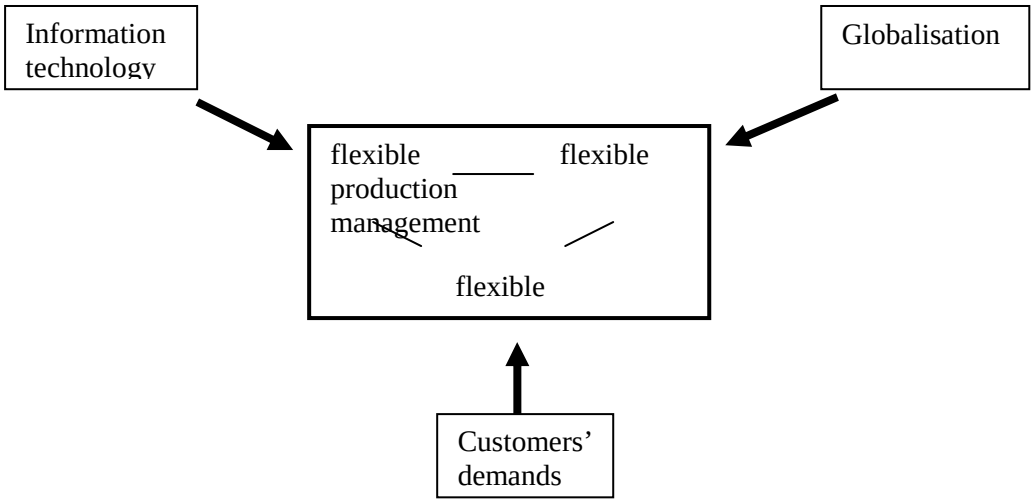
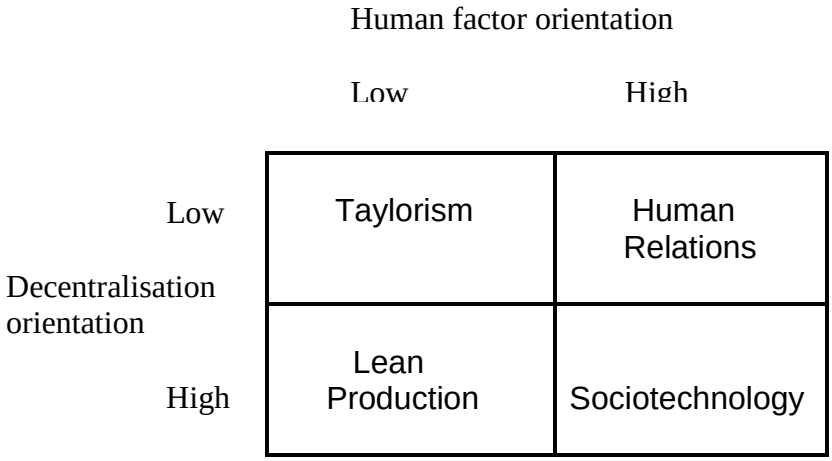


Figure 2, illustrating the context for companies' choice of a strategy of flexibility (cf Csonka 2000).

For the employees, the new forms of management and organisation have first and foremost meant a demand for readiness to switch over to new functions/competencies/organisations etc. However, they have also been accompanied by delegation of responsibility and competence as well as regard for human needs in working life. Wiezer et al (2001) apply the matrix below to characterize the different forms of work organisation within which the employees covered by the surveys of the European Foundation can be grouped.



It is argued by Wiezer et al that for every form of typical work organisation, specific conditions for the psychosocial environment are established.

In the international research on participation there is a shared empirically observed finding that increased employee participation or involvement has been taking place in companies from the mid 80s and onwards both in Europe and in the US (Harley, Hyman & Thompson 2005, Markey 2002, EPOC 2005). At the same time it is a common observation that the form of participation which is increasing is the direct, employer-initiated form, i.e. employee involvement, connected with the utility rationale.

It is difficult to estimate the percentage of companies employing flexible management and work organisation. Different investigations converge on the assessment that the percentage of companies with a more or less 'pure' form is in the range of between 25 and 40% in Europe and the US (Dhondt 2000, Csonka 2002). But many companies are characterized by using parts of the particular ideas and methods. Furthermore, modern companies in general are characterised by frequent shifts between forms and methods of management and concepts of production (Nielsen 2003). The general development in European industrial structure towards more knowledge-based and service work at the expense of both the primary and the manufacturing sectors, which is evident in the occupation of European employees according to the EWC surveys, naturally also influences the forms of management and work organisation. A growing number of jobs in Europe are characterized by computerization, working at very high speeds, monotonous work and working in permanent and direct contact with clients. These changes go along with an extension of shift work, irregular working hours and flexible work arrangements (Siegrist 2006, p.6).

The rise of flexible forms of production according to a series of researchers (Csonka 2000, Wiezer et al 2001, Navrbjerg 1999) may follow one of two paths, corresponding to 'lean' and 'sociotechnology' respectively from the figure above. The one being the 'low' road (leaning on Atkinson's concept of "flexible firm") implying a 'narrow' flexibility characterized by outsourcing, core and periphery work forces and frequent reorganisation. The other one being the 'high' road, including HRM-orientation and focusing on quality, service-mindedness and innovation, and counting on multifunctional employees and involvement of employees through job enrichment and teamwork. A third type of flexible production may be identified in the knowledge-based sector, the

'hyper-flexible company', counting on omnipotent, self-organising and self-developing employees (Csonka 2000).

Regardless of which concept of production a clear tendency to more job autonomy is distinguishable. European employees have acquired more space for decisions and skill discretion in connection with how they perform their jobs. The empirical evidence is inter alia provided by the EWC surveys by the European Foundation. In the 2005 version it is found that over 60% of the employees can choose or change the order in which they perform their job, as well as their speed and method of work. Scandinavian research shows the same development (Arbejdsmiljøinstituttet 2003).

All available research as well as the hard facts in the form of numbers of employees and produced output attest to an increased intensity of work during the last 10 to 20 years, including the public sector, which augmented by the New Public Management regime and the canonization in the EU system has incorporated the efficiency rationale of the private sector. At the same time it is shown that strenuous factors have been maintained in the physical working environment of European employees, whereas a significant deterioration of the psychosocial working environment has occurred. "…there is solid evidence that there has been a real increase in mental and emotional demands and threats at work during the past few decades" (Siegrist 2006, p.6).

Research into the relationship between new regimes of participation and the working environment

At this point the interesting question is: How can the simultaneous increases in work intensity and direct participation, including increased job-control on the one hand, and deteriorated psychosocial environment on the other hand be explained. Research into the consequences of employee participation for the working environment is rather limited. More specifically it appears to be insufficiently documented as to whether or not the increased job autonomy has been decoupled from the maintenance of a satisfying working environment, or if it by itself may constitute a psychological strain. What is alluded to here is the ambiguous character of the modern, flexible forms of organisation, which on the one hand delegate responsibility and competences to the single employee or a group of them and on the other hand demand more results from their performance. Jessen & Hvenegaard did a literature review in 2000 on teamwork and the psychosocial environment and found that although teamwork generally increases job-satisfaction, it also generally increases the psychological demands and often blocks social support at work, an important dimension of a safe psychosocial environment.

In general the international research on participation finds that in addition to increased productivity through 'commitment' employee participation through motivation and 'empowerment' contributes to higher degrees of well-being at work (Wilpert 1998, Heller 1998). However, there are also findings that do not confirm this main tendency. Participation can be experienced as frustrating if management organises it in an 'inauthentic' or manipulating way (ibid). Strauss (1998) identifies a series of contextual variables that respectively promote or counteract the successful working of employee participation. Two central variables are the degree of trust between management and employees and the parties' experience of benefits from participation. In a newly published Danish research project on the psychosocial working environment it was also found that trust is a fundamental parameter for establishing a good working environment ((Sørensen et al 2008).

Indirect participation and the working environment

Research into the meaning of indirect participation, where safety committees and other joint committees and fora are being studied, appears to find a clearly positive connection between participation and a good working environment (Frick & Walters 2000, Eaton & Nocerino 2000, Walters & Nichols 2006, Popma 2003). Frick and Walters' comprehensive literature review concludes that representative participation due to the combined activity of unionized employees and union support leads to fewer injuries at work, and that the working environment is obviously better at workplaces with organised labour than without. In Denmark, Hasle in his review of Danish research into the workings of the institutionalised Safety Organisation over 30 years concludes that it has contributed to an "internal discourse in companies, which no doubt helps in the solution of many health and safety problems." (2001, p.7). However, Hasle adds, it has not succeeded in incorporating "the working environment in the central decion- and planning processes in the companies.". A similar conclusion is drawn by Jensen (2002), who speaks of limited success for the health and safety work in Denmark, primarily reserved for larger companies.

The growing psychosocial problems have shown difficult to handle within the traditional working area of the Safety Organisation as the problems are often touching upon organisational and managerial questions (for which reason the employers' associations in Denmark vehemently have resisted regulation of the field). As a consequence works councils and similar joint institutions have come into focus as possible arenas for solution of problems. At the European level the social partners have agreed in a common effort towards preventing stress at work, which in Denmark has been integrated into the existing collective agreements in the private as well as in the public sector. Agervold, in 2002, found that over two thirds of the works councils had "safety and environmental issues" on the agenda; real negotiations, however, only occurred in 26% of the committees, and only 10% made joint decisions. In the public sector the possibility of merging works councils and safety committees into a unified forum for "co-influence" in Denmark has lead to a possible strengthening of the preventive work regarding working environmental problems. Navrbjerg (2005) found that employee representatives in municipalities with a unified system were more inclined to see the work strengthened than their colleagues in municipalities where the old system prevailed. The shop steward institution as well can have a positive influence on the working environment work. Hasle and Møller (2005) found that a close cooperation between management and shop stewards on the organisation of production in Danish slaughterhouses lead to obvious improvements in the psychosocial environment.

All together the studies of indirect participation point to positive effects in the working environment. This is not really surprising, as representative participation has been established in order to give employees a certain collective influence on their working conditions. However, collective influence may prioritise other concerns than the working environment, such as increased income or the survival of the company and hence job security. For this reason, it cannot be excluded that indirect participation in specific contexts is carried out in ways that do not promote the quality of the working environment. It is highly probable that the forms of participation oriented towards the working environment, i.e. safety representatives and health and safety committees, have a positive effect on the physical working environment, whereas research, at least Danish, gives reason to believe that it is ineffective or has a limited effect on psychosocial environmental problems (Kristensen & Smith-Hansen 2003, TI-Arbejdsliv 2006, Christiansen & Limborg 2005). Meanwhile, the effects of the increased focus on psychosocial problems of the general cooperative practices by works councils etc., still needs to be shown.

Direct participation and the working environment

Concerning direct participation and its influence on the working environment, the research results are much more ambivalent. On the one hand direct participation means that employees can exert more influence on their working situation and hence take action against physical as well as psychosocial threats in their working environment, on the other hand direct participation is typically introduced on the basis of the utility rationale in order to intensify work and make it more productive. North American studies of "high performance" workplaces characterized by 'lean' or 'flexible' production and teamwork find a negative correlation with the working environment, for instance as measured by the number of accidents. Even if increased direct participation may have some positive effect, the increase in intensity eventually compromises these effects (Harrison & Legendre 2003, Azkenazy 2001, Foley & Polaney 2006)

In Denmark, the effect of direct participation has been demonstrated by a systematic research effort based on the concept: of 'work that fosters personal growth' (the SARA programme). From an individual perspective the concept is defined as "work giving the individual much influence on his own work, development opportunities, freedom of choice and meaningfulness" (Kristensen & Smith-Hansen 2003: 12). As such, it was to a large extent the effect of direct participation that was measured. The quantitative results showed that this type of work correlated positively with good health and well-being and negatively with stress, meaning that all in all it was positively connected with a good quality of the working environment. The results of the qualitative studies, however, showed a less consistent picture. More autonomy in the work was not always experienced as an improvement in the working environment (Hvid & Hasle 2003, Hvid 2003). In Norway, the research programme 'Bedriftsudvikling 2000' in continuation of the strong sociotechnical tradition in the country made an effort to demonstrate simultaneous improvements in effectiveness and the working environment through increased direct participation. Hansen (2002), reviewing the programme, found that the employees did experience an improvement in the working environment, but at the same time he rejects the assumption that participation, democracy and the working environment go hand in hand. Quite negative results are found by research in knowledge-based work, where a high degree of autonomy in work and self-management may also lead to the transfer to the employee of the responsibility for his or her own mental health. The handling of psychosocial problems, furthermore, is individualised (Tynell 2002, Ipsen 2006).

It could be assumed that direct participation has a higher probability of influencing the working environment positively in the Scandinavian countries than in, for example, North America because of the stronger tradition of representative participation and union influence in the these countries, meaning that some control of the conditions under which direct participation was carried out could be maintained. In the EPOC study (2005) Sweden and Denmark clearly came out as countries where joint decision-making generally took place prior to the introduction of different forms of direct participation. Furthermore, the study showed that, in general, direct and indirect participation work well together, which is also found in Scandinavian research (Hvid 2003). However, the Scandinavian countries in the EPOC study are also clearly distinguished as countries that to a higher degree than other European countries are practising flexible forms of management, and in both countries the psychosocial working environment appears to be no better than in other countries. Marklund et al (2005) in a review of Swedish research on absenteeism due to illness found that increased absenteeism in Sweden since the mid 90s could not be explained by a deteriorated physical working environment, but rather found its reason in a deteriorated psychosocial environment. They concluded that the main factors behind the increase in absenteismwere increased work speed and a shift in the balance between job demands and job-

control in relation to structural changes towards more lean production and less influence for the employees. In a joint study of absenteeism due to illness in the Scandinavian countries by the national working environment research centres in these countries, it was found that the increase in absenteeism found in these countries is mainly due to increased psychosocial working environment problems (Arbejdsmiljøinstituttet 2003).

It is at this point that the ambivalence of the existing research is demonstrated, as it is often taken for granted that if only job autonomy is increased, increased psychological job demands can be handled or 'coped' with. Job autonomy has in general increased in Europe as well as in North America, not the least in Scandinavia, and irrespective of a higher level of institutionalised employee participation in Scandinavia the increased work intensity everywhere has lead to increased psychosocial strain with stress as the main result. Most of the research still finds itself within Karasek and Theorell's paradigm for the understanding of the relationship between psychological job demands and stress. But as others have already pointed out (Wainwright & Calnan 2002, Sørensen et al 2007) the demand-control model was developed in a culture of industrial work and is not without a certain ideological framework in the form of a possible win-win scenario contained in the model meant to unite both interests in increased productivity and interests in health and well-being. This scenario, indicating that increased productivity can be achieved without causing stress as long as job-control is correspondingly increased is actually expressed in the EU's Green paper on "Partnership" and the decisions from the Lisbon summit. Wiezer et al (2001) in their "Background paper for the EU-summit 'For a better quality of work' confront the implicit assumptions in the approach that flexible organisations – even those to be found in the 'sociotechnical' quadrant – is a guarantee for a better working environment.

The weaknesses of the model, in addition to the simple fact that service and knowledge-based work today is more common than industrial work, concentrate on the following:

- Indirect participation during the last 10 to 20 years has lost significance in connection with the relative weakening of the unions and in particular it has lost authority in respect to influence on the conditions of work which, according to Karasek and Theorell's theory, was preconditioned to be taken care of through collective bargaining (Sørensen 2007)
- Modern forms of management focusing on human resources have applied strategies and techniques, including standardised systems and value-based management, that increase job autonomy while the framework within which such autonomy exists is designed from above. In both service- and knowledge-based work the experience of more psychological strain from unpredictable and borderless job demands than strain from lack of influence in the job prevails. However, in modern industrial work, elements of knowledge work and customer orientation are also present, as is the experience of borderless demands (Lund & Hvid 2007).
- The flexible forms of organisation, including increased delegation of responsibility and blurred divisions between management competencies and social competencies of employees, have 'negated' the functions of the 'workers' collective' (Navrbjerg 1999 and Lysgaard 1967). In teamwork, the social support function of camaraderie, which in the model, together with influence is given decisive meaning for the mental health, is at risk of being substituted by relations of authority and conflict (Jessen & Hvenegaard 2000). Where self-management is employed there is a danger that social support will be substituted by competition among employees (Wadel 2005)

These changed conditions in the fundamental dynamics between job demands and the participation and mental health of employees have to do with the relations between management and employees in companies. A consideration of how the cultural processes of individualisation in the surrounding society, as for example Z. Baumann (1998) sees them, influence industrial relations could be added. Much research is pointing to the fact that that work and work life more than ever is creating identity and meaning for human beings. Concepts like self-realisation, respect and recognition increasingly appear in the literature. The question is to what extent the companies actually are capable of integrating a holistic view of the person, which seems at stake, in the organisation and the company culture, or, if a conflict potential is more likely to result as human needs become more difficult to integrate in the demands of work, irrespective of the dominant organisational regime (Andersen et al 2007). A. Hochschield's research into the simultaneous time pressures from work and family life (2003) sheds light on this issue. Siegrist (2006) has developed a model to comprehend the mechanisms of the psychosocial working environment focusing on the imbalance between 'effort' and 'reward', in which the reward has much to do with the possibility for personal development and respect at work ("self-efficacy" and "self-esteem"). Reviewing research based on this model as well as on Karasek and Theorell's model, he argues that both models have explanatory value in regard to what make people experience psychosocial strain, noticing, however, that it primarily applies to low status groups. A more detailed investigation of this interplay with cultural factors is beyond the scope of this text, but all in all, a need to reformulate or expand the demand-control model to make it more adequate to the realities of modern working life is evident.

Future research

The Danish research project (MEDEA) mentioned earlier will on the background of the above discussion and in association with a team of New Zealand researchers lead by R. Markey try to shed new light on the complex relations between employee participation and the working environment in modern working life. Through case studies in a broad range of companies the meaning of direct as well as indirect participation for the quality of the working environment in general terms will be focused upon. There is no ambition to construct a new model for the understanding of the relationship between job demands and the health and well-being of employees. Instead, the intention is to contribute with new knowledge on the function and capacity of participation in different organisational contexts to avoid or mitigate physical and mental strain.

There is no reason to believe that influence and skill discretion no longer have essential meaning for the working environment, both the physical and the psychosocial. But regarding the psychosocial environment, the first thing needed is a focus on the quality of participation. What does it comprise, how far does it go and on whose conditions does it function? Secondly, a focus on the organisational framework and conditions laying the foundation for employees' use of participation to improve their working conditions is needed.

The collected qualitative and quantitative data in the project, including data on absenteeism due to illness, will be analysed in a model that seeks to determine the relationship between the form and intensity of participation and the quality of the working environment. In the further analysis of preconditions, interconnections and mechanisms in the organisational context promoting a good or a bad working environment respectively the following research questions will be guiding:

To what extent are the existing formal or informal fora for participation and influence actually capable of influencing job demands?

The purpose here is to assess partly, if the existing fora for influencing the working environment are sufficiently equipped and powered to handle the psychosocial problems in modern working life, and partly if increased overall participation means influence in relation to issues such as the work load. Influence on how and when the job is done may have increased, but maybe not on how much work must be done and with what result. Job autonomy may mean freedom to perform what others have decided must be performed and a possibility for personal development into what others have decided is relevant for the individual to develop into. Here we may be witnessing the traditional limitation of participative influence to only touch upon operational or, at the most, tactical issues, whereas the strategic issues are out of reach. However, it may also have to do with the more subtle limitations found in research on flexible forms of organisations and workplaces, where the power to decide the extent and content of the job is only seemingly delegated, but in reality is more concentrated and shrouded (Sennett 1999, Bovbjerg 2001). The experience of borderless demands is increasingly dominating within knowledge-based workplaces and in service work (Lund & Hvid 2007, Sørensen et al 2007). Furthermore, at workplaces with value-based leadership, psychological strain due to a conflict between the resources of employees and management expectations of their performance, which are internalised by the employees, may exist (Tynell 2002).

To what extent does the interplay between delegated forms of management and individual strategies of self-realisation and development contribute to the experience of insecurity and insufficiency among employees and the loss of common identity and preparedness to confront management?

Research is pointing to the "functional negation" of the 'workers' collective and to a conflict between managements' demands for social competencies of the employees on the one hand and collegial solidarity on the other hand. (Jessen & Hvenegaard 2000, Limborg 2002). Concomitantly the extension of individual competencies and opportunities for development in companies, the possibilities for collegial recognition and support are shrinking. The psychosocial environment of employees increasingly depends on the direct relation between management and the individual employee. The experience of lack of recognition and injustice comes to the fore in studies of the well-being of employees (Kristensen 2006, Sørensen et al 2008). Where the first question focused on the organisational framework for influence, this one focuses more on social relations and the collegial basis of participation.

To what extent is the imbalance between psychological job demands and the preconditions of the employees to handle or cope with them connected with the loss of continuity, meaning and quality in the job as experienced by employees?

Research shows negative reactions and the establishment of counter-cultures in connection with the frequent reorganisations and processes of change in modern workplaces (Limborg 2002). The experience of having made a useful, coherent effort is substituted by the experience of infinite demands on effort and commitment. When the content and extent of the job increasingly is being governed by external factors like competitive challenges, large-scale management strategies and systems, demands from clients, politically decided targets, etc., professional identity as well as the practice-based professional-cultural foundation for self-esteem and for collective action is lost. Discrepancy between the individual's professional norms, including ethical norms, and the company's norms may be mentally strenuous. New Danish research has (re)found that the opportunity and framework for being able to perform 'a piece of good work' is a central factor in a psychosocially satisfying working environment (Sørensen et al 2008).

In a more profound perspective the analysis rests on the assumption, *that the growing psychosocial strain in modern working life should be understood on the background of what is termed '**the transformation of participation**'. By this is meant that participation based on the mutual recognition of an exchange relationship between the social partners of society and of the company has changed into a participation based on the mutual recognition of the companies' needs and aims, including their productivity of work, competitive position and preparedness for change, which the employees are expected to share.*

Employee participation is less and less visible as a compromise between two more or less equal partners on the basis of a certain coincidence of interests, but appears more and more as an integrated element in newer forms of management. Participation no longer seems constructed and perceived as a means of protection of individual and collective interests, but as a necessary contribution to the success of the company. It is possible to see this qualitative change of participation as a process moving towards either the extension or blurring of the exchange relationship between the industrial partners.

Hyman and Mason identify two fundamental, historically constructed paradigms within organisational theory and industrial sociology: "employee participation" building on the assumption of a fundamental trade off between two parties with inconsistent interests, and "employee involvement", building on a unitarian conception of common interests. In contemporary management theories and practices the EI-philosophy appears utterly dominant, illustrated by E. Schein's frequently cited definition of the 'common company culture' which excludes contradictory interests: *"the basic assumptions and values that are shared by members of an organisation which are learned responses to a group's problem of survival in its external environment and internal integration"* (1985). To speak about divergent interests at work, including the notion of employees having an interest in protecting their health regardless of the fact that they find the job attractive, appears to be a suppressed discourse. The growing interest of companies in offering their employees personal development, value-based partnership and self-identification is followed by increased demands for commitment and efforts (result-oriented performance), as Z. Baumann, for instance, has exposed it (2001).

The new content and meaning of participation is not just a rhetorical development, although rhetoric has been helpful. In Denmark the word 'worker' was supplanted by 'co-worker' in the dominating discourses already in the 80s. The new quality of the concept has been internalised among both managements and employees as well as in the public discourse and regulation. In recent years Denmark has witnessed a significant decentralisation and delegation of the responsibility for and the competence to ensure employee participation in companies. At the same time the working environment regulation increasingly allows for the social partners to find solutions themselves to problems especially related to the psychosocial working environment. The institutional set-up is increasingly oriented towards internal solving of problems in companies. However, if participation in the company at the same time is performed on the basis of the premises of the company, the result is a 'catch 22' situation, where the chances for solving the problems are few.

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