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### ► To cite this version:

Marius Chevallier, Camille Noûs. How useful is research on cooperatives? Reflection based on 3 double-cap situations. Cooperatives in transition facing crisis ICA CCR Europe 2021, Jul 2021, Paris, France. hal-03288618

**HAL Id: hal-03288618**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03288618>**

Submitted on 16 Jul 2021

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# How useful is research on cooperatives? Reflection based on 3 double-cap situations.

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## Summary

Although I am highly motivated by collaborative action research in which the problems, the surveys (definition and administration) and the analyses can be carried out with the participation of the people concerned by the survey, I often have an aftertaste of incompleteness. In my experience, the dialogue between respondents and interviewers has often seemed to me to be approximate and not very thorough, despite the energy that is put into it and the trust that is created between the people. Being both a researcher on cooperatives and an active member in cooperatives for the past fifteen years, I had the opportunity to experience for myself how research can feed practice: on the one hand I have a broad enough knowledge of the literature to know where to identify relevant issues and, on the other hand, I hear and share some of the questions and tensions experienced in cooperatives. I would like to share my experience in three cooperatives in which I have been particularly involved in France : Coop Atlantique, a veteran consumer cooperative (northern New Aquitaine), Railcoop, the first railway cooperative, which was born in 2019 but already has 8000 members and Le Temps de Vivre, a small cooperative with 40 members (café-library, third place, small town near Limoges).

This work allows me to identify examples of research results that have been used for action and to see in what form this use has been made, distinguishing between the main contributions of the scientific method and the contributions of research results, which happens to be secondary in my practice. So, having analysed this experience of a practitioner who uses research myself, I think that this will help me to better find out how to deepen collaborative action research with structures of which I am not myself a member, by better targeting the facets of collaborative action research that are the most relevant.

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1 Ce document a été initialement rédigé en français. La version française peut être obtenue auprès de l'auteur par mail.

2 Camille Noûs is a collective name of researchers who claim "the open and collective nature of the creation, probation and dissemination of knowledge, under the control of the academic community" (<http://www.cogitamus.fr> ). Here, it is indeed an article written individually but the writing is only part of a long work marked by exchanges with many people throughout cooperative activities and research that it does not. would not be possible to name: hence the reference to Camille Noûs. However, I keep certain sentences in the first person when I refer directly to my work in cooperatives rather than my research.

# INTRODUCTION: "compare what you have read with what you have experienced"

"Compare what you have read with what you have experienced". This is what I ask students to do. I say them that research is about producing syntheses of what already exists to facilitate transmission to people who are asking the same questions or may be facing the same problems. If you have identified a problem, there is certainly someone who has written about it or produced data. In preparing the lessons, however, I found that it was not so easy to find convincing examples of this "usefulness of research". So I decided to test the method on my own activities.

My first instinct, in order to find examples and make it meaningful for students, was to look for work in the educational sciences that could shed light on teaching. It was easy to find conceptual work on the main educational currents, but I had more difficulty identifying empirical research that could tell me how things are done elsewhere. The same goes for my role as a parent and my role as a parent representative at school. Not being familiar with the literature in educational sciences, I was able to measure the extent of the difficulty in finding my way through the scientific production in order to hope to find articles that speak to me.

Conversely, on the cooperative side, this has been part of my field of research for about twenty years. I should be able to identify this more easily since I am both a researcher on cooperatives and a cooperative actor, even though my research and action fields have almost never been on the same cooperatives. I therefore wished to identify whether any actions that I have carried out as a member have benefited from research works<sup>3</sup>.

In the first section, I situate my reflection in the literature on participatory action research and other related terms. Then, after a presentation of the cooperatives and the roles I played in them, I review two dimensions of the research to identify the usefulness of the research: the method and the results. The method approach consists of applying research practices (hypotheses, data collection and synthesis of results) in cooperatives. The results approach consists of drawing on the results of other research works to guide action in cooperatives. Lhotellier and Saint-Arnaud (1994) consider that it is necessary to distance oneself from "homologated knowledge": "in a perspective of renewal of the always difficult interaction between researchers and practitioners, the praxeological approach intends to put an end to the traditional tutelage that homologated knowledge imposed on action". They specify that "it will of course remain to establish the rules and methods which, while respecting the constraints of the situations dealt with, will contribute to sufficiently articulated generalisations to create new knowledge. But if the construction of action progresses, we can predict that the construction of a new approved knowledge, resulting from this action, will follow". They therefore consider that the current literature is ill-suited to collaboration with actors in the field.

Let us specify before starting that this question of the usefulness of research must be carried out while remaining vigilant to the contemporary risk of excessive utilitarianism, against which the Mauss review (anti-utilitarian movement in the social sciences) has been warning us since 1981, following authors such as "John Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 1971; Bernard Williams, *A Critique of Utilitarianism*, 1973; Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, 1975", cited by Bourcier et al. (2016).

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<sup>3</sup> Another topic could have been to identify the impact of knowing the terrain in order to do research on it, but this is not addressed here.

# Literature review

Hubert et al (2013) recall the diversity of terms used around the notions of "participatory research, citizen research, etc": "action research, clinical research, intervention research, etc". For my part, I included my approach in the term participatory research-action in the sense that one aim of research is to feed action and that this action, like research, is carried out through the joint participation of researchers and field workers. But reading Blin's (2015) work on 'collaborative action research' (CAR thereafter), I adopted this term, since the notion of collaboration seems more involving than the notion of participation: it is about working. Ballon et al (2019) use the term 'action research' to emphasise that there is simply an articulation between research work carried out by researchers and action work carried out by people in the field, but that each stakeholder in the process has both a foot in the research and a foot in the action: the participatory dimension is tacit. Conversely, Houllier and Merilhou-Goudard (2016) and Millot et al. (2012) speak of participatory research or science: here it is the action dimension that is tacit.

The publications on participatory action research should help me to reflect on the usefulness of my research. I had read some of this work a few years ago, but it had not helped me to structure my own action research approaches, probably because I had not identified a sufficiently precise problem. I am therefore repeating the exercise here, focusing on the question of the difficulties of meeting the expectations raised by participatory action research approaches.

These difficulties have been noted for a long time, since it was already "Dewey's objective (1929): the destruction of the barriers which have divided theory and practice" according to Lhotellier and Saint-Arnaud (1994). This destruction has been achieved in particular by distancing academic knowledge, which leaves its mark on current relations between academic research and people in the field involved in non-academic action research, following the example of "the work of Paolo Freire (1977) and also that of Pascal Galvani (1999), which demonstrates that formalised knowledge constituted in disciplines and benefiting from institutional legitimacy is not sufficient to grasp the complexity of reality. They do not sufficiently provide actors with the resources necessary to understand their condition" (Penven, 2013). Research in the Social and Solidarity Economics is probably all the more delicate to carry out because the SSE is close to popular education (Carimentrand et al., 2017). On the one hand, the actors and actresses of the SSE already have a reflective approach by themselves since it is a question of analyzing the environment in order to change it: they and they can therefore do without academic research. On the other hand, they have a critical eye on the institutionalized world, of which the university is a part.

More recently, the democratisation of research has had an ambivalent impact on this rapprochement between research and action. The practice of research is less and less reserved for a professional body: "a new awareness in professional education has appeared: we are no longer limited to technical rationality" (Lhotellier, Saint-Arnaud, 1994) and we can see that an introduction to research is integrated into a growing number of training courses. On the one hand, this may facilitate exchanges between research and the field, but on the other hand, it may make the intervention of researchers less necessary: "Michel Callon [Rabat colloquium, 2012, cited by Penven, 2013] recently spoke of the proliferation of problematisation spaces. These observed phenomena show the growing capacity, and this is probably a beneficial effect of university massification, of groups of actors to conduct knowledge production processes close to *or at a distance from institutions and their disciplines and protocols*<sup>4</sup>".

# Three cooperative fields

Although I am personally involved in several co-operatives, the relationship between my cooperative activities and my knowledge of co-operative research has not been spontaneous. My cooperative activities have sometimes been exploratory research helping me to identify issues, but the reciprocal relationship has been more difficult for me to identify. Nevertheless, I am not hermetically sealed between my life as a volunteer cooperative actor and my life as a professional researcher, so I hypothesise that my research must have had some impact on my cooperative activity. I have therefore chosen to explore this question by focusing on the three cooperatives in which I have been most involved.

Le Temps de Vivre, <a href="http://www.letempsdevivre.co">www.letempsdevivre.co</a>	Council of wise people and workshop leader: 2012-2021
Coop Atlantic, <a href="http://www.coop-atlantique.fr">www.coop-atlantique.fr</a>	Local Circle 2008-2014 and Supervisory Board Member: 2012-2014
Railcoop, <a href="http://www.railcoop.fr">www.railcoop.fr</a>	Member animation circle, local circle: 2020-2021

Table 1 - Personal investment of the author in the three cooperatives studied

Le Temps de Vivre is a cooperative society of collective interest created in 2019 following six years of operation with a cooperative spirit but with the status of a limited company. Its economic activity consists of a café-library-games, shared work spaces, cultural events and a resource and training centre in the social and solidarity economy. It has also been awarded the "espace de vie sociale" label by the Caisse d'Allocation Familiale de Haute-Vienne, and its aim is to contribute to strengthening social links in its area. The cooperative has about forty members divided into a college of employees, a college of life (direct contribution to commercial and cultural activities) and a college of wise men (reflections, strategy).

Coop Atlantique is a consumer cooperative. It is the result of the merger of several cooperatives, including the Union de Limoges, which was created in 1881 by workers from Limoges in response to the excessive prices charged in grocery shops. It has an economic activity of grocery shops, supermarkets and hypermarkets and, through a parallel association statutorily linked to it, the defence of consumers and consumer education.

Railcoop is a cooperative society of collective interest created in 2019 following one year of a prefiguration association. It brings together users, companies and associations, technical partners, local authorities and employees whose aim is to relaunch the train where the current players in the sector are no longer present. It has 8,000 members who can contribute through the classic statutory bodies (Board of Directors and General Assembly) but also via think tanks which can make suggestions to the Board of Directors. There are currently about fifteen circles (station development, train development, governance, Europe, local circles, freight, etc.) and as many are currently being validated by the Board.

# The usefulness of scientific methods

We are dealing here with the contributions of the application of scientific methods to action. According to Desroche (1993), quoted by Penven (2013), this includes a "reflexive analysis of practices and experiential knowledge revealed and structured by awareness and maieutics (DESROCHE, 1993)". In popular education, the scientific research method has been appropriated by developing the "mental training" method, detailed presentations of which can be found in numerous works, in particular those by Dumazedier (1994) and Chosson (1975) or *Peuple et Culture* (2003). We identify from the three cases studied that this reflexive analysis mainly translates into the transmission-dissemination of practices as well as the recognition and visibility of practices and subjects. Finally, we show that the results of those RAC seem not to gather interest from participants, but gather the interests of external partners.

First, According to Schön, quoted by Lhotellier and Saint-Arnaud (1994), "competent practitioners usually know more than they can say. They demonstrate a kind of 'knowing in practice', much of which is tacit". Hubert, Aubertin and Billaud, (2013) also speak of a contribution of "revealing tacit knowledge".

The RAC therefore makes it possible to identify and facilitate the transmission of knowledge. We were able to identify this at Temps de Vivre: an interview survey made it possible to identify the diversity of volunteer practices. Some volunteer actions were already well identified (taking glass bottles to the recycling bins, running the shop, taking inventory, washing up, etc.), but other actions seemed trivial and were therefore not identified (tidying up the shelves of books or second-hand objects, wiping down tables and chairs left in the garden, bringing back cups left on the tables, being present regularly so that there are people around, welcoming new people, etc.). The survey helped to identify these practices and thus to facilitate their transmission: the list was posted to give ideas to others and the active volunteers, as well as the salaried staff, used this list to direct goodwill.

Hubert, Aubertin and Billaud (2013) also talk about creating new knowledge as well as revealing tacit knowledge: to our knowledge, this was not observed for this task survey: new task proposals did not emerge from this collective reflection, which simply disseminated to a larger number the tasks performed by a few. I have proposed similar work to Railcoop to identify different ways of facilitating circles: using a CAR rather than (or in addition to) training to help self-help circle facilitators become more comfortable with facilitating.

Participatory observation techniques have contributed to this identification by preparing the interviews in depth by identifying certain practices in advance in order to ask more relevant follow-up questions to raise awareness of certain practices. This was particularly the case at Temps de Vivre through the observation of cultural activities. At Railcoop, forty telephone calls to welcome new members played a similar role of exploratory survey to better identify the diversity of members.

Finally, while the construction of grids or questionnaires and the administration of interviews were carried out by a variety of people, the analysis of the data benefited from research methods in order to better create reference points, but was only carried out by people already familiar with the field, in preparation for a collective feedback session. In particular, it allowed for the preparation of a storage form adapted to data processing, then an analysis of the results by cross-sorting in addition to the flat sorting that was disseminated by the teams.

Second, The surveys are also a form of recognition of the interviewees. Interview forms were produced in order to create an atmosphere of free discussion with Railcoop members who were not involved in circles and/or did not have easy access to digital technology. The main aim was to use non-directive interviewing techniques to make the interview last in order to create a meaningful time for social interaction.

On the same principle, they are an opportunity to highlight important issues. A survey on local products carried out among Coop Atlantique shop customers made it possible to publicise the products concerned and to create dedicated discussion time with the staff team. Research is therefore a way of making people and issues visible.

The collaborative construction and administration of the surveys allows us to go further in the process of bringing the targeted subject to life. The interviews conducted on volunteer activities at Le Temps de Vivre were in part conducted in a rotating manner, with people taking turns being interviewed and being interviewed, thus increasing the opportunities to discuss the subject with others. Volunteering thus became all the more of a common good to be cared for collectively. In addition, these interviews led to the administration of individual questionnaires to help the volunteers take stock of their practices.

Cross-tabulation analysis has also made it possible to better value the diversity of people by not crushing behaviours into a single average. This was the case in a survey on the practices of buying local products by distinguishing behaviour by age and gender.

Finally, collaborative analysis of the data could never be carried out as such: whether at Railcoop, Temps de Vivre or Coop Atlantique, the results of the surveys were hardly listened to and the data hardly analysed<sup>5</sup>. The meetings systematically drifted into new times of exchange: they certainly had the positive side effect of continuing to make the subjects treated more visible, but the results remained little studied. It is rather the institutional partners who are interested in the results as such. For subjects dear to the Caisse d'Allocation Familiale, such as identifying how Temps de Vivre creates social links through its activities, the synthesis of observations made by participating in several activities has made it possible to create benchmarks and thus to communicate better with outsiders.

The people directly concerned did not seem to be directly interested in the results: they were more interested, through discussion, in making a mess of the categories that were brought in. On the other hand, since outsiders do not have access to this complex experience, they are more interested in the syntheses that can be constructed through the surveys. And the presentation of the methodological approach reinforces the credibility of the information provided. This therefore introduces the results dimension, which we will see below poses a problem.

## The usefulness of search results

In the previous section, a certain usefulness of the scientific method seems to have been acquired in order to adopt a reflective practice, but what do we observe of the use of research results? We have seen that the detailed analysis of the results produced in the field of RAC itself is not very mobilising for the people involved in this field. This section now focuses on the use, in one field of research, of results produced in *other fields*: hereafter, we will therefore refer to the subject of this section as 'external results'.

As indicated in the introduction, Galvani (1999) and Freire (1977) consider that the knowledge disseminated through institutional channels "is not sufficient to grasp the complexity of reality". In the same vein, Lhotellier and Saint-Arnaud call for the "construction of a new homologated knowledge". There is therefore a strong mistrust of the usefulness of research results, as currently disseminated. Finally, Hubert, Aubertin and Billaud (2013) tend to reserve this practice of cross-referencing field results to researchers rather than to actors in the RAC field: "the research process allows both the revelation of tacit knowledge and the production of new knowledge directly from these interactions (...) with the objective of providing knowledge that is relevant for action (by those who are confronted with a situation that poses a problem for them) and sufficiently heuristic to *be confronted with other situations (by the researchers engaged in such collaborations)*". Nevertheless,

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5 The work on volunteer tasks in the Temps de Vivre, however, resulted in a list that was not discussed, but which

we can identify, from our experiences, three main ways of using external results for the benefit of a RAC: they allow for the rapid identification of structuring issues, the legitimisation of the introduction of certain subjects and the justification of the relevance of the cooperative model to external partners.

First, Knowledge of some of the research results enabled me to quickly identify priorities for action. At Railcoop, one member's highly emotional expression led to his removal from the email lists. Political sociology work on emotions (Nez, 2018) then drew my attention to the need to reach out to this person to maintain a listening channel and to assess the possibility of keeping emotional expressions within a framework intended for rational deliberation. Indeed, the literature on the democracy of emotions shows that the absence of such a channel overemphasises those accustomed to disciplining their emotions in favour of rational arguments, which leads to a participatory bias. However, I did not have the time to go further by participating in the exchanges, initiated by the governance circle in prefiguration of the ethics commission, and I did not have access to the full text of what was said in order to get an idea of how to maintain the possibility of emotional expressions while taking into account the wounds that this may cause to others.

During a workshop I led on 3 March 2021 in partnership with Localos and Unadel with the participation of Railcoop<sup>6</sup>, sociologist Chantal Nicole-Drancourt spoke about the question of how to maintain the loyalty of volunteers involved in circles. Drawing on Granovetter's (1973) work on the strength of weak ties, she argued that the most important thing is to facilitate entry and exit so that each circle runs a large network rather than a small group. This approach clearly allowed me to focus less on keeping a stable team and more on free flow. Based on this theory, the sociologist stated that associations tend to focus too much on departures experienced as betrayals or failures: too much focused on a family conception (strong ties), they miss the strength of weak ties based on free circulation. Following his intervention, we thought about increasing the number of entry points into Railcoop.

Finally, our work on the diversity of sources of inequalities in small local food supply cooperatives (Chevallier, Dellier, 2020) allowed us to quickly identify why the numerous tools and spaces for democratic expression at Temps de Vivre were only weakly appropriated by the people. We then began to identify the sources of power in order to consider how to strengthen the real translation of the democratic substance provided for in the statutes with regard to the effective inequalities that pre-exist the will of the people involved in Temps de Vivre.

Second, in my practice, I have mainly identified the mobilisation of external results to give legitimacy to addressing a sensitive issue. Rather than saying "there is a problem at the moment", it is a question of saying "we often observe in cooperatives that... So maybe this is a subject we should tackle". This was done at Coop Atlantique to ask to reinforce the place of animations and interventions as close as possible to the economic activities, notably in the shops, to complete the educational interventions in the schools, but only remotely concerning the economic activity. It was a desire to bring the volunteers closer to the heart of the economic activity. For this, I mobilised a typology constructed in Caire and Chevallier (2017) identifying different forms of involvement from those furthest from economic activity to those closest to it. I distributed this typology, also published in booklet form (Caire et al. 2013), but it did not generate any interest. This did not prevent us from obtaining an intensification of the interventions close to the commercial activity, but it seems to have been useful for me personally to feel legitimate, but not for my interlocutors in the cooperative.

I also had the opportunity to use a research result at Coop Atlantique during a supervisory board meeting. The general director of finance wanted to speed up the vote on the internal regulations and I had pointed out that research work states that a strength of the cooperative lies in temperance: the time needed for members to understand acts as a sort of filter to avoid making hasty decisions

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6 Local Development Week 1-5 March 2021 - workshop 3 Developing citizen action, 3 March 2021, <https://unadel.org/actions-chantiers/journees-des-territoires>.

(Chevallier, 2013a and 2013b). My intervention made it possible to extend the time for reflection, but I was not asked any questions about this research: it is as if 'the research said' functioned as a magic argument rather than a rational one, conferring superior power on the person who is able to brandish a study to speak. Similarly, in the face of criticism that young people are no longer involved in volunteering, I pointed to the work of Ion (1997) to respond that young people are involved in other ways but not less. Here we find a fundamental problem with the use of external results in action: the person who possesses this knowledge can quickly find himself in a position of domination rather than deliberation, which is contradictory to the RAC spirit.

When I felt it was relevant to mobilise other research results, I preferred not to play too much on the magic argument, which is more in the realm of lobbying power than rational deliberation. At *Le Temps de Vivre*, I addressed the issue of the risk of a recognition deficit for volunteers after seeing the departure of a very involved volunteer. I used the work of Mitchell et al (2001) and Millette (2005) to identify the importance of recognition in the long-term involvement of volunteers. I have not cited these studies, but I have pointed out the difficulty of dealing with the subject of recognition, as volunteering is caught between a desire to show selflessness and a rarely expressed need for recognition: how to recognise practices without feeling that the selflessness of volunteers who find themselves receiving a benefit in return is being questioned.

Finally, as mentioned above in the section on research methods, it seems that research is most directly useful not for the actors but for their partners in their economic and social environments. In response to the concerns of many people about the apparent slowness of cooperatives, I have been able to draw on various studies to explain that this apparent slowness does not translate into less efficiency: Doucouliagos (1997) on employee cooperatives, Fortin and Leclerc (2011) on financial cooperatives, and Sexton and Iskow (1993) on agricultural cooperatives show that there are no notable differences in efficiency based on syntheses of the literature. We then draw on the literature on the enterprise as an institution (Biondi et al, 2007; Gindis, 2007; Mangolte, 2007; Robé, 1999; cited in Chevallier, 2013b) to show that the slowness experienced in decision-making can be considered as a capacity to create stability in unstable entrepreneurial universes because they are in contact with volatile markets and value mobility very highly (Colletis, 2008).

On the other hand, the work of Ansart et al. (2017) shows that this rapprochement is both the result of the adoption of cooperative practices by the competitors and the adoption of competing practices by the cooperatives. I have been able to use this argument to explain the small difference currently observable between Co-op Atlantic and its competitors in the large and medium-sized retailers. My thesis (Chevallier, 2011) allowed me to explain that even in the absence of alternative values, the sociological profiles show that the administrators of cooperatives, less qualified than the directors, constitute a force of reminder towards the common sense unlike what happens in capitalist companies whose presidents are even more qualified than the leaders.

## Conclusion

This article has enabled us to take stock of the uses of research for action as a member of cooperatives. It appears that research is more directly usable in its classic form (presentation of results) for the actors' partners than for the actors themselves directly. In terms of direct usefulness for the actors, we were able to identify some usable work. However, we have been able to use the results of these works, but have only very rarely used them with the cooperative partners. These articles are part of the references mobilised in my research work and have nourished a personal sensitivity to certain issues. They have contributed to building a kind of personal radar that allows us to quickly identify priorities for action. On the other hand, I am more comfortable with the relevance of accompanying stakeholders in structures to use empirical research methods to take a step back from their practices, while recalling that what counts is not so much the publication of results, but the process of debating and making certain practices visible: these scientific approaches

are a good way of animating debates in order to collectively concern ourselves with cooperatives as common goods that need to be taken care of.

We are currently creating spaces to collect testimonies and share reflections with other researchers on cooperatives and involved in cooperatives, in order to go beyond this assessment based on nine years of active membership in three cooperatives. In particular, I would like to explore the idea of working in pairs with a fellow researcher who could ask me questions about one or more of the cooperatives of which I am a member, in order to better manage this double role. During informal "cooperative talks" involving fellow researchers working on cooperatives, I identified research questions on their part that I would try to document in order to take a step back from my activities as a member of Railcoop. On the other hand, in another field, one of my colleagues was recently elected administrator of an association supporting peasant agriculture, and I hope to be able to form this research pairing to help him take a step back and identify courses of action.

Finally, in order to test the extent to which this analysis is linked to personal scepticism, I recently suggested to teachers of state social work degrees that when they set up research dissertation support for their students they should first identify research articles that they would be comfortable presenting in class to show the relevance of reading research to their students.

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