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Introduction: Action Research, Policy and Politics

Special Issue of the International Journal of Action Research

Julia Wittmayer, Koen Bartels and Miren Larrea (guest editors)

The current COVID-19 pandemic is putting public trust in representative democratic institutions to the test: arguably in an unprecedented manner. However, it only is the tip of the iceberg. The Paris Agreement in 2015 signalled nation states' commitment to putting global warming to a halt, but, five years later, there is widespread disappointment and frustration with the absence of decisive and systematic action. With many national constitutions heralding equality between people of different sex, gender, age, colour and ethnicity, people consistently fail to see those rights translated into actual equal opportunities and treatment in society. The daily flood of news is supposed to enhance transparency and accountability but also fuels the post-truth bubbles of deeply divided political landscapes marred by conspiracy theories, anti-establishment sentiments and violent protests. Across the world, citizens are demanding urgent and transformative action to halt climate change, realise social justice and overturn entrenched powers in a range of novel, insurgent ways that challenge traditional political relationships, arenas and values. Political responses and institutional changes take shape through policy processes characterised by high levels of complexity, interdependence, and intransigence.

The underpinning rationale of this special issue is that the societal challenges we are facing require fundamental, long-term societal transformations that need to be co-produced by all relevant stakeholders. This includes the role and functioning of policy and politics, inviting us to imagine and enact new political-economic frameworks (Speth & Courier, 2020). It also includes the role and functioning of science, inviting us to conceive and develop spaces to co-produce critical knowledge, transformative action and trustful relations (Bartels & Wittmayer, 2018). This special issue therefore addresses the need to connect across different fields to address societal problems, including climate change and social justice.

This editorial is not only an introduction to this special issue. The International Journal of Action Research (IJAR) aims for it to create a window of opportunity for researchers wanting to explore transformation at the interface of action research, policy and politics. By inviting us as guest editors, IJAR deliberately selected the fields of policy analysis, sustainability transition research and territorial development, because of ongoing efforts for cross-fertilisation at this interface. Hence, this editorial is also an invitation for action researchers in (and beyond) these fields to contribute to the ensuing conversation, about how to address multiple challenges emerging across fields committed to transformative change.

Action research as counter-hegemonic approach to policy and politics

The interface of action research, policy and politics is an important path to explore if we want to co-produce sustainability transitions. With its counter-hegemonic and increasingly trans-

formative agenda, action research can play a crucial role in navigating and changing the challenging dynamics of policy and politics. However, there are a wide range of different approaches and contingencies. Action research can, for example, be used to generate pressure for change on policy makers from outside the policy process, or to collaborate with policy makers and other stakeholders¹ in a critical-relational way.

In most action research processes, action researchers work with communities or social groups that are suffering from oppression, and have no voice in the political and policy decisions (Freire, 2000; Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Hale, 2008), e.g., women in chronic homelessness (Vaccaro, 2020). The aim is to co-generate new knowledge and solutions with these communities or groups, that will later be presented to policy makers as recommendations (e.g., about how permanent housing for women should be developed) or shared with the different communities or groups involved to generate pressure on policy makers. This counter-hegemonic approach positions action researchers as outsiders to the policy process. It also positions policy makers at the receiving end of the process, being handed recommendations as a ‘finished’ product. In turn, the communities, social groups and wider stakeholders involved or affected are not included in policy processes, and hence not conceived as (legitimate) policy actors (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003). Consequently, action researchers seldom collaborate with policy actors, while action research on specific issues and the policy processes that address those same issues run parallel, reducing the potential impact of both policy and research.

This special issue explores another avenue; one where action researchers are inside the policy process, collaborating with policy actors in their endeavours to address societal challenges. Consequently, turning the communities and social groups, that action researchers co-generate knowledge and action with, into policy actors is more than a semantic twist: it raises fundamental questions about power and co-optation. How can action researchers play a transformative role as part of policy processes? How can they continue to play a critical, counter-hegemonic role, without becoming subdued to the status quo? How can they maintain meaningful and empowering relationships with all policy actors across their deep divides? The articles in this special issue address these questions, to kick-start a wider discussion among action researchers about the interface with politics and policy.

Action research meets policy and politics

We believe that the action research community stands to benefit from the ways in which the fields of policy analysis, sustainability transition research, and territorial development have been exploring the intricate ways in which policy and politics are implicated in societal issues. Despite their diverging backgrounds and trajectories, these fields are characterised by a shared interest in complex societal problems, the governance of systems designed to address these, and transformative change for the common good. Moreover, they have started to increasingly engage in action research over the past decade to address these issues (for overviews, see Karlsen & Larrea, 2014; Bartels & Wittmayer, 2018).

1 From here on, we will use the term ‘policy makers’ to refer specifically to those in formal positions of power and ‘policy actors’ to include all those involved in and affected by policy processes.

The renewal of politics through co-creation: the analysis of the case of rainwater and biowaste in Brussels

Simon De Muynck and Dominique Nalpas

Abstract In 2015, The Brussels Institute for Research and Innovation (Innoviris) launched an innovative policy in Europe, inviting Brussels research consortia to propose participatory-action research (PAR) projects. PHOSPHORE and BRUSSEAU worked for three years *in* and *on* Brussels socio-technical systems, respectively on biowaste and water management. These research projects revealed many institutional (governance) tensions, and tackled many political issues which this paper analyses because they are still insufficiently explored in the literature.

The main contribution of the paper is the discussion of the reflexive learning between the two projects concerning the institutional tensions (reductive injunctions, black boxes, antagonisms, post-political) and moments of confluences (impacts on municipalities strategies and policies, rebalancing of distribution of power, removal of regulatory barriers, emergence of a multi-level and multi-technical approach) we encountered.

Keywords: Participatory-action research; co-creation ; political ecology ; post-political ; (ant) agonism

La renovación de la política a través de la co-creación: el análisis del caso del agua de lluvia y los biorresiduos en Bruselas

Resumen En 2015, el Brussels Institute for Research and Innovation (Innoviris) lanzó una política innovadora en Europa, invitando a los consorcios de investigación de Bruselas para proponer proyectos de Investigación-Acción Participativa (IAP). PHOSPHORE y BRUSSEAU trabajaron durante tres años en y sobre los sistemas sociotécnicos de Bruselas, respectivamente en la gestión de los biorresiduos y el agua. Estos proyectos de investigación revelaron muchas tensiones institucionales (de gobernanza) y abordaron muchos temas políticos que este artículo analiza porque aún no están suficientemente explorados en la literatura. El principal aporte del artículo es la discusión del aprendizaje reflexivo entre los dos proyectos en torno a las tensiones institucionales (mandatos reducidos, cajas negras, antagonismos, pos-política) y momentos de confluencia (impactos en las estrategias y políticas de los municipios, reequilibrio de la distribución de poder, eliminación de las barreras reglamentarias, aparición de un enfoque multinivel y multitécnico) que encontramos.

Palabras clave: Investigación acción participativa; co-creación; ecología política; post-política; (ant)agonismo

1. Introduction

Innoviris (The Brussels Institute for Research and Innovation) Co-create research policy call was initiated in Brussels in 2015. Primarily dedicated to sustainable food systems, this research policy then expanded its scope and was consolidated into three pillars: participatory research, social innovation and urban resilience. Within this framework, co-creation was defined as “*a participatory research emerging from users, creating transdisciplinary, cross-sectorial and co-learning spaces rooted in action research*” (Innoviris 2016, pp.3–4). The PHOSPHORE and BRUSSEAU participatory action-research (PAR) had the common intention of respectively transforming the biowaste and water socio-technical systems.

The fundamental hypothesis of this article is that the two PAR tackled many institutional (governance) tensions and political issues that are still insufficiently explored in the literature. In order to understand the tensions and strategies which generate consensual policies, we rely on a number of concepts from different disciplinary fields (Section 2) which is one of the major contributions of this paper.

Subsequent to this conceptual introduction, the concepts will be used to analyse the research trajectories of BRUSSEAU (Section 3) and PHOSPHORE (Section 4) in detail within three common subsections:

Genesis: describes the genesis of the ‘knowledge and research communities’ of our PAR and the shared objectives. We also describe the respective approaches towards the institutions.

Tensions: describes the institutional tensions revealed by the PAR and the post-political response provided by the institutions.

Confluences: describes the content of some of the proposals co-created by our PAR, the constructive political response that institutions have provided, and the impacts of our PAR on policies.

Then, Section 5 discusses the reflexive learning between our two projects concerning the institutional tensions and moments of confluences we encountered.

The concluding Section 6 shows how PAR processes can make a conceptual and operational contribution to policy, politics and PAR literature, and proposes pathways and areas of attention (refusing “black boxes”, proposing agonistic institutions and new hybrid parliaments) for future PAR, that struggle for more sustainable policies.

2. Conceptual section

In order to understand our working methodologies, it is important to understand what action-research and its participatory extension are all about.

Action-research is a scientific research methodology related to Kurt Lewin (1946) which aims to generate a transformation of reality through action/intervention, while producing knowledge about this transformation through an iterative cycle and/or reflexive approach: planning, acting, observing, and evaluating (Lewin 1946, 1952). The method has been progressively used in a very large number of disciplinary fields which have further developed and enriched it over time (such as psychology, sociology, psycho-sociology, socio-clinical, urban political ecology, social work, etc.). According to others, it is the advancement of knowledge

by, and also *for*, the action (Danley & Ellison 1999; Catroux 2002; Baron 2008). Moreover, action research has given rise to *Participatory action research (PAR)* methods and approaches (Chevalier & Buckles 2019). PAR considers the participants as co-researchers actively contributing to the action-research process, from the initial design to the final presentation of the results and discussion of the implications of their actions (Tandon, 1988; Whyte 1991) with a view to transformation of a system and democratisation of research (Aiken 2017). PAR aims to *collectively* choose research questions and reformulate them, develop hypotheses, define modes of data collection, analyse these data, formalise results and disseminate them. The ambition of PAR is to integrate rigorous designs with meaningful questions, respecting principles (McTaggart, 1991) and values (Danley & Ellison 1999) and using reflexivity, creativity and complex techniques (Chevalier & Buckles 2019).

In that sense, *Co-creation*, defined as “*a participatory research emerging from users, creating transdisciplinary, cross-sectorial and co-learning spaces rooted in action research*” (Innoviris 2016, pp.3–4) is here understood as a synonym of PAR.

In order to understand the institutional tensions we have been going through, we developed, as action-research coordinators of our PAR, reflexive learnings based on *institutional (governance) tensions* developed by Manganelli and Moulaert (2018), Manganelli, van den Broeck and Moulaert (2019) and Manganelli (2020). According to them, these tensions “*emerge through the building of relational networks between local (water and biowaste) initiatives and key governing agencies and institutions at different scales*” (Manganelli & Moulaert, 2018, p. 4).

In order to reveal the political dimensions and tensions of our PAR, we rely on the work of Rancières (2004), Mouffe (2004, 2010a, 2010b), Swyngedouw (2011), Wilson & Swyngedouw (2014) and Kenis, Bono & Mathijs (2016).

These authors distinguish between:

- “*the political*” (“*le*” politique), defined as “*a space of contestation and agonistic engagement*”(Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p.6) and as a “*discourse in which the existence of power, conflict, and contingency is recognised*” (Kenis, Bono & Mathijs, 2016).
- “*politic*” (“*la*” politique), defined as “*technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free markets economics and cosmopolitan liberalism*” (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p.6).
- “*policies*”, considered as strategic plans, roadmaps or sets of rules agreed by actors (administrations, business groups, political parties or a government).

This distinction between “the political” and the “politic” brings us to Mouffe’s fundamental distinction (2010a) between “*agonism*”, which recognises the opponent or the challenger to political community as an “*adversary*”, and “*antagonism*, which recognises the opponent as a political “*enemy*”. This resonates with Rancières’s work (2004) on disagreement, and with the notion of *post-political* defined by Wilson & Swyngedouw (2014, p.5) as “*a situation in which the political understood as a space of contestation and agonistic engagement is increasingly colonised by politics – understood as technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free markets economics and cosmopolitan liberalism. In post politics, political contradictions are reduced to policy problems to be managed by experts and legitimated through participatory processes in which the scope of possible outcomes is narrowly defined in advance*”. Swyngedouw (2011) further clarifies, “*Although disagreement and debate are of course still*

Action research and politics: power, love and inquiry in political transformations

Miren Larrea, Hilary Bradbury and Xabier Barandiaran

“A moment comes when it is not possible to exist without being subject to the radical and deep tension between good and bad, between dignity and indignity, between decency and shamelessness, between the beauty and ugliness of the world. This means that it is not possible to exist without educators assuming their right or duty to choose, to decide, to fight, to do politics” (Freire, 2008:51).

Abstract: Motivated by a real case of action research with political aims, we focus attention on the importance of power dynamics and emotional work for all involved in the facilitation and manifestation of new policy. The paper introduces an extension of contemporary action research called Action Research Transformations (ART). In ART, reflexive co-agency operates as a core concept and practice, because it furthers the possibility of moving toward mutuality. This enables policy makers and researchers, working together, to move from power over to power with, and increases the transformative potential of the projects they develop together.

Key words: Action Research for Transformations; politics; power; emotions

Investigación-acción y política: poder, amor e investigación en las transformaciones políticas

Resumen: Partiendo de un caso real de investigación-acción con objetivos políticos, centramos nuestra atención en la importancia de las dinámicas de poder y el trabajo emocional para todas aquellas personas involucradas en la facilitación y la generación de nuevas políticas. El artículo introduce una extensión de la investigación-acción contemporánea denominada Investigación-Acción para la Transformación (ART según su acrónimo en inglés). Esta aproximación plantea la acción conjunta y reflexiva como concepto, y simultáneamente, como práctica que favorece el desarrollo mutuo de las personas que la experimentan. La ART genera condiciones favorables para que los actores participantes -sean políticos o investigadores- puedan pasar de ejercer el poder sobre las personas con las que trabajan a ejercerlo con ellas, lo que incrementa el potencial transformador de los proyectos desarrollados conjuntamente.

Palabras clave: Investigación-Acción para la Transformación, política, poder, emociones

Introduction

Humanity is living a moment in which we are called to respond to the escalating and interweaving social and ecological crises around our shared planet. It is also a moment in which we see that democracy is fragile, perhaps more so than many of us ever imagined. It is a moment

to think about strengthening democracy for the future, and therefore to ask how we might support action-oriented scholarship in the revitalisation of democracy toward becoming a more beneficial presence for all.

To revitalise democracy, we need to meet certain conditions such as citizens' re-engagement with local and national democratic processes, simultaneous with rejection of authoritarian alternatives, parties and movements who destabilise basic norms of democracy (Mounk, 2018). We see stakeholder-citizens as society's key political stakeholders, to the extent that they share the intention, held with awareness and varying degrees of clarity that a more desirable state of social relationships is a foundation of a better society. Policy makers¹ and researchers are a subset of citizen- stakeholders and, if willing, can play an important role together in shaping this democratising new political culture in the face of societal challenges (Bartels and Wittmayer, 2018; Bradbury et al., 2019). The political culture we both describe and illustrate is an experiment which is ideological, because it considers that democracy is a value. Therefore, it makes space for progressive and conservative stances.

There are presently a significant number of action researchers around the world who either conduct their action research with policy makers, or conduct it to generate recommendations for policy makers (Pomares, 2020; Vaccaro, 2020). They all aim at increasing the impact of research through policy. If we look closely enough, we see myriad relationships between concrete policy makers and researchers, all mediated in one way or the other by power dynamics, which in turn are anchored by emotions and strategies of all kinds.

We approach these power dynamics through the lens of Action Research Transformations (ART; Bradbury et al., 2019), which we later present as the framework for the case. ART has been proposed with the aim of aligning action-oriented researchers from all over the world in a shared endeavour to respond to urgent societal challenges. Our main contribution to ART is the concept of reflexive co-agency. By elevating the concept and practice of reflexive co-agency, we support more awareness of what is actually happening under the surface of the relationships between action researchers and policy makers, and we make dynamics discussible (Argyris et al, 1985) to move toward more mutually supportive practices. Developing reflexive co-agency, we suggest, helps these policy makers and action researchers to enhance the transformative potential of their shared projects.

We have structured the paper so that it first presents the context where we have experimented with reflexive co-agency, followed by the definition and conceptual framework on this concept. We then share our methodological framework and our learning chronicle, and end with a discussion, and pointing to what is actionable in other contexts.

The context for developing reflexive co-agency

What we name as the learning chronicle in this paper is one specific mutual- inquiry process framed around a policy programme led by the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa (Basque Country, Spain), titled *Etorbizuna Eraikiz* (translated from Basque as “constructing the future”). This programme is fostering a new political culture based on collaborative governance,

1 The term policy maker includes both elected politicians and civil servants involved in policy processes, we consider them all as political actors and stakeholder-citizens.

‘We seem to be moving in circles’

How facilitative action research generates transferable and workable breakthroughs in policy networks that are stuck

Martien Kuitenbrouwer

Abstract: Action Research can make an important contribution in bringing transformative action to contemporary complex societal problems. Critique upon its limited scope opens the discussion about transferability of outcomes. This paper discusses how facilitative action research enabled transferable and workable breakthroughs to policy practitioners feeling stuck in designed governance networks around complex care and safety problems in the Netherlands. Experiments with facilitated, collaborative conversations of relational inquiry with policy practitioners were conducted in practices in three different cities. Evidence from the three practices suggests that for breakthroughs to be transferable and workable, they need to be able to support a process of reliving and re-experiencing. Reliving and re-experiencing was enhanced when the researcher added a level of abstraction to the conversation by using systems-thinking inspired visuals. This way, policy practitioners were able to grasp the complexity of their situation as well as to see the unintended consequences of their actions. Subsequent naming of the visuals enhanced both the appropriation of the abstracted situation as well as facilitating the broader communication of the experience beyond the group of practitioners involved. Finally, by actively bridging the different practices in three different cities, the researcher was able to connect experiences and so enhance the feeling of reliving and re-experiencing beyond the individual practices. This way, a broader base of knowledge and experience about the problematique, and possible breakthroughs in the complexity of collaboration in designed policy networks, was created.

Keywords: Facilitative action research; relationality; systems thinking; designed policy networks; transferability; reliving; re-experiencing; bridging.

Parece que nos estamos moviendo en círculos

Cómo la investigación-acción facilitadora genera avances transferibles y factibles en redes de políticas que están estancadas

Resumen: La investigación-acción puede hacer una contribución importante trayendo una acción transformadora a complejos problemas sociales contemporáneos. La crítica sobre su alcance limitado abre la discusión sobre la transferibilidad de los resultados. Este artículo discute cómo la investigación-acción facilitadora permitió avances transferibles y factibles para los profesionales de la política que se sentían atrapados en redes de gobernanza diseñadas en torno a problemas complejos de asistencia y seguridad en los Países Bajos. Se llevaron a cabo experimentos de investigación relacional, con conversaciones facilitadas y colaborativas, con los profesionales de la política en prácticas en tres ciudades diferentes. Las evi-

dencias de las tres prácticas sugieren que para que los avances sean transferibles y factibles, deben ser capaces de respaldar un proceso de revivir y re-experimentar. El revivir y re-experimentar mejoró cuando el investigador agregó un nivel de abstracción a la conversación mediante el uso de imágenes inspiradas en el pensamiento sistémico. De esta manera, los profesionales de las políticas pudieron comprender la complejidad de su situación, así como ver las consecuencias no deseadas de sus acciones. El nombramiento posterior de las imágenes mejoró con la apropiación de la situación abstraída, así como también facilitó la comunicación más amplia de la experiencia más allá del grupo de profesionales involucrados. Finalmente, al unir activamente las diferentes prácticas en tres ciudades diferentes, el investigador pudo conectar con experiencias y así mejorar la sensación de revivir y re-experimentar más allá de las prácticas individuales. De esta manera, se creó una base más amplia de conocimiento y experiencia sobre la problemática y posibles avances en la complejidad de la colaboración en las redes de políticas diseñadas.

Palabras clave: Investigación-acción facilitadora; relacionalidad; pensamiento sistémico; redes de políticas diseñadas; transferibilidad, revivir; re-experimentar; vinculación.

1. Introduction

Policy networks are increasingly seen as alternative governance structures for societal problems that have become too complex to handle in more conventional hierarchical structures (Kickert, Klijn and Koppejan 1997; Börzel 1998; Agranoff 2001; Peters 2005; Castells 2007, Klijn and Koppejan 2012). Policy networks are not new, especially in countries with a strong tradition of hybrid and pluralistic public policy structures, such as the UK, Germany and the Netherlands. In these countries, policy networks are a common part of policymaking or public service delivery structures (Börzel 1998). However, with the rise of complex societal problems, the amount of *governance* networks aimed dealing with these complexities, increases as well. These newly developing governance networks do not only emerge organically, but are increasingly *designed* in an attempt to manage problems and deliver fast results. In the Netherlands, we can witness the increase of such networks, especially in domains where social and safety policies come together in complex societal problems, such as domestic violence, undermining criminality and juvenile delinquency (Brandsen et al 2012). As the programme manager for the prevention of domestic violence, based at the public health agency in The Hague, puts it:

“We think we are collaborating on a voluntary basis, intrinsically motivated to work together, but in reality, we are forced to do so, we have no choice” (Interview 2).

These newly emerging governance networks bring about new challenges when it comes to coordination, management and decision making. Essential here is the question of management of interdependent horizontal relations (Kickert, Klijn and Koppejan 1997, Peters 2005, Agranoff and McGuire 2011, Klijn and Koppejan 2012). Traditionally, research into network management emphasises rational choice-based strategies in managing interdependent horizontal relations, understanding *relations* as merely contextual (Axelrod 1984; Scharpf 1994). However, over the last decades, the concept of *relationality* as a way to fundamentally

appreciate policy networks has gained popularity (Bartels and Turnball 2019). In relational approaches, such as promoted by Emirbayer (1997), the dynamics of interaction and interdependence, in unfolding and ever-changing relationships between actors and their environment, is not merely contextual but the primary focus for analysis (Bartels and Turnball 2019). The principles of relationality can be traced back to the pragmatist tradition as represented by Charles Peirce (1877), John Dewey (1910, 1913), and Mary Follet (1918, 1924). In the pragmatist tradition, the ever-changing dynamics of interaction between object and subject is the starting point for inquiry, since “*reality is in the relating, in the activity-between*” (Follet, 1924:54).

In the complex and demanding day-to-day reality of the designed governance networks in the Netherlands, effective collaboration between policy practitioners is often experienced as an enormous and recurrent relational challenge. The complexity of the problems they are dealing with, the outside (political) pressure to produce quick results, and the diversity in institutional perspectives and routines can leave policy practitioners feeling frustrated. As the area manager in Tilburg-Groenewoud indicates:

“I do not have the answers, I do not know how to do it” (Interview 1)

In their attempts to improve their collaboration, the ‘*how to do it*’ seems particularly relevant. Policy practitioners testify not only about their sensation of feeling stuck in their collaboration, but also about the repetitiveness of their conversation about their collaboration. As the programme manager for the prevention of domestic violence in the Hague puts it:

“we keep moving in circles..we have the same conversation...over and over again..” (Interview 2)

In searching for breakthroughs out of these recurrent challenges, Action Research (AR) can play an important role (Bartels and Wittmayer 2018, Kuitenbrouwer 2018). AR, more than any other form of social research, is aimed at *transformative* change, combining analysis, participation and action (Greenwood 2018). Inspired by the pragmatist tradition, *transformative* action in AR is not so much about changing ‘something’ but about changing underlying value and belief systems, and relationships between ‘*the out there and the in here*’ (Bradbury et al 2019: 8). Especially when seeking to break through the repetitiveness in the conversations about the malfunctioning collaboration in these designed networks, transformative change is needed. However, the complex societal problems of today demand transformative change that goes beyond individual practices (Bartels and Wittmayer 2018, Bradbury et al 2019). In order to reach broader impact, AR needs to deal with critiques on the limited scope, and focus on ‘situatedness’ (Bryman 2001; Gustavsen, Hansson and Qvale 2008; Loeber 2007). AR needs to generate outcomes that are both *transferable* from one particular situation to other contexts, or in the same context in another time (Lincoln and Guba 1985) as well as *workable* in other contexts (Karlsen and Larrea 2014; Canto-Farachala and Estensoro 2020).

In this paper, the focus is on how facilitative AR practices can generate transferable and workable outcomes for policy practitioners, who feel that they are moving in circles when trying to improve the collaboration in their designed governance networks. The aim is to explain how facilitative AR not only allows for finding breakthroughs-in-the-moment, but for breakthroughs that are transferable and workable in similar situations within the same policy network and similar situations in other policy networks. The key question addressed in this paper is:

Policy reform instead of policy transformation?

Experiences of participatory action research (PAR) on desegregation policy in Szeged, Hungary

György Málovics, Boglárka Méreiné Berki and Melinda Mihály

Abstract: To move towards more just and ecologically sustainable societies, we must structurally transform our current socio-economic system at a deep level. Participatory Action Research makes much of this term ‘transformation’, yet on closer examination, the concept is not only conceptually but also practically vague. What exactly is required for socio-environmental spatial policies to be ‘transformational’? Our aims in this paper are twofold. First, we want to suggest that there are different definitions of ‘transformation’. We work through three sets of concepts: autonomy, empowerment, and solidarity, showing that there are hegemonic and counterhegemonic versions of each. Secondly, we use these different framings to reflect on a case study exploring the desegregation of a Roma community in Szeged, Hungary. We explore the ways in which the empowerment of Roma community leaders within a PAR project worked both to challenge and to reinforce existing power asymmetries: while Roma representatives were increasingly accepted and influential, they were unable to shift the powerful city council away from an underlying commitment both to desegregation, and to a logic of “deserving” and “undeserving” poor. Ultimately, this led to a situation where the neoliberal hegemonic logic of the policy went unchallenged, with the practical consequence that, while some community members benefitted from desegregation, the poorest were rendered more precarious and vulnerable. This points to a need for further reflection on the intractability of oppressive structures, and honesty about the potential limitations in achieving short-term structural transformation using PAR.

Keywords: Participatory action research; (de)segregation; transformation; autonomy; empowerment; solidarity

¿Reforma de políticas en lugar de transformación de políticas? Experiencias de Investigación-Acción Participativa (IAP) sobre políticas de desegregación en Szeged, Hungría

Resumen: Para avanzar hacia sociedades más justas y ecológicamente sustentables, debemos transformar estructuralmente nuestro sistema socioeconómico actual a un nivel profundo. La investigación-acción participativa le da mucha importancia a este término “transformación”, sin embargo, en un examen más detallado, el concepto no solo es conceptual, sino también prácticamente vago. ¿Qué se requiere exactamente para que las políticas espaciales socio-ambientales sean “transformadoras”? Nuestros objetivos en este artículo son dobles. Primero, queremos sugerir que existen diferentes definiciones de “transformación”. Trabajamos a través de tres conjuntos de conceptos: autonomía, empoderamiento y solidaridad, mostrando que existen versiones hegemónicas y contrahegemónicas de cada uno. En segundo lugar, utilizamos estos diferentes marcos para reflexionar sobre un estudio de caso que explora la desegregación de una comunidad romaní en Szeged, Hungría. Exploramos las formas en que

el empoderamiento de los líderes de la comunidad romaní, dentro de un proyecto IAP, funcionó tanto para desafiar como para reforzar las asimetrías de poder existentes: Si bien los representantes romaníes fueron cada vez más aceptados e influyentes, no pudieron desviar al poderoso consejo municipal de un compromiso subyacente tanto con la segregación como con una lógica de pobres “merecedores” e “indignos”. Finalmente, esto condujo a una situación en la que la lógica hegemónica neoliberal de la política no fue cuestionada, con la consecuencia práctica de que, si bien algunos miembros de la comunidad se beneficiaron de la segregación, los más pobres se volvieron más precarios y vulnerables. Esto apunta a la necesidad de una mayor reflexión sobre la intratabilidad de las estructuras opresivas y la honestidad sobre las limitaciones potenciales para lograr una transformación estructural a corto plazo utilizando IAP.

Palabras clave: Investigación-acción participativa; (desegregación; transformación; autonomía; empoderamiento; solidaridad

Introduction

The Roma population in Europe faces historical stigmatisation, segregation, and extreme poverty (Powell & van Baar, 2019). In Hungary and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) more generally, spatial segregation is common, creating ethnically homogenous Roma neighbourhoods in urban environments (Steger, 2007).

Roma segregation and social marginalisation is reinforced by discriminatory policies related to work (van Baar, 2012; Szóke, 2015), housing (Maestri, 2017), and schooling (Paniagua-Rodríguez & Bereményi, 2017). As action-researchers, we believe this situation calls for policy intervention “to change oppressive social conditions and to create a more egalitarian society” (Zhao, 2015, pp. 178). To achieve this, however, means more than ameliorating the situation of oppressed and marginalised Roma residents. It requires systemic social and environmental change, including the transformation of existing socio-economic structures, in order to move toward a more just and ecologically sustainable society (Hopwood, Mellor & O’Brien, 2005; Avelino, Wittmayer, Pel, Weaver, Dimitru, Haxeltine, Kemp, Jørgensen, Bauler, Ruijsink & O’Riordan, 2019; Bradbury, Waddell, O’ Brien, Apgar, Teehanke, & Fazey, 2019). However, the extent of the social shift that is required means that it is difficult to know precisely how to operationalise transformation (Feola, 2015; Avelino et al., 2019).

Transformation is a core concept in Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2015; Bradbury et al., 2019): its literature is “*full of the rhetoric of revolutionary change and social transformation*” (Smith, Bratini, Chambers, Jensen & Romero, 2010, pp. 409). However, it is often unclear exactly what is meant by “transformation”, since scholars use the term to refer to both gradual social reform, and more radical, or even revolutionary, transformation. Part of the problem is that a universal conceptualisation and operationalisation of transformation is epistemologically impossible to achieve, since the concept is value-laden. Not only do participants with different views and lived experience disagree on its meaning, but views vary within different contexts of human interaction (Panu, 2015; Greenwood, 2015). Within the present paper, we seek to contribute to this gap in the

literature, exploring whether we can produce a workable conceptualisation of policy transformation that is in line with conceptualisation of transformation within PAR literature. Our **first research question** emerges here: How can we operationalise ‘transformation’ in a way that points towards deep-seated structural change, rather than superficial change that reinforces existing power imbalances –in a way that is in line with conceptualisation of transformation within PAR?

A further problem is that actual PAR processes frequently fall short of the research ideal (Smith et al., 2010). Our **second research question** considers this, asking how the intractability of multiple power asymmetries and community divisions over policy issues affects the realisation of PAR’s transformative intentions in practice.

As our research questions show, we focus on the consequences of PAR: whether the impact of PAR on policies can be considered transformative (or not), and certain challenges of PAR related to reaching transformative policy changes.

We aim to answer these questions by analysing the impact of a PAR process on desegregation (social mixing) policy in a segregated urban Roma neighbourhood in Hungary. Desegregation policy aims to achieve more socially mixed neighbourhoods by removing and relocating poor, stigmatised Roma residents from ethnically homogenous areas to settlements that are more heterogeneous. Social mixing is a mandatory and official goal within all Hungarian city development, something that is reflected in the policy context in Hungary (NFGM, 2009). However, desegregation has been criticized as a contradictory and neoliberal approach to poverty and housing policy, since it often supports market-based urban processes without tackling the deeper structural causes of oppression, poverty, and stigmatisation. Slater describes it as a form of “*collective irresponsibility*” (Slater, 2006, pp. 753), since it displaces marginalised people without doing anything to ameliorate the enormous socio-economic disadvantages that they face. In practice, its economic benefits accrue to middle-class gentrifiers at the expense of poorer social groups (Lees, 2008), while at a socio-cultural level it reifies middle-income lifestyles as a natural category, pushing “*the idea that we all should somehow be/become middle class and that we all want to be middle class*” (Lees, 2008, pp. 2463). As a consequence, it not only “*treats the middle classes as the exclusive agents of urban restructuring*” (Slater, 2009, pp. 296) but constructs the poor as abnormal, even deviant.

This paper critically reflects on desegregation policy, and draws on PAR to explore possible alternatives. Our analysis focuses on three concepts that are linked to different ideas of change, distinguishing between hegemonic and counterhegemonic narratives of **autonomy** (libertarian vs. relational), **empowerment** (neoliberal vs. participatory democratic), and **solidarity** (philanthropic vs. democratic). We begin by discussing the concept of transformation in PAR (section 2), before discussing these three framings (section 3). We introduce the context and method of our PAR study (section 4), and its empirical failure to achieve transformative structural change (section five), which we then discuss in depth (section six).

For the sake of analytical clarity, it is important to emphasise that we **distinguish between framings of empowerment** (section 3) and **actual processes of political empowerment** (sections 2 and 5). On one hand, **framings of empowerment** refer to theoretical approaches to conceptualise the notion of empowerment and are used in the text to operationalise the concept of transformation (see section 3). On the other hand, **political empowerment**, being a core concept in PAR, having (beside its intrinsic value) an instrumental value concerning transformative changes (see sections 2 and 5), refers to actual processes of change, understood as