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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 & Courrier, 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 stakeholders[1] 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.

Policy analysis is a well-established field, the origins of which are commonly traced back to the writings of Harold Lasswell (1951) about "the policy sciences of democracy" (14). Despite the problem-oriented, multidisciplinary and normative orientation that he advocated, the field became dominated by a rationalist-empiricist approach of conducting technical, value-free analysis to provide policy makers with objective knowledge for making authoritative decisions (DeLeon, 2006). The field has long moved on to study the processes, institutions and powers through which policies are made, but the mainstream still operates within a rationalist-empiricist framework. An alternative, and in itself well-established, stream is formed by a range of critical and interpretivist approaches driven by normative ideals of democracy, emancipation, and social justice (Fischer and Forester, 1993; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Fischer et al., 2015). Critically investigating the socio-political implications of hegemonic epistemological beliefs, these approaches interpret the argumentative processes through which policies are enacted, negotiated and contested. A key insight is that policy processes involve a multiplicity of meanings, values, knowledge, discourses, emotions, practices and power relationships that not only render them complex, but proliferate the differences, conflicts and inequalities that make a sustainable and just world an exceedingly elusive ideal. It is within this stream of policy analysis that action research has been steadily gaining ground as a favoured way of collaborating with stakeholders in "exploring preference differences, agreeing on problem definitions, and jointly designing solutions … [that are] problem-driven and aimed at enhancing reflexivity, reshaping relations, and increasing evolutionary learning" (Li & Wagenaar 2019, 581).

Sustainability transition research is a relatively young, emerging interdisciplinary field of research, interested in questions of sustainability and (processes of) structural societal change (Grin et al. 2011). Initially, the focus was on describing, explaining, or interpreting fundamental changes in socio-technical system, such as energy, water or transportation, often driven by technological innovations. An often-heard criticism in the 2000 s was that much research neglected issues of power and politics. By now, a growing group of scholars focuses specifically on those questions, as well as on social innovation as drivers for change (Haxeltine et al. 2018). They have contributed to the emergence of a socio-institutional approach in the field (Loorbach et al. 2017). While a broader group shares the ambition for increased research impact[2], there is but a small group of sustainability transition researchers using action-oriented research approaches. A recent review of the methodological and philosophical underpinnings of sustainability transition research showed that transdisciplinary, knowledge co-production, or action research approaches are still operating at the margins of the field (Zolfagharian et al. 2019). Within the group of scholars engaging in such approaches, we find a broad array of orientations, including relational, pragmatic, reformist or emancipatory.

Territorial development literature in Europe takes local and regional economic development as its backbone. At the local level, industrial districts have been defined as a complex and intractable network of external economies and diseconomies, of connections in costs and historical and cultural factors, of inter-firm relations and inter-personal ones (Marshall, 1890). Territory from this perspective is an economic resource that connects technology with culture, and firms with their environment, translating competition into cooperation and societal mo-

2 Testimony are the titles of the annual conferences organized by the Sustainability Transitions Research Network. For example IST 2016: Exploring Transition Research as Transformative Science; IST 2017: Taking the lead in real world transitions; or the upcoming IST 2021: Mainstreaming sustainability transitions: From research towards impact.

bilisation (Becattini, 1979). At regional level, literature has focused on the concept of regional innovation systems (Asheim, 2001; Isaksen, Martin and Tripple, 2018). Its overall premise is that knowledge helps innovation, innovation brings competitiveness, and competitiveness is the source of wellbeing. During recent years, the focus is on Regional Smart Specialization Strategies (RIS3) (Foray, 2016), which conceptually integrate regional and local levels (Barca, 2009). In this context, grand societal challenges, and especially the climate crisis, have challenged the field. On the one hand, the traditional connections between innovation, competitiveness and wellbeing have been questioned. Innovation is no longer considered a purely technical issue; it has deep political consequences (Tödtling and Trippl, 2018), and competitiveness needs to respond to sustainability (Gianelle et al., 2016). On the other hand, the field is challenged to understand territory as a multi-scalar phenomenon, where policy cannot solve problems exclusively on one scale or another, and multiple levels of government need to collaborate in policy making. Action research has been proposed and practiced as a methodology in regional development (Levin, 2007; Pålshaugen, 2013) and some of its proponents have gathered around the label of *action research for territorial development* to address both the political dimension and multiscalarity (Karlsen and Larrea, 2014; Arrona, Karlsen and Larrea, 2020). These contributions have been considered as part of the regional innovation policy field by some of its leading authors (Isaksen, Martin, and Trippl, 2018), however, action research remains a marginal approach in terms of the number of researchers that practice it.

Insights at the interface of action research, policy and politics

When comparing the developments of these three fields, one thing that stands out is that action research is taken up in their peripheries, to offer a transformative alternative to mainstream empiricist approaches. Similar to the wider action research community (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003), action researchers in policy analysis, sustainability transition research and territorial development want to live up to their fields' latent normative ambitions for making a difference in the pursuit of a democratic, just and sustainable world. Action research offers them a rich methodological repertoire for addressing societal problems, both in terms of the complexity of issues as the multitude of stakeholders and governance systems involved. Since we cannot possibly do justice to the advances and variety of approaches in these three fields, we highlight three key insights about the interface of action research, policy and politics that emerged from recent efforts to bridge them with each other and the wider action research community.

First, action research can facilitate collaborative reflection, learning and change around policy issues characterised by uncertainty, complexity, conflict and interdependence (Bartels & Wittmayer, 2014; Larrea & Arrona, 2019; Li & Wagenaar 2019). It offers researchers a range of methods and principles that go beyond just pointing out to policy actors that they need to recognise the multiplicity of perspectives, expertise, experiences, emotions and values that each bring to the issue. Rather, action research enables policy actors to recognise multiplicity as part of a joint process of learning how to collaborate in more holistic, inclusive and effective ways (Foster et al., 2019). Drawing on deliberative approaches to policy making that move beyond conventional models, action researchers can create "interpretive settings to

contribute to sense-making among policy actors that previously don't share meaning and have shared vocabularies" (Arrona, 2020, 190). While power remains an integral feature of these processes, engaging with politics and policy does not necessarily take the form of counter-hegemonic struggle. It can bring all those affected, including marginalised groups and those in positions of power, together to build robust relationships and generate mutually beneficial change.

Second, doing action research in political and policy settings means engaging in critical-relational dynamics (Bartels & Wittmayer, 2018). The aim is to challenge and transform hegemonic interpretations of policy, unequal power relations, and unsustainable political-economic systems, which is an emergent, interactive process of joint sense making and relationship building. Being both critical and relational is obviously challenging to do: how can we be transformative and pragmatic at the same time when negotiating the scope of change and the nature of our relationships with policy actors? Drawing on shared foundations in classical pragmatism and General Systems Theory (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Bartels et al., 2020), the answer is that critical awareness and strengthening of mutual interdependencies go hand in hand with abilities to holistically expand and integrate different forms of knowledge and capacities to confront problems. A concrete example is that policy actors are more open to be challenged by action researchers if they have developed mutual trust and understanding. Likewise, they are better able to change existing policies and systems when they come to appreciate how their relational dynamics have produced the current, undesirable situation. And think of how co-productive processes of critically inquiring into existing policy problems and imagining alternative futures can reveal what kinds of relationships are needed to enable sustainable development (for further details on these examples, see Bartels & Wittmayer, 2018).

Third, policy actors and action researchers co-generate what is simultaneously both policy and research (Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Karlsen and Larrea, 2014). In other words, policy actors are stakeholder participants in the research process, and action researchers are stakeholder participants in the policy process (Larrea, 2019). As we have already discussed, action researchers are thus not outside the policy process, but inside, collaborating with policy actors to address societal challenges. This mutual engagement is underexplored in the action research literature.

Building on these three key insights, this special issue is an exploration of how policy actors as stakeholder participants in action research, and action researchers as stakeholder participants in policy processes, can fruitfully engage in critical-relational dynamics aimed at collaborative reflection, learning and transformative change.

Aim of this special issue

This special issue aims to further explore the interface of action research, policy and politics. The contributions from across policy analysis, transition research, and territorial development include creative, non-traditional formats, and are all aimed at increasing our understanding of the coproduction of sustainability transformations through action research. The special issue is not only a collection of articles. In the run up to its publication, a broader group of participants,

including the contributors and the editorial team, came together to examine and exchange the manifestations and processes through which policy and politics manifest in their action research. Based on two dialogue sessions in June and September 2020, five main questions and working propositions emerged. During the IJAR Symposium 2020 on the 1st and 2nd of October 2020, the group deliberated with the symposium participants on each of these questions and related working propositions, to develop strategies on how action researchers could address these (see table 1). We discuss these questions and working propositions below, and explain how the five articles in the special issue address and illuminate them.

Table 1. Overview of questions and answers IJAR symposium

Question	**Answer**
Who is considered to have power and legitimacy to influence policy change?	Reflect on who is seen to be legitimate and by whom. Adopt and develop methods that give legitimacy to those who need power to change policy processes and discourse. These methods need to reflect their everyday experiences and practices and relate to elements of hegemonic discourse.
How can action researchers collaborate with and challenge those in positions of power?	There is a risk of futility/sterility in action research. What makes a fertile space within power dynamics? Listening to ourselves as we listen to others. Use of tools for working with polarity of perspectives (e.g. Fishbowl, theatre)
How can action researchers support learning and reflexivity about societal challenges?	Moving beyond transferability to connecting AR practices, by applying visuals and other artefacts that people can identify with (through emotions, identification and connectivity) in complex situations.
How to address power differentials in working with disempowered groups?	Methodological flexibility: Less scientific rigour, but supportive of relationship building. Continuous reflexivity on layers of powerlessness to address power differentials within and between groups. Building a sustainable movement around the marginalised groups. Skippering between conflict and cooperation with those in power – whether policy or politician.
How to embed action research processes and outcomes in policy systems?	Unpacking legitimacy in terms of levels (from the personal to the organizational and democratic) and then looking at it in terms of conflict, power, time and cultural specificities.

1. Who is considered to have power and legitimacy to influence policy change?

Action research is part of the endeavour of researchers to face and address grand societal challenges. In their article, Simon De Muynck and Dominique Nalpas share their experience in two projects, PHOSPHORE and BRUSSEAU, addressing the transformation of socio-technical systems of biowaste and water management in Brussels. Both projects used co-creation as a methodological framework, and participants were considered as co-researchers throughout the process. In sharing these cases, De Muynck and Nalpas guide us through very rich and nuanced accounts, where technical and expert knowledge on the one hand, and experiential knowledge by participants on the other, entangle in mutually transforming ways. Through questioning the legitimacy of technical knowledge, the political dimension is brought to the surface. The article thus demonstrates how co-creation enables tensions and politics to emerge.

During the IJAR symposium 2020, reflections on this article inspired relevant questions regarding the integration of action research in political and policy arenas. One of these questions referred to who is considered to have power and legitimacy to influence policy change. One answer that was explored is that anyone who is part of the complex system has legitimacy to influence policy, but that not everyone has the power to do so. The challenge is thus to co-create political empowerment of policy actors in complex systems, which requires institutional arrangements that can generate real, democratic, and agonistic co-creation. The participants argued that action researchers need to use methods that give legitimacy to those who need power to change policy processes, and challenge the dominating and silencing influence of hegemonic discourse. These methods need to reflect their everyday experiences and practices and relate to elements of hegemonic discourse.

In their discussion of the 'political', 'politic' and 'policies', De Muynck and Nalpas open a debate about the legitimacy to influence development projects. They discuss the roles of citizen knowledge and expert knowledge, and their connections to power and transformation. In this context, they provide examples of how Participatory Action Research (PAR) confronts post-political answers from governance institutions. By doing this, participants open a black box that often remains closed, and make the political and its related power relationships visible, to bring decisions previously made by 'shadow actors' to the co-generative arena. The ensuing re-balancing of power creates new and ambitious forms of collaboration, required by tomorrow's social-ecological systems. De Muynck and Nalpas argue that PAR can thus fulfil an important role, by helping the political to surface in the search for a new political ecology, and call upon action researchers to take up this role.

2. How can action researchers collaborate with and challenge those in positions of power?

Collaboration with stakeholders is the hallmark of action research, and one of its gratifying features. However, it is also incredibly challenging to do, especially when collaborating with policy actors in positions of power, who we also seek to challenge. What do we do when a conflict or tension in our relationship (either explicit or tacit) emerges? As Miren Larrea, Xabier Barandiaran, and Hilary Bradbury put it, "we do not have much shared fluency about

the importance of, much less the ingredients for and practice with, creating high-quality … relational spaces, i. e., those in which telling the truth elevates the capacity for positive outcomes" (pp. 55). Drilling down into the nitty-gritty of these critical-relational dynamics, they reflect on how they handled a challenging episode in the relationship of Larrea and Barandiaran, in the context of their ongoing collaboration on a territorial development policy in the Basque Country, Spain.

During the IJAR symposium 2020, a group of participants engaged in a dialogue on the central yet often unrecognised role of power and emotions in policy and politics. They reflected that there is a risk of futility or sterility in our work when we develop it exclusively in the realm of reason, without any connection to our emotions. But if we are to recognise and deal with emotions, including anger, fear, compassion and love, how can we create a fruitful space within power dynamics? Suggestions were made, based on the participants' experiences, for how to create safe spaces for experimenting with emotions and power. These ranged from listening to ourselves as we listen to others, to using tools for working with a polarity of perspectives (e. g., Fishbowl, theatre).

The approach that Larrea, Barandiaran, and Bradbury develop is 'reflexive co-agency': "a relationship in which self-expression of participants can be seen as reciprocally shaping one another and, simultaneously, shaping and potentially transforming political structures" (pp. 44). Drawing on Action Research for Transformations, reflexive co-agency is cultivated by creating a relational space in which participants recognise the debilitating emotional effects of coercive power, engage in self- and mutual inquiry to compare diverging interpretations of situations, and seek mutuality through other-regarding emotions (i. e., mutual regard, intimacy, commitment, love). Larrea and Barandiaran share a unique, intimate account of their unfolding relationship as Bradbury facilitated them, through a combination of joint online meetings and individual reflective writing, in clarifying the departure point, gaining awareness of individual positions, and constructing mutuality. The six stages of this process serve as valuable guidance for action researchers and policy actors seeking to transform their relationships in other 'micro-environments'; the ability to fruitfully do so is an important outstanding challenge.

3. How can action researchers support learning and reflexivity about societal challenges?

Action research can make a tremendous difference to the people involved, helping to address the issues they face. But, more often than not, its ability to transform wider systems is limited. So how can action research support learning and reflexivity that extends beyond the 'here and now'? Martien Kuitenbrouwer experienced this challenge first-hand, when several local policy practitioners with whom she had previously organised 'reconstruction clinics' asked for more help. While they had gained new insight into how their relational dynamics had given shape to the conflict they had been embroiled in, they still felt 'stuck' in their collaborative networks: moving in circles, having the same conversations over and over again, without resolving the underlying problem. The question Kuitenbrouwer asks, therefore, is how, in such complex and tense situations, action research can enable 'breakthroughs' which are both transferable and workable to other policy actors (managers, politicians, practitioners from other organisations) and contexts (future situations in the network, similar problems the policy

practitioners are facing elsewhere, similar problems experienced by other policy actors in very different settings).

During the IJAR symposium 2020, a group of participants had a conversation about how to make learning transferable and transformative. The key insight that emerged was that we need to co-create visual, creative and engaging artefacts that enable others to 're-live' what has been experienced and learned. The visual artefacts need to be crafted in such a way that a range of policy actors in complex situations can identify with them, through their emotions, a sense of recognition and identification, and a feeling of connection. This can be challenging to achieve. How, for instance, can the director of a municipal service get a genuine experiential grasp of what it means for an adolescent to be vulnerable? Action researchers need to be sensitive to inequalities and differences in power and expertise, while co-producing visual artefacts and facilitating transferable and transformative learning.

In her article, Kuitenbrouwer shares her experiences with conducting facilitative action research with three policy networks that got stuck in their efforts to address complex care and safety problems in the Netherlands. Inspired by systems thinking, she co-produced 'causal loop diagrams' by visualising their patterns of interaction, naming these patterns, and sharing them within and across the three case contexts. This enabled the policy practitioners involved to see how they interactively produced the unintended consequences they were stuck in and, rather than responding to the problems defensively out of blame avoidance, feel a sense of collective ownership and empowerment for addressing them. Moreover, the transferable nature of the visuals helped the policy practitioners to achieve a more transformative impact in three ways. First, it shifted the focus of their conversations, from the immediate problems at hand, to how they could break through these patterns of interaction. Second, it enabled them to have conversations on a more abstract level with their managers about the kind of support and changes they needed. Finally, it institutionalised joint reflection and learning as part of their collaborative networks. How to continue to sustain such commitment to and sharing of learning, as part of an ongoing transformative process, remains an open question.

4. How to address power differentials in working with disempowered groups?

Starting from the emancipatory agenda of PAR, an important question that remains is how to address power differentials when working with disempowered groups. In their contribution, György Málovics, Boglárka Méreiné Berki and Melinda Mihály analyse their long-term engagement with a Roma community in the Hungarian city of Szeged. One of the important results of their PAR process is the political empowerment of this group vis-à-vis the city council : the extent to which this result can be considered transformative, however, is critically discussed. The representation of the Roma community by certain members challenged but also reinforced existing power asymmetries. Therefore, the authors ask how to use action research for "deep-seated structural change, rather than superficial change that reinforces existing power imbalances" (pp. 83).

During the IJAR symposium 2020, a group of participants engaged in a dialogue on the underlying question on power differentials, and proposed several strategies to address these. A first recommendation was to approach the research with methodological flexibility, meaning investing in relationship and trust building, possibly at the expense of conventional notions of 'scientific rigour'. Concretely, it could mean not recording conversations, but memorising and

write up field notes after the event: since otherwise conversations might not take place at all. This is especially important when working with disempowered groups, who often have manifold negative experiences with institutional actors, including researchers. Secondly, it was proposed to engage in a practice of continuous reflexivity, on the different layers of powerlessness to address power differentials within a disempowered group (homeless member of a Roma community vs. spokesperson of a Roma community), and between the researchers and a disempowered group. Thirdly, it was suggested to build a sustainable movement around the marginalised groups, to address the power differentials between a disempowered group and society at large while avoiding dependency on, for example, a single action researcher. Finally, working with marginalised groups involves skipping between conflict and co-operation with those in power. Questions to ponder on are: How to know what is right? Where does your loyalty lie? Where does power lie?

In their contribution, Málovics and colleagues address those questions and show the difficulty of using PAR for structural change. They show the practical and moral intricacies of engaging in fields with extreme asymmetrical power relations: specifically the power differentials becoming evident in the struggle for desegregation within a minority such as a Roma community in a Hungarian city. Empowering certain actors within a group, who then 'represent' the group vis-à-vis city administration, may in the end not ensure the protection of the most vulnerable. Since desegregation policies tend to promote a certain model of citizenship (white, middle class): only those willing to conform to such hegemonic ideas are welcomed, often including those official representatives. Others are "labelled deviants, or 'non-deserving poor', in a way that intensifies their marginalisation and disempowerment" (pp. 97). Further and more honest reflection is therefore needed on how action research can achieve transformation, when dealing with intractable oppressive structures tied with hegemonic framing of societal problems and extreme power inequalities.

5. How to embed action research processes and outcomes in policy systems?

The International Journal of Action Research aims, with this special issue, not only to be a space for reflection through academic articles, but also a discussion forum. In this issue, Rebecca Santos shares key insights inspired by her experiences with doing action research in the OECD.

The previous articles address local/regional action research processes developed in Brussels (Belgium), three region/cities in Netherlands, Szeged (Hungary) and Basque Country (Spain). This is representative of how action research usually develops, as its participatory dimension requires spaces of interaction that limit the scope of transformation. However, grand societal challenges, and clearly the ecological crisis, have a planetary dimension. Consequently, the action research community faces a challenge of scope to positively contribute to these challenges. The integration of action research in the working methodologies of multilateral organisations, such as the OECD, could be a first step to explore how by integrating projects in these different scales, the action research community can aspire to congruently address the local and global dimensions of grand societal challenges. By helping understand how action research operates in the OECD, Santos opens this path.

By sharing her experiences as "an action researcher in an advisor's hat", Santos connects with discussions held during the IJAR symposium about 'How to embed action research processes and outcomes in policy systems?'. This discussion addressed the dilemma met by those action researchers that, aiming at transformation, deliberately position themselves outside the policy process. From that outsider position, they search for ways to embed action research in the ongoing policy processes. One of the issues that emerged as relevant in the discussion was the legitimacy of action researchers to transform policy. Participants unpacked legitimacy in terms of levels, and discussed personal legitimacy (researchers and policy actors are citizens and thus political actors); the legitimacy of organisations (the most cited were governments and universities) and democratic legitimacy (politicians have the legitimacy of having been democratically elected).

In her discussion paper, Santos invites the reader to reflect on three main lessons. First, to frame the value of action research with policy makers. Santos provides insight on the difficulties action researchers might face in multilateral organisations, because policy makers are rarely used to this type of methodology. Second, to diversify data and follow the story. Experiences with action research in the OECD help understand how a mixed method approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data, can help to detect inconsistencies in policy narratives. Third, to prime practitioners to participate. Action researchers need to employ engaging methods to deal with trepidation, resistance, cynicism or plain inexperience from the side of policy actors. The future challenge for action researchers operating at the global level is to actively renegotiate relationships and expectations, in ways that empower policy actors to both understand and *feel* the value of action research.

In conclusion

In the introduction of this editorial, we explained that the main aim of the special issue is to advance understanding of how action researchers and policy actors can co-produce fundamental, long-term transformations of the societal challenges we are facing. We argued that action researchers could benefit from positioning themselves as part of policy processes, rather than outside and against them. This widens the array of transformation strategies that policy actors, including action researchers, can adopt to face grand societal challenges. Action researchers can use these strategies to act as insiders or outsiders to the policy process, and thus generate transformative tensions within it or from the outside. They may even engage in both positionalities in ways that reinforce each other. We also argued for reconceiving policy actors, to include not just who we conventionally think of as policy makers, but all relevant stakeholders. We encourage action researchers to embrace this variety in positionalities and roles, to learn more about the multiple potential connections between action research, policy and politics.

The papers in the issue open up what, for many action researchers, arguably is a black box of politics and policy, raising fundamental questions, mostly about how action researchers can transform policy processes from the inside, combining a counter-hegemonic role with fruitful relationships with various policy actors. This positionality as insiders to the policy process is one of the main contributions of this issue to the action research literature, where insider positions usually relate researchers to the 'powerless', and not the 'powerful' actors. The contributions to this special issue have done more than just offer a look into said black box.

Based on their fascinating insights around power, legitimacy, emotions, learning and systems change, we suggest replacing the image of a black box with the image of a prism that reflects the light that any particular action research approach shines on it, into a spectrum of issues that require ongoing reflexivity. We would like to conclude by highlighting the five spectra they identified for further inquiry across a variety of contexts:

1. How action researchers can help the political to surface in the search for a new political ecology;
2. How action researchers and policy actors can systematically transform their relationships across 'micro-environments';
3. How to continue to sustain commitment to and sharing of learning, as part of an ongoing transformative process;
4. What can be expected from action research seeking to achieve transformation while dealing with intractable oppressive structures tied with hegemonic framing of societal problems and extreme power inequalities;
5. How action researchers operating at the global level can actively re-negotiate relationships and expectations, in ways that empower policy actors to both understand and feel the value of action research.

Further investigation of these issues, as well as sharing of experiences with them, will strengthen our ability to navigate and transform the interface between action research, politics and policy. There could not be a more acute time for starting to do so.

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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 Rancière'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*

possible, they operate within an overall model of elite consensus and agreement, subordinated to a managerial-technocratic regime. Disagreement is allowed, but only with respect to the choice of technologies (…) *the detail of the managerial adjustments, and the urgency of their timing and implementation* (…)" (p. 267).

Finally, *in order to understand the political strategies put in place to generate consensual policies,* frameworks of unquestioned thoughts and paradigms, we use the complex concept of "*black box*" from the sociology of translation. According to Callon and Latour (1981, pp. 285–286), *"a black box contains that which no longer needs to be reconsidered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference. The more elements one can place in black boxes – modes of thoughts, habits, forces objects – the broader the construction one can raise". "Only the differences between what can be put in black boxes and what remain open for future negotiations are now relevant for us".*

These concepts are used to analyse in detail the research trajectories of BRUSSEAU (Section 3) and PHOSPHORE (Section 4).

3. BRUSSEAU

3.1. Genesis

BRUSSEAU is rooted in a dynamic of activism, including one developed by the "*General States of Water*" (*Etats Généraux de l'Eau à Bruxelles*) (EGEB), an association of Brussel citizens born out of a triple crisis concerning rainwater management in Brussels.

The activist struggle and citizenship genesis

In 2002, the crisis in the storm water basin of Place Flagey revealed an opposition which had been created by the politicians, between those who wanted to be protected from floods by the construction of a storm water basin, and those who wanted to avoid the gigantic construction site. This tactic has led to disqualification of the latter, and the emergence of the concept of "watershed solidarity"[1] : becoming the object of an open public debate, water became politicised.

In 2010, following an attempt by Veolia to privatise large parts of water management (Laimé, 2010), the Platform Eau Water Zone[2] published a *carte blanche* calling for a broad debate in the Brussels Region based on the hypothesis of eco-systemic and common good management (EGEB 2010). Finally, in 2015, a citizen accessiblele collective mapping work was recognised by the municipality of Forest together, to give a common structure with a programming capacity: "The Solidary Side of Forest" (EGEB 2014a). However, it did not last because the citizens were too weak in the face of official technical expertise. Nevertheless, research questions remained (EGEB 2014b, pp.12–28) which later sustained the new alliance, and therefore a new legitimacy, between scientists and citizens. This alliance is the basis of BRUSSEAU PAR, which was submitted to the Innoviris Co-Create policy in 2016. The BRUSSEAU coalition consortium, created to act as a counter-power, brought together and

1 Concept developed by the Collective "citizen itinerary" (Parcours Citoyen) which assumed that technical choices in the urban environment had to be discussed collectively. This collective has disappeared today.

2 Expert Citizen Platform from the Flagey Square storm water basin conflict.

united seven partners as *co-researchers:* citizens, technicians (Latitude, Arkipel and Eco-technic) and scientists: the Department of Hydrology and Hydraulic Engineering (HYDR) of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, The HABITER research center (Centre d'études en Développement, Territoire et Paysages) and the Laboratoire interdisciplinaire en Etudes urbaines (LIEU) of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB).

Understanding the water management system: the technical and institutional impasse

Historically, the Brussels-Capital Region "pushed back" water, both technically and psychologically. At the time of the construction of the BRUSSEAU project, the collective understanding of the water management system had evolved significantly from the knowledge available in 2002. The floods are essentially linked to the saturation of the combined sewer systems by runoff water during storms. More generally, flooding in Brussels is caused by numerous disturbances to which the water cycle has been subjected, especially since the 19th century (Deligne, 2003; Kohlbenner, 2015) as well as the more recent significant waterproofing of soils (Vanhuysse, Despireux & Wolff, 2006).

The historical distribution of competences in terms of rainwater and runoff management is unclear, paradoxical and conflicting, between the different levels of power and services (town planning, public works, environment) and operators (BE, Vivaqua, la Société bruxelloise de gestion de l'eau – Brussels Water Management Company (BWMC)). As a significant part of the water flows into the sewerage network, it is the sewage operator (Vivaqua) who is responsible. The most disastrous consequence of this centralised, technical management system lies in the removal of the political dimension, the alignment of policy with technical services, at the expense of Brussels's inhabitants who find themselves forbidden from taking part in the decisions that affect them. This exclusion does not allow them to develop new knowledge and practices in order to respond to the increased risks of flooding.

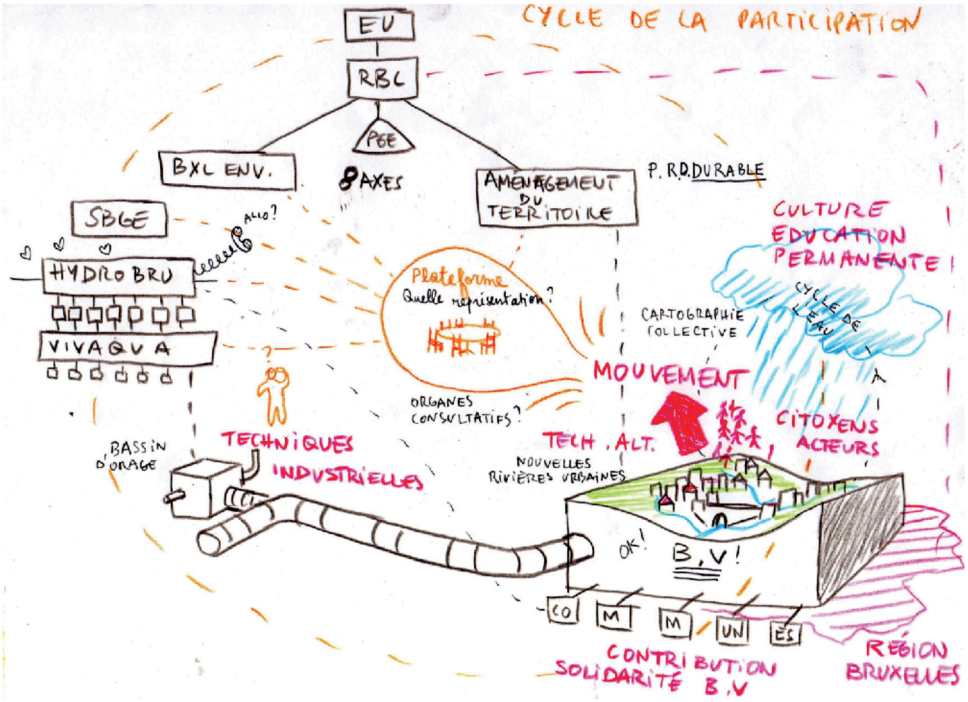
Politicize a technical issue

The main research question of Brusseau's co-researchers was: "*in terms of water management how to transform a technical problem, confined to a restricted circle of experts, to a political problem, involving a wider collective*"[3]. It was thus a question of using theories of source water management (Mahaut 2009), decentralised over an entire river basin, based on low technologies (Bihouix, 2014) that could be appropriated by the inhabitants. For the inhabitants it was no longer a question of simply participating in a debate, but of actively contributing to this new form of water management in a joint co-creative action (Whyte 1991; Chevalier & Buckles 2019).

"The hydrological communities" bring together inhabitants and local stakeholders to discuss hydrological issues, sharing and developing their expertise both in terms of the diagnosis of hydrological flows and modeling and the implementation and monitoring of solutions to flooding problems *before* public institutions enter the scene. Therefore, the inhabitants and users of the city can exercise their right to define their environment by the means of a bottom-up approach.

3 Elements from the final BRUSSEAU proposal submitted to Innoviris at the end of 2016

Figure 1. Water system management in Brussels. (Arnaud Bilande).



3.2. Tensions

BRUSSEAU has developed several devices and intermediary objects (Vinck 1999), such as historical archives, flow measuring instruments, models, etc. Among these instruments, the collaborative Map-it (EGEB, 2014a) has made it possible to establish multiple relationships between the actors involved in the process, territory and future, as well as the articulation of multiple, contradictory and intertwined logics. Around the map, there is equal access to experts, their practices and experience, as well as scientific and technical expertise. If formal equality and law take place around the map, we also observed tensions due to the asymmetry of the positions (scientific argument vs user expertise). One way of resolving this tension has been the use of the concept of "common demand" (Nalpas et al. 2019).

Common demand as a border concept to resolve facts and values linked tensions

Whereas the recourse to the technical and scientific expert is usually the subject of an order, in the context of the co-creation process, it is by mutual agreement that each one makes knowledge available to establish a co-expertise with a new consistency. This border-notion has made it possible to make the political side of co-creation conscious and visible, because it raises the question of *who asks what, to whom, to do what and for whom?* This is the key moment when the Brussels's landscape, with its observations, uses and projected intentions is

translated (Akrich, Callon & Latour, 2006) into a calculation of the volume of water that will not go to the sewers. Many of the questions that came out of the mapping work became hydrological questions, thus, turning them into facts. When facts come back to the hydrological community in order to co-decide on concrete proposals, the discussions necessarily combine facts and values, and become the locus of "the" *political* (Latour 2018). By the means of this action, the *politic* is disinserted from the technical dominance, taking into account the uses and generating *the political* (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014; Kenis, Bono & Mathijs, 2016). Common demand expresses knowledge shared by all, co-expertise and co-creation.

The black box

One of the first of these common demands took place around the project of the storm water basin for the northern slope of Forest planned by Vivaqua (and the municipality of Forest) on the site of the "Essential Garden". This magnificent collective garden of aromatic plants was endangered by the construction of a storm water basin, and the hydrological community legitimately wondered if there were other solutions to solve the flooding problem further down the valley. BRUSSEAU took up this request, and concluded that other water paths were possible. Coming from a potential social conflict between inhabitants and Forest politicians, a technical-scientific controversy arose between BRUSSEAU and Vivaqua, the classical expert in the field. To turn this controversy into a debate, we proposed that Brussels Environment (BE) and Forest work together.

However, with BE we went even further. The idea was to co-produce the set-up of a *co-creation space* for all the actors concerned on the northern slope of Forest, from hydrological communities to water operators, together. The BRUSSEAU partners reflected on the framework and minimum acceptable conditions for this co-creation and proposed the importance of transparency, access to information and the possibility of dealing with controversies and disagreements. Things were well on their way to co-producing an inclusive and community-generating co-creative dynamic. Our institutional form was beginning to take shape, but negotiations came to a halt.

We do not know the precise reasons for this new stalemate; we only have presumptions, such as hierarchical political agreements, fear of job losses for Vivaqua, fear of overly complex co-ordination, lack of participation practice, etc. However, there is one explanation that creates a system: the famous "*black box*" (Callon & Latour 1981), which took the form of an agreement that was not very visible, and that we discovered very late.

This agreement, which had been negotiated between the three partners of the Regional Water Co-ordination, determines what needs to be taken into account for the construction of the storm water basin (Brussels Environment, 2018). Consequently, it was unthinkable for BE and the water operators to allow inhabitants, or their spokespersons, to openly express their disagreement on standards that cannot, in reality, be questioned. Things were decided, and controversy was made impossible.

From this perspective, it is easier to understand why BRUSSEAU was subject to reductive injunctions. When we presented a project to extend the BRUSSEAU research dynamic to BE, we were asked to deal only with "*disconnecting the roofs*" and with the tiny parcel of land. Gone was the efficiency of water management at the source, based on a network of interconnected devices and a product of common creation. Gone was the complexity and links between the multiplicity of low tech and solidarity devices.

3.3. Confluences

Nevertheless, BRUSSEAU has worked on multiple situations in which new water paths and flow calculations have been imagined and modeled with the support of the three Brussels's hydrological communities.

A "situation" is defined as the arrangement of a set of elements. Socio-hydro-technical problems are recognised by a certain number of actors (inhabitants, researchers, institutions), and constitute problems over which there is "control".

The administration of the municipality of called upon BRUSSEAU to carry out collective mapping actions that became the basis of their water policy. Jette administration made water management one of its policy priorities after BRUSSEAU explained that there was a bottleneck in the sewerage system that was creating flooding in the neighbouring districts downstream. Furthermore, BRUSSEAU proposed a "storm garden", a very large landscape retention area that could collect rainwater from many neighbourhoods during major storms (Mahaut, 2009). There are also many other socio-technical and co-creative ideas which were brought forth by BRUSSEAU, and which did not leave BE and Vivaqua indifferent.

The new paths of water and governance

Two municipalities in the Molenbeek valley contacted BRUSSEAU to ask for our opinion on the specifications of The BWMC's contract conditions of a new storm water basin. We agreed together that it was necessary to redo the flow calculations according to the new arrangements, and to imagine new forms of governance, including a "common demand". The question which arose forcefully was "*but who is actually asking for this storm water basin?"*

Several "situations" have made their way to various policies/institutions that were sensitive to proposals, from the smallest to the largest scale and often at different project stages (Dobre, Nalpas et al. 2020). However, this is not yet sufficient to produce an instituted form of co-creation in terms of water management. Regional institutions seem to welcome these results as a godsend in some cases, but they do not necessarily care about replicability, sustainability, common demand, nor for the adventure to institute this way of co-creation.

BE explained to us that the hydrological communities endangered the hard-built Regional Water Coordination arrangement (BE, Vivaqua, BWMC). For BE, Hydrological communities appear as systems, making BE afraid of a competition of systems. It is one of the reasons we now prefer to talk about "situations" that take on different accents depending on the scale and project phase where it is situated (Dobre, Nalpas, Verbeiren et al. 2020).

In parallel to the new paths of water, new paths of governance must emerge. We have therefore proposed the creation of a "bridging dynamic" that would not only fluidify, adjust, anticipate and study, without having recourse continuously to public contracts, but would also incorporate at all stages, and on several scales, the continuity of the "common demand" (Dobre, Nalpas et al. 2020). It is on this basis that discussions with BE are currently being resumed, to generate a co-created dynamic, a mechanism that would make it possible to co-produce a multiplicity of situations, at the crossroads of networks and systems, but which would also be pragmatically feasible.

4. PHOSPHORE

4.1. Genesis

The academic genesis and the co-researchers as key players

The genesis of the PHOSPHORE project is to be found in the academic work of Kampelmann (2016). This article directly fueled the proposal content that the PHOSPHORE consortium presented a few months later to Innoviris. The PHOSPHORE's consortium was then composed by:

- the Urban Ecology Centre (UEC) which became the co-ordinator operating as bridging organisation (Folke, Hahn, Olsson et al. 2005 ; Hahn, Olsson, Folke et al. 2006) knowledge broker (Meyer 2010; Meyer & Kearnes 2013;) and systemic intermediary of the project (Klerkx, Hall & Leeuwis 2009).
- the Agence de Bruxelles-Propreté (ABP), the "type A"[4] para-regional institution in charge of the collection and treatment of household waste in Brussels.
- WORMS, a grassroots association in charge of the support and training of "master composters" in Brussels.
- the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) which worked on the aforementioned article.
- Brussels Environment (BE), the other "type A" para regional environmental administration as well as three urban "living labs" (Lehmann, Frangioni & Dubé 2015; Scholl & Kemp 2016).
- Roots, a neighbourhood grocery store intended to experiment with the design and implementation of a circular organic matter collector.
- the green division of the administration of Schaerbeek and BE that aimed to test the recirculation of their green waste and finally.
- Refresh, a neighbourhood restaurant that intended to test several types of decentralised treatments.

These co-researchers: who until then had very diverse world visions (Grisoni, Milanesi, Pelenc et al. 2018), actively contributed to the entire PAR process (Tandon, 1988; Whyte 1991).

Towards a hybrid biowaste system

The common objective of the consortium is to "*collectively developing, debating and experimenting solutions for the transformation and implementation of a management system for available organic matter in the Brussels region that is resilient, circular and meaningful for all Brussels residents, including those who are currently excluded*"[5].

Our pragmatic aim was to bring together the key players in the system (regime and niche) to co-create a hybrid: which Geels and Schot (2007) call a "symbiotic" and more balanced system. "Hybrid" because it would attempt to find systemic complementarities between the actors/techniques of local (decentralised) and industrial (centralised) poles of Brussels's biowaste regime and "balanced" because it would attempt to find a balance between the use of

4 Controlled hierarchically by the Minister in charge
5 Elements from the final PHOSPHORE proposal submitted to Innoviris in 2016.

centralised and decentralised solutions, which is strongly skewed towards centralised solutions today.

The system change strategy

Kurt Lewin once said something along the lines of "*If you want truly to understand a system, try to change it*": however the opposite is true, If you want to change a system, first you must try to truly understand it.

During the three years of the project, the PHOSPHORE consortium had gradually become explicitly situated in a multi-level and transformation perspective (Geels, 2002, 2011; Geels & Schot 2007; 2010) using Reflexive Monitoring in Action (van Mierlo et al. 2010). Landscape, regime and niches were precisely defined (De Muynck, Kampelmann, Dávila et al. 2019, p. 14). Interventions on the socio-technical-ecological system of Brussel's biowaste were carried out, on the basis of six strategic action research activities:

1. Understand the current regime (flows, actors, rules, infrastructures) and the challenges of its transformation (economic, environmental, social and political).
2. Identify and supporting innovative initiatives within the socio-technical niches.
3. Experiment with the most promising initiative es with a view to their development.
4. To remove the barriers related to this rise in power.
5. Co-construct a transition narrative.
6. Defend the narrative and institutionalise innovative actors and practices.

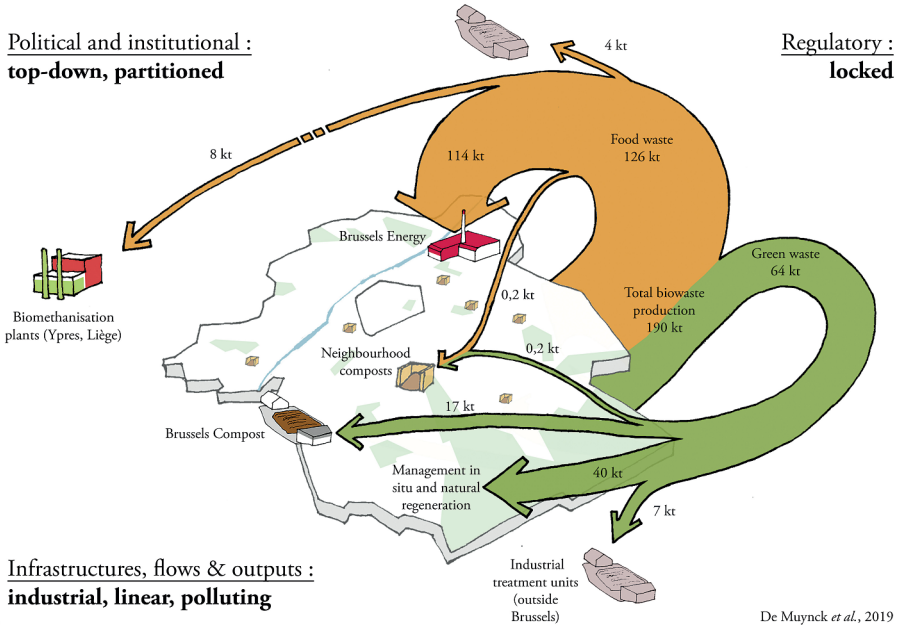
The features of action research were clearly materialised. The final intention was to transform the system (activities 5–6) through actions and interventions (activities 1–4) (Lewin 1946, 1952) and self-reflexivity (Lewin 1946, 1952; van Mierlo et al. 2010; Chevalier & Buckles 2019).

Concerning strategic Activities 1 and 2, PHOSPHORE's co-researchers had considered a detailed understanding of the biowaste system as an absolutely necessary condition for envisaging its transformation. Kampelmann's preliminary work, the corollary studies commissioned by BE, and carried out by part of the PHOSPHORE consortium (UEC, ULB), led to a consensus on the total quantities of food and green waste *produced* and *collectable* (significantly lower than the produced) in Brussels by type of actor (Bortolotti, Aragone, Athanassiadis et al. 2018) as well as on decentralised biowaste treatment techniques (Bortolotti, Kampelmann & De Muynck, 2018). Then PHOSPHORE identified all the innovative actors in Brussels. Rapidly, the socio-technical regime of biowaste collection and treatment was characterised as industrial, linear, polluting, top down, partitioned and locked (Kampelmann 2016; De Muynck et al. 2019).

Then, co-experimentation with the most promising living labs (Baccarne, B., Logghe, S., Schuurman et al. 2016), including Roots and Schaerbeek, revealed a wide variety of barriers that needed to be documented in order to remove them (activities 4–5).

The last two activities (5–6) dealing with the co-construction of the PHOSPHORE scenario are interesting from a sociopolitical point of view, because they revealed institutional tensions.

Figure 2. Sources, flows and infrastructures for the current treatment of biowaste in the Brussels-Capital Region and challenges of transformation (Translated from De Muynck et al. 2019)



4.2. Tensions

Faced with the double challenge of co-constructing a complex and accessible narrative of change (Wittmayer, Backhaus, Avelino et al. 2019), PHOSPHORE co-researchers have used the intermediate object (Mélard 2008; Vinck & Jeantet, 1995; Vinck & Laureillard, 1996; Vinck, 2009) of scriptwriting to 2025. We wanted to consider qualitative (policies, rules, strategies, actors and their relations), and quantitative (numerical objectives, flows) and material (infrastructures) elements at the same time. The PHOSPHORE consortium then recounted the content of the participatory workshops, bringing together numerous actors from the field, in prospective narratives that were critically reread by a broader and transdisciplinary collective (associations, university professors, administration employees, concerned citizens, etc.). This is in line with what Funtowicz and Ravets (1997) call the "extended peer community". The qualitative narratives were then translated into quantitative targets by PHOSPHORE, who estimated biowaste flows until 2025.

The first scenario: the impossible translation into the world of policy planning

The major characteristic of this first narrative (scenario 1) was the upscaling of the most promising niches articulated with a *modular* triple co-composting unit. As the *collectable* Brussels biowaste were estimated to be between 25kt/year and 50kt/year (Bortolotti et

al. 2018), our proposal was to start by building a single co-composting plant. *If* the first plant (17kt/year) was filled, another plant could be built and, *only if necessary*, a third and final plant would be built to complete the installation. This first emerging narrative went unheeded as relations between PHOSPHORE and the newly forming political cabinets became strained as negotiations between political parties progressed. Several hypothetical elements worked against the institutionalisation of this first narrative:

1) It did not correspond to the treatment by biomethanisation that certain members of the cabinets and administration (BE) had decided, *in a restricted circle*, and well *before* PHOSPHORE. According to them, industrial biomethanisation presented better arguments: increase in regional statistics on renewable energy production and recycling, clarity of the political message, increased Brussels regional control over treatment etc.

2) It was not fully matured, and moreover *too complex* (multi-level, multi-technical, multi-stakeholder). Its translation into the world of policy planning and politic was not possible. We were indeed asked to "*synthesise in a few points* (the) *proposal, otherwise it will be inaudible by the cabinet*", and to keep only the recycling and renewable energy objectives in the final proposal.

3) In February 2019, we received the official notice from BE asking us to "*not question the debate on the centralised solution, to admit that it is planned to manage up to 50kt/year of biowaste, and to develop as much as possible scenarios of prevention and local (and meso) decentralised recovery for the rest of the flows. The policy biowaste roadmap will be developed in this way. If we* (PHOSPHORE) *do not work in this direction, we lose our credibility and the results/proposals may not be followed up"*[6].

We were therefore witnessing the "depoliticisation" of an important environmental issue (Kenis & Lievens 2014). Noting that we were asked to stop intervening on essential terms of a complex political discussion, we wrote a press release entitled "*Towards a reasoned strategy for biowaste in Brussels*" (June 2019) which was widely relayed by the media and the grassroots actors of Brussels. The aim was to warn the people of Brussels about the closure of the political debate on the installation of a 50kt/year biomethanisation plant in Brussels[7]. The consequences of this press release were difficult to measure, but for a time our relationship with one of BE's chief of division members who provided the metabolic link between BE and the cabinet was altered. He was at the heart of a compartmentalised world.

The final scenario: playing a post-political game

A few weeks later, when the new government was finalised, the establishment of a 50 kt/year biomethanisation plant in Brussels was explicitly noted in the General Policy Statement of the Brussels Government (2019–2024), which stated that "*the implementation of a biomethanisation plant in Brussels is one of the objectives of the policy*" (…) " *with recovery of renewable energy on the regional territory. The Government will also continue to support the strengthening of the network of decentralised collective composting*" (Gouvernement Bruxellois 2019).

The 50kt/year objective corresponds to the dimensions discussed in the last feasibility study (ULB, OWS & IDEA Consult, 2018), in which part of the PHOSPHORE consortium

6 Personal communication.

7 A few months later, we received unofficial confirmation from an outgoing cabinet member that larger dimensions for the future plant: up to 100 kt/year , (sic)had been discussed and defended by certain parties during the negotiations (personal communication).

participated as a member of the steering committee (UEC, WORMS). The results of this study were never officially validated by us. Launching a feasibility study for the establishment of a biomethanisation plant in Brussels (closed focus) while participating in a PAR that aimed to explore the systemic (and open) possibilities of treating Brussels' biowaste, this is the *tour de force* that BE has conducted, and the politic we agreed to play.

In this whirlwind, we found ourselves faced with two options. The first was to make a proposal persisting with the idea of a hybrid/symbiotic system with a triple modular co-composting plant. The second to accept the terms imposed on us and integrate a 50kt bio-methanisation plant in the PHOSPHORE final scenario. We agreed to opt for the second option (De Muynck et al. 2020) and maybe missed the occasion to assume a moment of dissensual politic, as Rancière (2004) says: "*it is not a quarrel over which solutions are best to apply to a situation but a dispute over the situation itself* (Velicua and Kaika 2015).

4.3. Confluences

The effective pragmatic problem-oriented approach

The pragmatic problem-framing and solving approach (Popa, Guillermin & Dedeurwaerdere 2014; Chevalier & Buckles 2019) had rapid and directly visible benefits. We co-designed, identified the barriers, accompanied processes, broke down the barriers, and then implanted two new artifacts unique in Europe and reproducible on the Brussels territory: the biowaste collector for grocery of Roots, and the hybrid compost of Schaerbeek.

We identified the fact that the vast majority of decentralised biowaste collection and/or treatment practices (niches) were illegal, due to strict European regulations and policies and administrative formalities. Thus, with BE's Authorisations Department, the consortium co-edited a new regional biowaste decree that clarified the policy rules of local composting, in order to facilitate the emergence and replicability of decentralised and ecological practices. We also worked on the notion of vegetable "co-products" in order to be able to share shredded vegetable materials, which is an activator of ecological practices. This resonates with the work of Gutwirth & Stengers (2016) which calls for the creativity of law to create new commons. We also facilitated the dynamics of the sharing of 400 t/year of shredded plants from the parks and green spaces managed by BE, benefiting 160 neighbourhood composts. The PHOSPHORE scenario has also served as a working basis for BE's Bioewaste Roadmap policy. To do this, and given the constantly changing political context, we used a quantitative matrix we had developed as an adaptive boundary object to estimate collectively how much each treatment category could treat by 2025. We did that by taking into account food and green waste and three scales of treatment. The adaptive matrix is now used by BE, and it allowed us to demonstrate to BE the *systemic nature* of flows and infrastructures.

The next Section discusses the main reflexive learning of our two projects concerning institutional tensions and the post-political moments we encountered.

5. Discussion

5.1. Genesis

The different emergence dynamics and roles of co-researchers

The emergence dynamics of BRUSSEAU and PHOSPHORE were very different. BRUSSEAU brought together historical actors contesting water management, to rebalance the past and current political-technical expertise coalition. It is made up of a consortium of committed co-researchers whose intentions were to not only to re-legitimise the vernacular and citizen knowledge, but also the contestation resulting from situated technical controversies. In this sense, BRUSSEAU is in line with a critical-emancipatory approach of the PAR that emphasises empowerment and struggles against injustices (Chevalier & Buckles 2019), but also, on the other hand, with a constructivist vision proposing a new technical democracy (Callon, Lascoumes & Barthe, 2001 ; Nalpas, 2014).

Conversely, the PHOSPHORE consortium does not stem from an activist dynamic. Its origin is found in knowledge developed in the academic world, and thereby, the consortium rapidly became a key actor of the sociopolitical process. In this sense, PHOSPHORE is more in line with pragmatic action-research (Popa, Guillermin & Dedeurwaerdere 2014; Chevalier & Buckles 2019): focusing on problem-solving and rationality. Moreover the intention to generate knowledge from the field was also a founding element of the consortium.

The composition of the research consortia is probably, in part, the consequence of these different geneses. PHOSPHORE integrated key actors with the prerogative to modify the system and assume the different roles necessary in sustainability sciences (Wittmayer & Schäpke, 2014), i. e. a reassuring academic champion (Fransolet 2017), an association representing citizen dynamics, and a bridging actor mastering the requirements of PAR (Whyte 1991; Cahour 2002; Aiken 2017; Chevalier & Buckles 2019). With the means of rebalancing the distribution of political power concerning these socio-technical issues, which had historically always been to the disadvantage of weaker citizens, BRUSSEAU has strengthened its citizen dynamics through an alliance with three university partners and other technical expertise in a co-creative perspective.

5.2. Tensions

The black boxes and the post-politics

BRUSSEAU proposed the “hydrological communities” concept to the institutions, because the technical and institutional impasses of large infrastructures in sub-catchments were evident (floods, storm water basin under construction).

PHOSPHORE chose to identify targeted transformation challenges, and tried to address them in a systematic way. In addition, PHOSPHORE’S co-researchers tried to directly influence new hybrid biowaste policies through a systemic scenario of transformation.

Our PAR has sometimes disagreed with existing institutions, politics and policies. In both cases, the response of the institutions on large infrastructures was of a “post-political” nature (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014) and revealed black boxes (Callon and Latour, 1981). At key

moments, institutions closed certain terms essential to the discussion: reducing injunctions and agreement on what should be taken into account for the construction of storm water basins, assignation to the hyperlocality or reducing injunctions and agreement on the inputs and dimensioning of an industrial biomethanisation plant. In both cases, the conditions for an agonistic, co-creative and complex research were not met. "The politic" has emptied the sense of "the political" inherent to our PAR.

BRUSSEAU observed sometimes difficult relationships with institutions. The aim was to work on an initial dynamic of empowerment for both citizens and scientists *before* placing these collectives in relationship with institutions. This aspect was debated. Some of BRUSSEAU's co-researchers argued the need for this empowerment, arguing that institutions operate with "black boxes" making internal dynamics opaque which result from power relationships that are not questioned. They also wanted to establish the conditions for co-creation before the public institution entered the scene. Others believed that co-creation must be done from the outset with all the stakeholders and, therefore, with the institutional actors in a more pragmatic approach. The notion of "common demand" emerging from situations made it possible to produce political content and contradictions. However this common demand required spaces for co-creation and, above all, *conditions* for co-creation that were not respected. First of all, as mentioned previously the paragraph on the black box revealed that the institutional system imposed a general norm on itself, obliging the construction of the storm water basin of the "Square Lainé", *regardless of the precise situation* that concerned us all. It was therefore intrinsically unthinkable for BE and the water operators to allow inhabitants or their spokespersons to be able to openly express their disagreement on standards *that could not be questioned.*

For PHOSPHORE, the confrontation of the first version of the PHOSPHORE narrative (the three co-composting plants) with the decision-making authorities (BE and political cabinets) revealed the *same dynamics.* We were also asked to de-complexify our discourse, and to keep only the elements that were resonated most with the politics (recycling rate, share of renewable energy, job creation), which was in contradiction with our transdisciplinary work.

PHOSPHORE was also asked to follow the strategic feasibility study for the implementation of a biomethanisation plant on the Brussels territory (ULB, OWS & IDEA Consult, 2018) *during* the research conduction of PHOSPHORE. The indicators proposed and retained by this study (investment costs, profitability, required ground surface area, labour, energy generated, reusable products) greatly reduced the field of analysis and possibilities. Within the framework of this study, no more broad reflection could be made on the peak production of phosphorus (Cordell, Drangert & White et al. 2009), the quality of the output produced (Weithmann, Möller, Löder et al., 2018), the societal priority to generate energy rather than a healthy soil that can amend crops, the planning of modular treatment plants calibrated on the basis of the real and operational needs of the Brussels territory, rather than an overhanging plant that will have to be filled, whatever happens, for decades to come. Broader, as Rancières (2004) argues (in Velicu and Kaika, 2015 p.3): "*during a dialogue within an established framework, disagreement can only be articulated around opinions and values or around best solutions for a contested situation. The situation itself, the framework itself within which this dialogue operates (e.g. continuous development, neoliberalism, etc.) is not (supposed to be) contested. Therefore, entering a dialogue with a pre-conceived identity and*

position within a pre-established framework, may leave space for consensual politics, but does not allow space for systemic transformative or insurgent politics".

In this sense, the management of BE's Sustainable City Department has clearly placed us in a post-political situation defined by Wilson & Swyngedouw (2011; 2014))

Perhaps , as co-researchers of PHOSPHORE, we placed ourselves in this position and may have served as an exogenous legitimation of a top down choice already made: as Fransolet states (2017, p. 16) "*studies are rather used to justify decisions already taken or to improve someone's relative position in the policy systems compared to opponents*". It is possible that PHOSPHORE's weak positioning on the critical and emancipatory, and therefore *political,* – approach of PAR (Chevalier & Buckles 2019) may have played against the institutionalisation of the first PHOSPHORE narrative. On the other hand, much has been done to mobilise extra scientific actors in our narrative of change, and to challenge the political authorities: proto-discussions with the cabinets, press release, answers to parliamentary questions, etc.

However institutional (governance) tensions also arose because our PAR consortia wanted to have an influence on Brussels's water and biowaste policies, and because complexity was discussed: or, in the words Manganelli & Moulaert (2018) "*new values were discussed, negotiated, protected or opposed by different institutions.*"

The power relations

One of the specific features of Brussels is also the relationship of authority linking the "type-A" para-regional administrations to their supervisory minister and their respective chiefs of staff and political staff. The analysis of the role of these actors and "technical bodies" (Zitouni & Tellier 2013) is crucial for understanding the shape of the system and the infrastructural choices. PHOSPHORE did not properly identify the pre-existing hierarchical and political/policy stakes within the institutions that collaborated in our PAR (BE, ABP). Benefiting from the fruitful collaboration of several project managers from several different departments was not enough. Major and strategic decisions on infrastructure (and therefore flows) are taken by the Divisional directors, who are in direct connection with the General Board, which is itself in direct connection with the cabinets of the Governmental majority. Understanding the relationships between these "shadow actors" is absolutely imperative for the modification of socio-technical regimes.

In both cases of BRUSSEAU and PHOSPHORE, fundamental elements of the debate have been discussed elsewhere, *outside the co-creative arenas* that we wanted to generate.

5.3. Confluences

The co-creation as a basis of local transitions

The institutional and political response has not always been unfruitful. For BRUSSEAU, it seems that the critical, emancipatory and bottom-up approach has generated multiple situations in which the BRUSSEAU consortium's proposals have made their way through the institutions. BRUSSEAU's growing expertise and the relationship of trust between the municipal actors explain some of these successes. BRUSSEAU has made technical proposals,

proposed local solutions, directly impacted the municipalities strategies and policies, and is currently working on new ways of governance to co-produce a multitude of situations, at the crossroads of networks and systems, but also pragmatically feasible. The General Policy Statement of the Brussels Government (2019–2024) noted that: "(it) *will reduce the construction of storm water basins and promote alternative stormwater management through integrated stormwater management. It will also intensify the renovation of the sewerage system* (Gouvernement Bruxellois 2019, p.99). However, these successes, mainly at the local and regulatory levels, have had too little impact on the systems, and generated very little controversy, debate and substantive institutional dynamics.

In the case of PHOSPHORE, the pragmatic approach worked very well on local and on regulatory dynamics that can be assimilated to problem-situations. PHOSPHORE has directly fueled the Biowaste Roadmap policy, co-drafted a regional decree that set the rules for local composting, and changed the status of shredded material towards a common good, concluded a public space occupation agreement for the Roots organic matter collector. Moreover, the PHOSPHORE scenario is now a solid strategic basis for the BE Waste Department.

In each case, co-creation was the basis of the work. We also learnt that adaptive action-research strategies (Brunner 2010) and bridging actors (UEC for the Roots collector, WORMS for the hybrid compost plant of Schaerbeek and BE for the local composting decree) facilitated the removal of barriers, as well as the intermediation and negotiation with the political stakeholders involved.

The co-creation as a revelator of the need of new systemic arrangements

At the regional level, however, it appears that BRUSSEAU has jeopardised the governance set up within the framework of the Regional Water Co-ordination. It is interesting to note that BRUSSEAU has developed a great deal of knowledge over these years, and that the network is now in a position to enter into co-creation logics in a healthier, more solid position than in the past. The distribution of power has been rebalanced in favour of the citizens, and it is precisely *this rebalancing* that allows the project to envisage new and very ambitious forms of collaboration with BE.

The PHOSPHORE's quantitative matrix is now used by BE for its planning work, and for clarifying the strategic objectives on biowaste. Finally, it should be noted that some members of the consortium are now appointed members of the Biowaste Working Group, in the framework of the "participative governance" process that BE is putting in place for the Resource and Waste Management Plan.

Our research also has shown the need for radically new institutional, legal, financial and democratic arrangements for the social-ecological systems of tomorrow (Berkes and Folke, 1998).

The concluding section shows how PAR processes can make a conceptual and operational contribution to policy, politics and action-research literature.

6. Conclusion

Refusing black boxes

PAR, or research in co-creation, are imperfect frameworks, open to criticism and confined to short-term dynamics of projects. Nevertheless, we hypothesise that these modes of research allow the emergence of the "political", a new political ecology. They allow each actor (citizen, association, administration, academic) who feels concerned by a situation or a socio-technical-ecological issue, to participate in its transformation, while collectively producing knowledge about the transformation (Lewin 1946, 1952) and to scientific elaboration within a hybrid enclosure in which all the "spokespersons" meet (Latour 2018). We argue that these modes of research should be a mode *of political production:* one that can raise new questions, define intentions, methods, new narratives and experiments in laboratories (Tandon, 1988; Chevalier & Buckles 2019; Whyte 1991) with an *instituting potential.*

However, to go beyond tensions generated by reductive injunctions of post-politics (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014), and by antagonisms (Mouffe 2010a, 2010b) intrinsically linked to the PAR methods (Whyte 1991; Chevalier & Buckles 2019), and to meet "the political" (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014) we must refuse and denounce the "*black boxes*" (Callon and Latour, 1981) that too often operate during the current mode of political production and, thereby, we must adopt an agonistic posture. In order to do so, we must demand agonistic institutions and pay attention to the blind spots intrinsic to the dynamics of participatory research. In this sense, we contributed to the PAR literature by exploring in detail its political blind spots insufficiently explored in the literature.

Towards agonistic institutions

We agree with Chantal Mouffe (2010a) that controversies and conflicts are *inherent* to democratic societies, and that they *can and should not* be eradicated. We believe that controversy precedes the emergence of a scientific content. We also believe that we need to go further and that, based on this controversy, we need to seek pragmatically and, concretely, common socio-technical-ecological worlds. The (political) institutions inscribed in the current modes of representative democracy have neither the culture nor the tools to imagine the pragmatic forms of the living laboratories that we call upon. We believe that institutions have an important role to play in these situations, as long as they are *transparent* and *controversy can arise from them.*

Moreover, we believe that agonistic co-creation as a way of generating collective, transdisciplinary political content should come out of the research institution, and percolate into all other institutional structures and dynamics.

Towards new hybrid parliaments and complexity

In the future, new institutional arrangements and new hybrid parliaments (Latour 2018) will have to be identified and experimented with, in order to accommodate news forms of knowledge creation integrating facts, values, ethics, scientific and extra-scientific knowledge (Jahn, Bergmann & Keil, 2012). We believe that the search for a single, technical and substantively rational response is no longer relevant here (Funtowicz, and Ravetz, 1993) and that we need *complexity.* The task is huge. Tom Dedeuwaerdere (2013) reminds us of the

tendency to return to more classical reductionist and specialised conceptions when it comes to providing advice of a political nature. In our view, however, mobilising these modes of research and new hybrid parliaments is the very condition for restoring meaning to the necessary links between science, research and society, and for attempting to construct, patiently and with humility, a semblance of political ecology, in the full sense of the term.

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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 makers[1] 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 Etorkizuna 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.

as a necessary condition to respond to the urgent societal challenges presented in the introduction of this paper. The regional government has formally integrated Action Research for Territorial Development (Arrona and Larrea, 2018; Karlsen and Larrea, 2014) as one of its key methodologies to achieve this. Barandiaran, an author of this paper, is the politician leading this programme for which Larrea, also authoring this paper, leads the action research. How each relates to different members of the programme, and with one another, provides the experimental context and the learning chronicle of emerging reflexive co-agency. Bradbury facilitated the process working with the theory and practice of Action Research Transformations (Bradbury et al, 2019; Bradbury and Torbert, 2016).

One of the main challenges faced in the inquiry process with busy professionals was creating space and resources for self-inquiry. To put it simply, it is rare in politics to take such time, even as participants may theoretically agree that it is a good idea. After all, the heart of science: namely its capacity for self-correction, is rarely practiced easily in public contexts that eschew ambiguity and reward tribal loyalties.

The motivation for this paper is to share our experience on how *reflexive co-agency* can be constructed by integrating self-inquiry into action research processes between policy makers and action researchers. Our aim is not only to share the concept but, in writing together, to learn from our own experience of how this kind of apparently simple (because it happens through conversation) yet difficult (because it requires reflexivity) practice can be promulgated. We want our lessons learnt to help other action researchers and policy makers willing to experiment. Consequently, the research question that guided us through the experiment and now guides us through the paper is: *How can we construct reflexive co-agency between policy makers and action researchers?*

Reflexive co- agency

Policy makers, even in advanced democratic societies, are faced nowadays with social inequality, rising rates of poverty, various and intersecting issues of sustainability that include climate change and rising toxicity throughout the food chain, chronic illness, integration of newly empowered women and racial minorities, increasing requests for refugee asylum and digitalisation of work, all happening alongside the radicalisation of political discourse. Policy makers cannot face, much less solve, these challenges alone; nor is a clear path visible. Compounding matters is that these challenges are emerging just as citizens are taking their distance from mainstream politics (Mair, 2017). By proposing reflexive co-agency as the core concept in this paper we aim at creating a framework to explore how policy makers and action researchers can democratise their relationships and by facilitating mutuality, create spaces that will be more critical and relational. These spaces are transformative because the dialogue process is liberating for policy makers and researchers together (Freire, 1996).

Reflective practice has been defined as thinking about what one has done, after completing an activity or while one is still engaged in such activity, with the purpose of improving what one does (Hase, 2014). *Reflexive agency* has been used to describe individuals who are not only reflexive, but also responsible for both choices made and discarded (Biese and Choroszewicz, 2019; Hoggett, 2001).

In our framework, reflection is an individual process of learning from experience whereby a person considers a specific (problem) situation, while reflexivity is more ambitious and actionable than reflection. Reflexivity involves thinking about and experimenting with our own way of thinking, assumptions and underlying patterns of values, world views and interactions with others. The term *agency* in this framework acknowledges the individual drive to self-expression while "*co*-" recognises that we are never alone, and that our subjectivity is always embedded within large political structures which reciprocally transform (Bourdieu & Laquant, 1992). Citizens' capacity to shape the construction of social systems, what Gergen et al. (2015) refer to as "future forming", happens as a function of capacity for communicative action with its demands for sincerity (Habermas, 1981). Co-reflexivity thus aims to transform the very mindset and relational interactions that hold our political systems captive, in either/or thinking that is largely unresponsive to the growing complexity of modern democracies.

In the case of policy makers and action researchers, which is the context where we define *reflexive co-agency*, we find a relationship in which self-expression of participants can be seen as reciprocally shaping one another and, simultaneously, shaping and potentially transforming political structures.

Reflexive co-agency requires an appreciation of subjectivity, and therefore self-study. When developing reflexive co-agency, policy makers and action researchers turn the camera both on each other *and* on themselves, discovering different subjective interpretations of their own, actions, relationships, and the structures within which these are operating.

The main challenge regarding reflexive co-agency is how it is enacted as a practice over time. For conceptual parsimony, we propose three basic pillars of its development: emotional engagement, power dynamics and capacity for inquiry. We propose that reflexive co-agency can be developed moving *from (1) wielding power coercively*, attended mostly by self-constricting emotions such as fear; and *from (2) wielding power without inquiry*, attended mostly by the absence of emotional engagement *to (3) seeking mutuality* in which more other-relating emotions (such as admiration, love) combine with a relational orientation so that power, love and inquiry interweave (Bradbury and Torbert, 2016, p. 10).

The development of reflexive co-agency requires therefore inquiry processes among and between policy makers and action researchers so that the dynamics of power and emotions become more conscious, thus opening avenues for more generative interactions in their relationships. Although such inquiry processes appear to take hold best in micro-environments, the goal is to connect or upscale such environments to the development of wider communities.

Action Research for Transformations

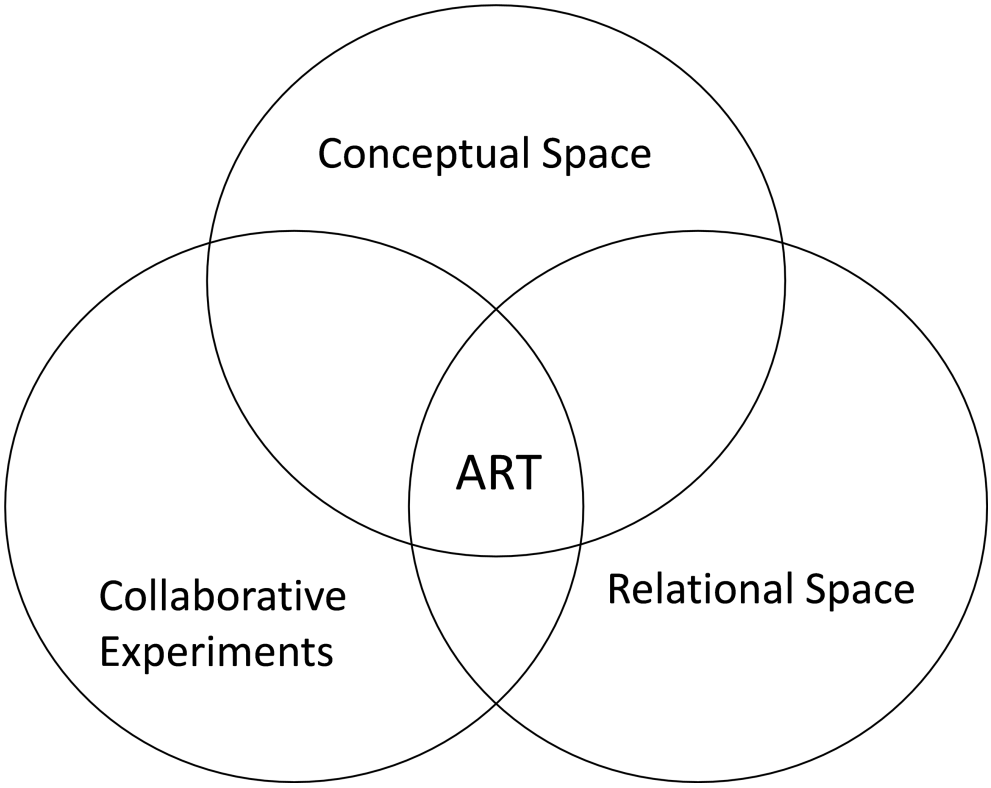
The approach to action research used for the case and the learning chronicle derives from Action Research Transformations (ART; Bradbury et al., 2019). Key contrasts between ART and its heritage within action research is the new emphasis on reflexivity with attention to issues of power and emotion. The key contrast between ART and conventional social science is the emphasis on actionability, i. e., the move to improve rather than simply diagnose a

situation. A relational orientation is central (Bradbury-Huang et al., 2010), which calls for the need to create relational space, in which people come to know and trust one another enough to make a positive difference through creative experiments together. The work described is informed by an exploration of relational power as a relationally developmental process, developed by Bradbury and Torbert (2016).

ART happens when action researchers bring the intention to improve, rather than describe the world, acting both as agents and subjects of change. When, with Rorty (1979), we stop seeing knowledge work as a mental mirroring of a mind-external world, but instead as an engagement in an always relational opportunity to recursively make and remake a better world with stakeholders (Gergen et al, 2015), we no longer simply dispassionately describe difficulties but work to include more of reality. We include reality with its rich relational complexity that is simultaneously cognitive, emotional, political, shared and also, inevitably, quite individual. ART with its pragmatic and relationally constructivist orientation therefore extends what (Gustavsen, 2014) referred to as *pragmatic constructivism.*

In the realm of politics, ART prioritises transformative response to our urgent socio-ecological crises. Figure 1 synthesises the framework of ART.

Figure 1. Main spaces of Action Research Transformations



Following Figure 1, we interpret the facilitated mutual inquiry process we describe in the learning chronicle is a collaborative experiment. It is created through an emphasis on rela-

tional space, as the collaboration between Barandiaran and Larrea is understood as a micro-environment to support the Etorkizuna Eraikiz program. This relational space enables work with shared ideas (conceptual space) in such a way as to encourage reflexive co-agency. If we conceptually simplify the process we identify as the case in this paper to make it more comprehensible, we can argue that it initially develops in sequence from relational to conceptual and then experimental space. However, when embedded in the complex context of the ongoing process of Etorkizuna Eraikiz, the three spaces evolve simultaneously in ways that ripple out to and enrich other spaces (deliberation and decision-making spaces of the project) beyond the starter microenvironment.

Emotions play a key role in ART. The role of emotions has not been well appreciated by action research scholars until relatively recently (Bradbury and Macy, 2003), despite early overlap of action research with the work of Bion (1970) and the psychodynamic work of Jakob Moreno (Greenwood, 2015). Today a renewed appreciation of emotion is emerging across the sciences. In a 1994 seminal text, Descartes Error, by Portuguese neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, we learn that human choices and behaviors are rooted in feelings, not rational thought. In other words, we act according to how we feel. Ditto we may understand the value of dialogue and find ourselves too upset to engage with someone whose views are at odds with our own. Moreover, the negativity bias of the mind is coming to be regarded as ten times stronger than the positive (Hanson, 2020), explaining why trust is remarkably difficult to establish, much less maintain, in increasingly complex democratic societies replete with social media that cater to extreme views. Neuropsychology in the 20th Century has come to recognise how "irrational" the average person is (Kahnemann, 2011). This insight has influenced, for instance, behavioural economics, and now may help build our understanding of how to cocreate a new political culture. Acknowledging the role of emotions and granting emotions a proper role in politics, can make room for learning and improvement. This is a decidedly different valuation of emotional work than acknowledging emotions only to control them out of concern for their chaotic nature, as when dealing with emotions of demagoguery (something that always must remain a concern). Instead, acknowledgment of emotion can be a path to invite radical wholeness among citizen stakeholders. Thus, we start by recognizing that all citizens: including action researchers and politicians, are emotional beings who, despite well-meaning efforts, also operate outside rational control.

When facilitating the specific mutual inquiry process shared as a learning chronicle, we did not start by agreeing to a methodological recipe per se, but rather by agreeing on principles which included an intention to be choiceful: care-full, in fostering a kind of friendship or at least a space both humorous/playful while also earnest/structured.

Noting the oddness of seeking authenticity in professional and politicised spaces, we agreed to hold open the possibility for disruptive and transformative conversation. We were clear that issues of power would be made discussible where useful. Building on the tradition of action science (Argyris et al, 1989), we strived to co-create good community and overcome blocks to shared sensemaking. We felt invited to do no harm and, ideally, to create a learning space from which good work could ripple out. In other words, we entered the micro-environment with an objective to have our work become beneficial to self and community.

We were therefore searching to invite authenticity and the possibility of alchemical friendship, which we define (based on Bradbury and Torbert, 2016) as part of an inquiry into how power develops and transforms which is present when:

A) engaging in some kind of shared work.
B) feeling high relational regard toward one another.
C) wishing to become more intimate.
D) making a commitment to develop.
E) experiencing a quest that increases – and requires – mutuality.
F) recognising the significant role of the "third" namely the mutual friend and/or community of co-practitioners.

The experiment proceeded through (1) a preparatory online meeting among all author-participants, (2) two facilitated mutual inquiry sessions online and (3) individual writing exercises after each meeting/session. When writing, each participant individually reflected and wrote down their thoughts with a view to later sharing these as part of the learning chronicle with the others. What we use as data are the transcriptions of the meetings and the written documents shared by the participants. We further explain and illustrate this approach in the following sections.

Learning chronicle: emotions and power dynamics in the construction of reflexive co-agency

An elected politician, Xabier[2], had initiated a programme with the aim of generating a new political culture based on collaborative governance in his region. Action researchers, led by Miren, joined the project from its inception and proposed action research as a supportive methodology. However, in one of the meetings of Xabier and his policy team, and Miren's research team, to discuss the methodological underpinnings for the project, Xabier explained that he was already working with additional researchers on similar ideas, and prioritised their proposals as an input for their decision processes. Miren was upset, as these decisions set the framework of collaboration between policy makers and researchers in the next political term, which would begin after elections in a few months. She wanted both to know what had gone wrong and what, if any, had been her personal or her team's contribution to the decision not to include their action research proposal in the policy programme. Was she or her team seen as competitors of the other research team? What could explain why they were kept out of the process of collaboration to this point? Feeling there was only one way to know, and without telling the rest of her research team, she emailed Xabier to invite him to meet soonest, that same day.

Upon meeting at the university cafeteria, Miren started by asking Xabier straight out if she was the problem. He replied, "as far as I can see there is no problem!". He explained he was glad she had indicated that something was amiss, as he was about to make changes. By the end of their coffees, they had agreed that organising a new meeting would be helpful. Xabier in fact called for three meetings with policy makers and other scholars. In the first meeting they agreed that Miren would lead her current team into a new combination of scholars who

2 Although up to now we have referred to the authors as Larrea, Bradbury and Barandiaran, in the case and its discussion we use their first names, to share with the reader the atmosphere of the process. Considering that most readers will be unfamiliar with Basque names and that there is a discussion of gender through the case, we note that Xabier is a masculine name and Miren a feminine one.

together would support Xabier's vision of a think-do tank in support of local enterprise. Through the case we name this episode as the pre-election episode.

Miren and Hilary are colleagues in action research. In listening to Miren's story Hilary reflected back her sense that although a great outcome, trusting relationships had nonetheless been damaged. Hilary wondered if that damage might continue to be felt. She further wondered if there might be a way to talk it through at a deeper level, as a kind of experiment in new conversations needed for action in action researching politics. When sharing these thoughts with Miren, Miren in turn asked if Hilary would facilitate such a conversation. Feeling called to walk the talk of ART in supporting transformative spaces, and hoping to learn more about the intricacies of working with Basque policy makers, Hilary agreed.

Miren started into the process by first writing up the specific pre-election incident that continued to bother her, and asked Xabier to do the same. Hilary agreed that if both were willing to exchange their accounts and prepare to discuss them together, she would be honored to meet with them together and facilitate discussion of their interpretations. Acknowledging Miren's own talent for facilitation, and her own lack of knowledge of Basque language and culture, Hilary asked for Miren's partnership about how to have a transformative conversation, and how to handle nuances of language. Miren suggested they have at least 2 meetings, video-recorded, and that they reflect together in writing afterwards, with transcriptions and video, to enrich their practice. Because Xabier and Miren lived in the same region, and Hilary was far away, they considered that the conditions were in place to have this conversation online.

We share the experiment in three stages that reflect (1) the preparatory meeting and the consequent initial stage of the first facilitated zoom meeting, (2) the process linked to the first facilitated zoom meeting and (3) the process linked to the second facilitated zoom meeting.

The departure points

The process started with a preparatory meeting of Xabier and Miren (who had already had a meeting with Hilary). The aim was to refresh the episode to be discussed. They had very different interpretations of the initial fragmentation. Xabier said that he did not remember the meeting described as being disruptive, while Miren said "for me, the meeting marks the boundary between before and after".

In the first zoom meeting Hilary noticed that despite not entering the discussion of the pre-election episode, Xabier's language in the meeting showed his focus was on emotions. Knowing it was a bit risky and that the gendered nature of the question might provoke discomfort, she delicately asked Xabier how he *felt* about meeting Miren in that specific episode.

"There is something essential in what we feel with each person, an attraction, a feeling, a confluence that gives us confidence, that makes us feel admiration. You like that person and how he or she thinks". He added "We lack the categories to explain [this feeling] rationally"

Hilary experienced this as offering more than a simple opening. Although he was using the impersonal form of speech "makes us feel…", she felt Xabier was indeed open to clearing up any bad feelings; he wanted to move to a positive set of actions. Hilary asked him what he

would need, to feel more confident in Miren's partnership. To this he replied: "I have no evidence of reciprocity".

Hilary then asked about Miren's emotional sense of things, and what if anything remained from the pre-election meeting. She replied equally clearly and authentically: "I felt like I had a glass ceiling", for which she rendered Xabier in part responsible:

"Although it was clear at the meeting that we [the research team] wanted to move forward, you told us not to […], [that] you would tell us how things would be done".

Hilary, herself an elected politician some years previously, was happy to be working with sincere people undeterred by the usual force of political reality, which demands more defensive posturing than authentic sharing.

Gaining awareness on individual positions

Reflecting on the first session in terms of power, emotions, and inquiry, Xabier shared that it was entirely new for him to work with such "subjective" perspectives.

Using the categories shared by Hilary, Miren reflected: "We are in a continuous struggle between power over[3] and power with". She was also concerned that the policy makers (others than Xabier) with whom she was working in the project might not be happy that she reached out privately to Xabier: "I don't think they [the other policy makers] perceive me as someone powerful, though likely as influential. Probably they thought I was overthinking, dramatising, or just making a mess".

Xabier resisted or at least avoided the interpretation of the episode in terms of power, preferring a discussion of emotions, saying: "I don't feel power to be a relevant logic in this episode. For me, the project was important, but the personal relationships more so". He further explained: "What you share as a conflict, Miren, I don't experience as such". Taking perhaps a risk to address Miren in personal terms he continued: "there was a feeling of admiration on my side, but I am not capable of saying what Miren's perception was. What I can say is that throughout this process I have been more emotional while Miren has been more rational, Cartesian".

Sensitive to gendered language (Miren had spoken of a glass ceiling) and responding to Xabier's awareness that he was not capable of knowing Miren's perception, Hilary invited Xabier to see the process from Miren's eyes. Meanwhile, Miren felt struck by Xabier's affirmation that she was rational and Cartesian; she wanted to know more. Xabier got more assertive about Miren's avoidance of the emotional dimension:

"my impression is that Miren is completely hermetic. Both with me and, I would say, in general. At least with me. And my relationship with her, too, is a hermetic relationship. Undeveloped, closed. There is a generic trust, perhaps some mutual esteem (especially on my side), but it is not open. And I think that makes communication between us much more rigid. And that doesn't generate the conditions for an emotional journey. So probably Miren and I have developed a (positive) opinion about each other, but there is no further "developed trust." Maybe this process will help with that"

Xabier added:

3 As working definitions Hilary had provided the following. Power over (I can make this person do something they don't want); power under (this person can make me do something I don't want); power within (I feel self-expressed); power with (we are equals and I feel positive/creative momentum together) drawing on previous work by Nietzche, Foucault, Habermas, Parker-Follet, Bradbury and Torbert.

"A very strange thing happens in my relationship with Miren at work. She is not accustomed to informality, but to formality. Then most of the conversations end either by referring to an author or by talking about how we should gather the contents of the conversation in some report"

However, his reflections from Miren's side were not as developed; he just explained: "she felt a victim of some injustice, and mostly unable to understand why her project was not progressing".

In her own individual reflection, Miren recognized Xabier'swords had had an impact on her. She clarified to him "your words are stuck in my head. In fact, I have usually been considered to be in the group of emotional and chaotic people!".

And building on the association suggested by Cartesianism, whereby the feminine goes along with emotion and intuition while the masculine with rationality, she argued: "I had championed a feminine style for years but I felt like it caused me to be disappeared into a masculine environment […]. So, I started writing and publishing *my* ideas, *my* voice in *my own* name. […]. I didn't want to be invisible. However, these ideas and my voice can separate me from others and […] I realise that they may have become an armour".

Hilary, quite taken by the authenticity of the conversation, dared to use the word love. She formulated what she hoped might be a useful polarity: while also fearing she may be overstepping: For Xabier she ventured "*If love, then no power*", meaning that if Xabier allowed recognition of positive emotions, then he would not allow admission also of power dynamics. While for Miren, the formulation was at the opposite pole "*If no power, no love*" meaning that if Miren recognised power, then there could be no admission of also feeling positive emotions such as love. The session ended with an agreement to meet again. We all felt we were getting much further than we initially thought possible.

Constructing mutuality

In the second co-inquiry session Hilary introduced gender as a conversational topic, to bring dimension to what may be unavoidably affecting the relationship. She stated her perception that for Xabier, a man with power, it may be easier to step over the difficulties and look at the future, than it might be for Miren. She then wondered aloud how each of their self-identities might be at play around gender, politics and research. Xabier responded:

"I find it strange that Miren, leaving her emotions aside, tries to find her balance in the normative structure"

Miren began to share her emotions, and how they relate to power:

"My [work here] was guided by emotions. I wanted to work with you, […] but I don't want you to hold all the cards, so that you can any day tell me I am not any more part of the [project], because that is emotionally draining"

In his reaction, Xabier admitted that power might be there and be asymmetric in the relationship:

"This reflection can make us more aware of how we use power. Any relationship, political relationships too, are either democratic or are not mutually developmental. It seems, by what you say, that our relationship is not democratic, that makes me very sad. However, at least awareness is the first step to structure something different"

After this recognition, which seemed to be naming emotional truths (sad; draining) at the heart of the matter, the self-reflection process rapidly moved toward a more constructive, action oriented, phase. Without anybody openly saying so, there was a feeling that we had reached

some trustworthy foundation from which to build. Telling the truth, in ways that required deep vulnerability and a challenge to self-identity, allowed the pre-election episode to fall completely behind; what had been so focal no longer seemed relevant anymore. Hilary and Xabier entered a dialogue on what could be constructed on the results of the experiment:

Xabier:

"In politics, up to now we consider the political objects and the rules that regulate them. But we do not consider this intangible feature that we can name as love, affection, admiration. But it exists and it is not anecdotal. The most transformative political relationships that I know have been based on the love that certain people felt for each other"

Hilary, working with her own developmental edge, in a way she hoped to meet the authenticity of Xabier and Miren noted:

"I'm surprised that you, that we, say love in our conversation. I don't think we normally say love. Which is actually really interesting. Cause we are talking about love, yet somehow, we cannot use the word. This says something about the normative discourse that prevents this conversation. Still here we are, we're having the conversation, we are working through this normative edge. And I want to say that from my perspective what we're doing is creating real contact, real transformation. Our conversation feels different, much more spacious. Even if we can only take 3% of this outside this private zone, it would be much"

Xabier:

"I have been in politics at least 20 years. I think this intangible factor, OK let's call it love, is an element to relearn politics in the context of the actual transformation worldwide. The political system will not be able to face complexity unless it becomes more horizontal, democratic and flexible"

Hilary:

"I am getting giddy. Miren and Xabier, what if we imagine offering other policy makers a space to practice this work, how to have new conversations. How do we construct the conditions for growing relational spaces?"

Miren had remained silent in this part of the conversation. She was aware that, even when the experiment was coming to an end, it was difficult for her to address love in this context. She had no experience in treating love as a dimension of her research processes and, although she felt the experiment had triggered something, love remained an alien concept in her action research.

Outcomes of the experiment

Contextual outcomes

We consider mutual awareness of power dynamics and emotions to be an asset in any collaborative process, and perhaps especially between policy makers and researchers. In the case, Xabier gained awareness on how Miren felt he had used power on her, and Miren became aware that in anticipation of such use of power, she wore an emotional armor that made Xabier feel there was no reciprocity in the relationship. These emotions might have hindered the dialogue leading Miren's research team to be part of Xabier's initial plan for the project. By Miren speaking to him, and risking enough to ask, "what is the problem?" and Xabier answering "as far as I can see there is no problem!" they could start a process to develop reflexive co-agency. However, had they not participated in an explicit process facilitated by

Hilary to construct it; mutual awareness would not have been reached. There is a need for a 'third', be it a facilitator or a community, to create some kind of safe -if not comfortable- space in which transformation can be metabolised.

There are two outcomes from this experiment. On the one hand, the process has enhanced reflexive co-agency between Xabier and Miren, in a way that allows them to speak to each other more openly and critically, and with better emotional management (Hochschild, 1979/2012) than before. This has been observed by others working with them. The following is an extract from Miren's research diary a few months after the experiment:

"Today we had a meeting with [another research team working with Xabier]. One of them asked: and do you have the conditions to share that kind of issue with Xabier? I told them about the experience with Hilary and later sent the draft of our paper. They said we should have a follow up meeting about this one day as it had produced a more positive dynamics, as if in a ripple effect"

Methodological outcomes: process guidelines

The second outcome connects directly to the words at the end of the case: "what if we imagine offering other policy makers a space to practice this work, how to have new conversations". Miren's group is now partnering with the AR+ community of action researchers (https://actionresearchplus.com/) to develop a learning space to work with policy makers in the political domain. This is a space where researchers and policy makers can continue exploring this path together.

On "how do we do it", we see another outcome of the process, which we offer as our contribution to the contemporary action research literature. We consider the process guidelines in this section could be a useful tool for second person action researchers, in processes where participants want to complement their approach with mutual inquiry to develop reflexive co-agency. Consequently, these are process guidelines for mutual inquiry in second person action research micro-environments. We see these not as a recipe, but deriving from conceptualisation of one micro-experience between a policy maker and action researchers, which happened within an understanding of developmental stages of relational action inquiry (Bradbury and Torbert, 2016). With these guidelines we directly answer the research question: *How can we construct reflexive co-agency between policy makers and action researchers?* We have synthetised our answer in six stages:

a) Define the space for dialogue and the roles of participants

Mutual inquiry for reflexive co-agency is most useful in situations where policy makers and action researchers already collaborate. This allows the parties to reflect on shared experience. In the learning chronicle above we see what may be described as a relational, second-person action research process, made possible because policy makers and researchers were already interacting. It is also necessary to agree on roles and decide who are going to reflect on their relationship and who is going to facilitate the process.

Decisions on the space for dialogue must also be made. In the learning chronicle, zoom was used: suggesting that in person meetings are not always necessary for sensitive work. We defined a process of two meetings, with writing exercises in between. However, the main features that sustained the dialogue space are intangible if necessary, these are: an intention from the start, namely agreement on the part of the participants to improve their relationship,

and trust. Confidence in the capabilities of the facilitator is also important to generate the aforementioned intention and trust. If these conditions exist, the next step can be taken.

b) Turning the camera around on self and other

Before entering mutual inquiry, it is important to take time to develop awareness of self. The facilitator can initiate the process by asking participants to reflect on an episode in their relationship they find meaningful because unresolved. In the learning chronicle above, both participants chose to reflect on the same episode, but the process can start with each participant reflecting on a different one, as long as it involves the other participant(s). An initial invitation to reflect on power and emotions on a shared specific episode may be explained as helping understand self- and other's identities. It also shows how participants think the other is affecting their development and even mutual development.

The narratives of participants on the episode helped the following rationales emerge:

- I/we cannot develop because the other is using power over
- I/we cannot develop because the other is suppressing her emotions.

c) Mutual awareness of self

After the initial awareness of participants is drawn to their own emotions and rationales, the facilitator can invite them to carefully listen to how the other(s) perceived their use of power and expression of emotions. This helps participants better understand others, and also find blind spots in their perception of themselves. In the learning chronicle the blind spots were:

- Not seeing self as suppressing emotions in the relationship
- Not seeing self as using power in the relationship.

d) Mutual recognition

Although we often tend, in the first place, to deny what the others show to us about ourselves, a facilitated dialogue can help reach mutual recognition, so that what the others see is made visible and discussible. In the learning chronicle the facilitator posed questions and, on a few occasions, tested her own interpretation too. The way she sketched the two positions in terms of "love, so no power" and "if power, no love" was done tentatively. The training as a scientist to make hypotheses is useful here, as such interpretations need to be tested and refuted if not true or helpful. In the case it turned out to help participants to see the connections between their positions, which in turn helped their positions to evolve:

- From "I am usually in the group of emotional and chaotic people" to "I suppress emotions to build a safe relationship for myself"
- From "I don't think our relationship can be interpreted in a power logic" to "it seems that our relationship is not democratic"

e) Relational growth

Mutual recognition creates the base on which something new can be constructed. The role of the facilitator, when aiming at relational growth, is to help participants think of what they can

achieve together if they constructively integrate emotional presence and mutuality in their relationship. The facilitator can thus help in articulating what can be achieved.

In the learning chronicle, the facilitator used a metaphor at the end of the second session to say that "this process was a seed that should first transform into a tree to later become a forest". (Of course, some trees also die as saplings.)

f) Reflexive co-agency

We interpret reflexive co-agency simultaneously as a process and the result of that process. The previous steps described reflexive co-agency as a process: we now focus on it as a result.

Reflexive co-agency as a result is the enactment of transformative work together. In the learning chronicle, reflexive co-agency was envisioned at the end of the second session when arguing "this intangible factor [love] is an element to relearn politics" and "we can offer policy makers to learn how to do this work".

In the specific learning chronicle, the forest metaphor described in the previous section is now re-materialised as a new experiment in AR+, in which policy makers and action researchers from different parts of the world can piggyback on the work done in this pilot, and see what they can accomplish together by taking pains to develop reflexive co-agency.

Conclusions

"We are desperately in need of a movement that shakes us at the very core of how we think about ourselves as individuals. What does it mean to love with courage? To make love an integral feature of moral [developmental] reasoning, the kind of love that risks in profound ways of being mutually vulnerable, [reimagining] who we call our neighbours…" – George Yancy, Ph.D., (Philosopher, Emory U.)
"The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" – Audre Lorde (1984).

It has been common in our action research processes with policy makers to talk about shared norms and values, but it is much more difficult to explore what goes on in the inner selves, much less to analyse to what extent these individual constructions impact and possibly impede, relationships and, therefore, transformation. The main conclusion here is that an introspective journey into self, in a process of reflective co-agency, allowed us to focus more precisely on policy related issues, to better identify the barriers that prevented transformation, and also the commonalities that can allow for transformation to become more likely.

One of the lessons learnt in this introspective journey was that relationality has been undervalued, ignored, and possibly even rendered taboo in some policy processes. The experiment showed the difficulties of the policy maker and the researcher in understanding the subjective conditions of the other, as well as their relational conditions. In addition to the rationally derived from existing identities and norms, they found, upon investigation, that there were relevant individual constructions of a cognitive, emotional and sometimes spiritual nature that had not been explicit, despite their power in shaping interactions and outcomes.

Understanding Miren's feeling of frustration generated by inequality turned out to be both necessary, and a catalyst to generating the conditions for the resolution of a conflict that impeded advancement. It was necessary to reach out to that frustration, through mutual

inquiry, to reach toward a deeper level of collaboration. However, when Hilary as facilitator asked Xabier "Can you try to think about how Miren could have felt in a situation of inequality in terms of power?", she posed a question that though pivotal, might conventionally be considered somewhat impertinent. Yet, beyond the context of this experiment, such a question may have value for opening up spaces in which complexity can be grappled with constructively.

A second lesson from the relational-introspective journey was that the emotional dimension is key to generating democratisation processes, group energies, and the levers of change that are so necessary in collaborative governance process. Xabier was surprised by the conflict, but the appreciation he felt towards Miren helped to advance in the resolution of such a conflict, and enabled a scenario for transformation with conditions for self-criticism, and a new starting point that is more horizontal and more energetic.

We have stated that all involved are citizens, and thus stakeholders in political processes. Yet our learning chronicle tells only of a micro experiment with one type of citizen, professionals within politics. In future work we will explore how a ripple effect can be nurtured from such micro-experiments. This may be shaped by earlier work (e. g., Bradbury-Huang, [2010] that convened politically fraught groups first in parallel and then in sequentially arranged intersections for learning together) and informed by today's growing literature on action research and peacebuilding/conflict-reduction (cf. Special issue edited by Allen and Friedman [2021]).

The intention to continue with this experimental path shows that our aim with this experiment goes beyond the verification that relationality and emotions matter in collaborative processes between policy makers and researchers. Despite the existence of abundant literature, as policy makers and scholars, we do not have much shared fluency about the importance of, much less the ingredients for and practice with, creating high-quality learning spaces. However, we need these shared fluency, ingredients and practice in alchemical relational spaces, i. e., those in which telling the truth elevates the capacity for positive outcomes. Here we can make an analogy with environmental regeneration issues, where researchers have proposed solutions for many of the problems affecting environmental regeneration, yet we have a colossal challenge regarding inertia in changing the values, attitudes and behaviour of millions of decision-makers (citizens, business, government). We thus recognise the existing literature that addresses relationality and emotions in the policy arena (Forester, 2009). Building on this, we see the need to continue exploring how to transform practice in the myriad of micro policy arenas where policy makers and action researchers collaborate. Our intellectual contribution is to propose the importance of the concept of reflexive co-agency; our process guidelines, in turn, help guide experiments with relationality and emotions in micro contexts. We hope that they can be inspiring for other action researchers.

Finally, we draw attention to the fact that we, flesh and blood, emotional, well-meaning persons, when transforming these microenvironments, must rely not primarily or solely on our technologies and theories (though they help), nor our structures (though we create them); instead, we can rely on our natural learning orientation and with it our capacity to meet and elevate ourselves and others. Our purpose therefore is to learn as a community of women and men involved in politics together and, in so doing, to cultivate the conditions for friendship and creativity that shape the world through the seasons of our own maturity.

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‘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:

How can facilitative, relational AR enable policy practitioners, stuck in designed governance networks, to find transferable and workable breakthroughs?

This paper discusses the findings of a research project that has been conducted over a period of 3.5 years. Central in this research project are three practices of facilitative, relational action research in designed governance networks, dealing with care and safety problems in three different cities in the Netherlands. In these practices, policy practitioners indicated they felt stuck in their collaboration, and sensed they were moving in circles while trying to discuss their collaboration. Together with the researcher, they engaged in collaborative sessions of inquiry in a search for breakthroughs.

First, the overall research design is presented. Next, three practices are introduced in phase 1 of the research project. Subsequently, phase 2 of the research project, is described and analysed.

Finally, addressing the central question of this paper: *How can facilitative, relational AR enable policy practitioners, stuck in designed network,s to find transferable and workable breakthroughs?* some final conclusions are drawn.

2. Research design: facilitated, relational inquiry

The research project is centred around the practice of facilitative relational AR. AR in itself is best understood not so much as a clear methodology, but as a family of approaches (Bradbury and Reason, 2008). This research project is rooted in the *relational* tradition of AR. Relationality takes the dynamic interaction between actors and the problem as the focus point for inquiry. The rationale is that collaborative interpretation of the relational, dynamic interaction between actors and the problem will both shed light on the sensation of feeling stuck, as well as offering opportunities for breakthroughs in discussing the collaboration (Kuitenbrouwer 2018). As the pragmatist Mary Follet puts it:

"When you get to a situation, it becomes what it was, plus you; you are responding to the situation plus yourself, that is, to the relation between it and yourself" (Follet 1924: cf. Whips, 2014:133).

The approach central in this research project is based upon practices of relational AR as predominantly developed in the field of organisational learning. Following Argyris and Schön's understanding, organisation learning is both normative and practice-oriented with a focus on *inquiry.* Inquiry is understood in the Deweyan sense as the intertwining between thought and action, that provokes the movement from resolution to doubt and vice versa (Argyris and Schön 1996). Inquiry as promoted by Argyris and Schön focusses both on single loop learning (within existing value and action systems, leading to change in practice) as well as on double loop learning (questioning and changing existing value and action systems, leading to transformation of strategy and behaviour). Argyris and Schön talk about single and double loop learning, where double loop learning is the equivalent of what Bateson calls 'deutero learning' or 'learning how to learn'(Visser 2003). However, when emphasising the need of *transformative* change in complex societal problems, sometimes triple-loop learning is introduced as a separate term, focussing on the inquiry of existing paradigms and introducing the idea of 'meta-learning' as a reflexive learning process (Tosey and Visser 2011).

As conversations of inquiry are unfamiliar, especially when in situations where actors feel learning is limited, facilitated inquiry-enhanced intervention is needed (Argyris and Schön 1996, Isaacs and Smith 1994: 376). In a facilitated conversation of inquiry, the facilitator enables

"…the creation of more effective learning arenas for the other stakeholders and herself. She is a teacher but also a learner from the store of experience and judgment of the other stakeholders. She is a facilitator but also a collaborator who participates in the research process directly and also coaches the other researchers" (Greenwood 2018).

Facilitation that enhances a continuous process of inquiry can perhaps best understood as 'Action Research in the Moment'. For this type of research, a reflexive stand of the researcher is necessary in four dimensions (Mackewn 2008: 615). The four dimensions, and how they were addressed in the research project, are discussed below.

Purpose of the group

The first dimension is the purpose of the group. In each of the three practices, the starting point of the collaboration between the policy practitioners and the researcher was the request for assistance of the policy practitioners. In each of the three practices, a diagnostic and clinical starting point was applied to find the purpose of the group. The opening question for collaborative investigation was diagnostic and clinical, close to the principles of Clinical Inquiry Research (Schein 2008). In each practice, the question *"what is happening"* was triggered by the experience of policy practitioners, namely that they kept moving in circles when trying to discuss their collaboration.

Theoretical conceptualisation

The second dimension to consider is the theoretical conceptualisation brought in by the researcher. In this project, the key theoretical concepts that were brought in by the researcher were the concepts of systemic awareness and systems thinking. When problems, like the large societal problems of today, are ambiguous, complex or even wicked, systemic awareness can help to make sense of complexity. Systemic awareness comes from understanding three principles: cycles in systems (such as ecological life cycles); understanding counterintuitive effects in closed systems (for example how floods can create a shortage of drinking water) and unintended consequences of actions (like how more motorways can create more traffic-jams) (Ison 2008:140). Practice of systems thinking in an AR context can be helpful, as action researchers can move between different levels of abstraction (Ison 2008). This way, the 'whole' of a complex situation can be grasped, different patterns of influence can be detected, and causality can be explored (Ison 2008: 156).

In order to make the concept of systemic awareness and systems thinking tangible in this research project, visuals were used. The visualisation of patterns of interaction was inspired by the causal loop diagram method as introduced by Peter Senge (1996). Causal loop diagrams are used to create systemic awareness, by connecting cause and effect relations in a systemic way (Senge 1997). Visuals offer added value above the use of spoken or written language, particularly in complex situations, as they can help gather pieces of information in one place; create a level of abstraction where important parts become salient and help reinterpreting a

situation (Martin and Schwarz (2014: 81). Next to this, visuals can add *interpretive flexibility:* room for different actors to attribute their own meaning to a situation- to a conversation that has been previously dominated by a search for 'wrong' and 'right' (Pinch and Bijker 1984). Earlier experiments with likeminded visualised patterns of interaction were developed in the so-called Buurtpraktijkteams ('Neighbourhood practice teams') in Amsterdam from 2010 until 2014, where the researcher was involved as a policy maker. Here, policy practitioners, citizens and policy makers tried to make sense of the problems they encountered in the neighbourhood, by drawing simplified versions of causal-loop diagrams[1].

The broader context

A third important dimension in facilitative AR is the notion of the broader context. In order to make sure that the purpose of the group and the purpose of the collaboration is not lost, the facilitator needs to be able to shift from the outside world (who and what is not part of the practice) to the inside world (who and what is part of the practice) and vice versa. Important in this research project was the focus on transferability and workability of outcomes. In order to enhance transferability and workability, the researcher and the policy practitioners decided to invite managers as well as other members of the governance networks in the collaborative sessions of inquiry. Next to this, with the aim to include the broader context and move beyond the situatedness of each practice, the three practices were actively connected by the researcher.

Choreography and energy of the group

Finally, as a fourth dimension, the choreography and energy of the group requires attention. In each of three practices, the researcher gave specific attention to the creation of ground rules in order to create safe space. These ground rules included the agreement that what was said during the collaborative learning sessions would not be disclosed to others unless otherwise agreed; the outcome that was put on paper was a product of the whole group, and that the researcher worked for the entire group, and not for one specific organisation in particular. Next to this, the designs of the collaborative conversations of inquiry sessions and role of the researcher were discussed with the core co-ordinators of the designed governance networks, during the length as well as at the end of the sequence of collaborative conversations of inquiry.

2.3. The selection of practices

Important in the selection of the practices was the *opportunity* for connectivity. Connectivity, as introduced by Karlsen and Larrea (2014), implies that the learning process that took place in one particular context can be extended into other contexts, by actively engaging with other researchers and practitioners. This way, workability and transferability of knowledge can be enhanced (Canto-Farachala and Estensoro 2020). Connectivity can be facilitated through bridging spaces between AR communities, by making use of facilitative researchers. Im-

1 See *Opvallend Dichtbij II (2014) Werkwijze Buurtpraktijkteams Amsterdam West* for a more detailed description of the Buurtpraktijkteams

portant here is that challenges, social and cultural values as well as institutional conditions are similar (Canto-Farachala and Estensoro 2020). Following the principles of connectivity, the practices were selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- *Similarity in context:* all three practices are set in localised designed networks around care and safety issues in an urban area. In these networks, policy practitioners are set to collaborate in a setting that is new to them. The collaborative task in each of the three practices can be described as ambiguous as well as (politically) urgent.
- *Previous experience with the reconstruction clinic:* all three practices started with experimentation with the methodology of the reconstruction clinic. The reconstruction clinic was developed as part of the Public Mediation Programme of the University of Amsterdam[2]. The reconstruction clinic has been designed for situations of conflict in ambiguous and complex policy situations, where policy practitioners feel stuck. In the reconstruction clinic, policy practitioners reflect upon the history of their interactions, by creating a (visualised) timeline together. This timeline is subsequently used to reconstruct the different perspectives and assumptions of past events that may have provoked the dynamics in the collaboration. The insights gained during the creation and reflection upon the timeline can lead to the reframing of underlying problems which then potentially lead to breakthroughs (see Kuitenbrouwer 2018; Forester, Kuitenbrouwer, Laws 2019 for more details about the reconstruction clinic). In each of the three practices, policy practitioners started their collaborative search for breakthroughs with this methodology and subsequently agreed to continue to explore other designs.
- *Voluntary request for assistance:* the policy practitioners in each of the three practices expressed a sensation of feeling stuck in their collaboration. They themselves expressed a desire to find breakthroughs, and asked for assistance of the researcher in finding these.
- *Sequential development:* The three practices developed sequentially in a period of three and a half years. This allowed for the researcher to build-up knowledge and insights, both within each practice as well as across the three practices over time.

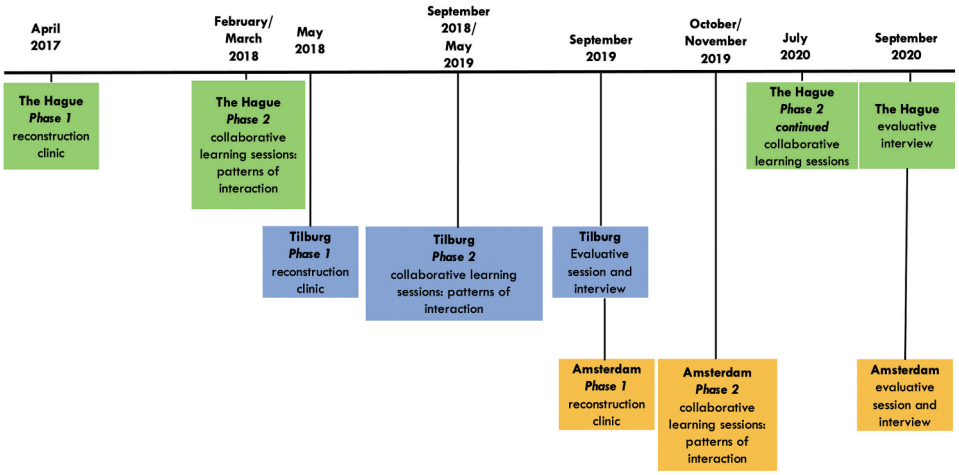
The involvement in each practice started with a short intake with the person responsible for the co-ordination within the network, the same person who reached out to the researcher in the first place. Subsequently, a number of collaborative learning sessions were organised over time. At the end of sequence of these collaborative learning sessions in all three practices, reflective interviews were held with the same persons, to discuss their reflection upon the outcomes.

3. Three problematic practices, phase 1

Three practices of designed governance networks that were organised around care and safety problems in three different cities in the Netherlands (The Hague, Tilburg and Amsterdam) are discussed below. Even though the collaboration between the policy practitioners and their organisations was not new, new political ambitions and targets had been formulated for their collaborative performance.

2 Public Mediation Programma UvA www.uva/pmp ; Public Mediation www.public-mediation.nl

Figure 1. Timeline practices 2017–2020



Policy practitioners felt stuck in their attempt to improve their collaboration and reached out to the researcher for help. Together with the researcher, a number of collaborative conversations of inquiry were initiated in order to investigate what was happening.

In The Hague, pressure from the newly installed Mayor to improve the prevention of domestic violence resulted in a newly designed governance network. Results were not immediately visible, leaving the responsible programme manager feeling frustrated. Especially when discussing the difficulties in their collaboration with the practitioners in the network, she felt stuck:

"Every time we sit together, we just have a chat and always, someone brings the discussion to 'we need more money, better co-ordination, a clear steering structure…it's always the same answer.." (Interview 2).

A similar experience was felt in Tilburg, where policy practitioners were set to collaborate in a newly launched approach aimed at turning crime figures in problematic neighbourhoods where social problems were piling up. The area manager of Tilburg Groenewoud, one of the targeted neighbourhoods recalled the uneasy start:

"Then there was the kick-off…the pressure increased…something had to happen….It was sort of dropped upon us by the Mayor.." (Interview 1).

When trying to discuss their collaboration with the partners in the network, she felt frustrated:

"our partners kept asking, where is the money, what do we need to do?" (Interview 1).

In Amsterdam, the Mayor pushed for improving collaboration between departments and organisations concerned with youth and safety, after an alarming report about juvenile delinquency in the western outskirts of the city was published. However, finding ways to do this was far from easy. The municipal programme manager for youth and safety revealed:

"We (department of youth policy) have been analysing this problem for a long time..together with the department of safety, the different districts in Amsterdam and other partner organisations, we have concluded that the policy domains of youth safety are not well connected.." (Interview 4).

What stands out in an initial analysis is the policy practitioners had to deal with newly top-down formulated goals and targets that seemed ambiguously formulated, open for multiple interpretations and sometimes even perceived as unattainable. This left policy practitioners feeling increasingly irritated, frustrated and sometimes even impotent. When seeking to discuss their collaboration, 'temporary band-aids' were sought. Policy practitioners as well as their managers called for 'more coordination', 'more money' or 'a clear management structure'. As Rein points out, these conventional solutions emerge in situations where the pressure to perform is high and 'talking' is considered a waste of time (Rein 2009). Underlying these 'temporary band-aids' is the assumption that resource scarcity or fragmentation of services prevents collaboration of being effective (Rein, 2009). However, in these practices, these conventional solutions did not seem to improve the collaboration and more importantly, the *discussion* about how to improve their collaboration seemed dominated by 'defensive reasoning'. 'Defensive reasoning', as defined by Argyris (1991), is a type of conversation that is characterised by seeking for 'right' or 'wrong' and where actors seek to be as rational as possible, defining clear objectives and evaluating behaviour in terms of achievement (Argyris 1991:8). The purpose is to avoid embarrassment or threat, feeling vulnerable or incompetent. Since underlying behaviour, frames and perspectives are not discussed, these types of discussions are often repetitive (Argyris 1991: 8).

In all three practices, the managers responsible for improving collaboration reached out to the Public Mediation Programme of the University of Amsterdam. As a first step, a reconstruction clinic was suggested, in order to reflect upon past events together. During the reconstruction clinic, a frame reflective conversation took place when participants revealed and discussed their individual perspectives of the situation. (Kuitenbrouwer, 2018) However, the chronological design of the timeline: key to the design of the reconstruction clinic, did not lift the deeply felt sensation of participants that they were moving in circles. In Tilburg, one of the participants revealed:

"We have to better understand the consequences of our actions or we will make the same mistakes over and over again..' (area manager Tilburg Groenewoud, comment made during collaborative learning session)

Similar comments were made in Amsterdam:

'What we see now is that the situation in the neighbourhood repeating itself, how do we find break throughs?' (Project leader Youth and Safety during session, sept 2019).

The programme manager in The Hague concluded:

'The points that have come out were very relevant. It was good that people were able to share and make recommendations together. But I am afraid it will not change anything…This is not the first time we deal with a case like this: we are seeing this over-and-over again: all suggestions that are made come down to more money and extra coordination… Somehow, we do not seem to be able to discuss our collaboration on a more fundamental level…" (personal communication)

In conclusion, the reconstruction clinic seemed helpful to open up the discussion between policy practitioners who felt frustrated about the situation, but the feeling of moving in circles remained and policy practitioners still felt as if the situation could easily repeat itself.

4. Phase 2: In search for breakthroughs: the practices revisited

In each of the three practices, the researcher was invited to continue to work with the policy practitioners after the initial slightly disappointing outcome of the reconstruction clinics. During the collaborative learning sessions that were organised subsequently in each practice, policy practitioners and the researcher experimented with visualisations inspired by causal loop diagrams methodology.

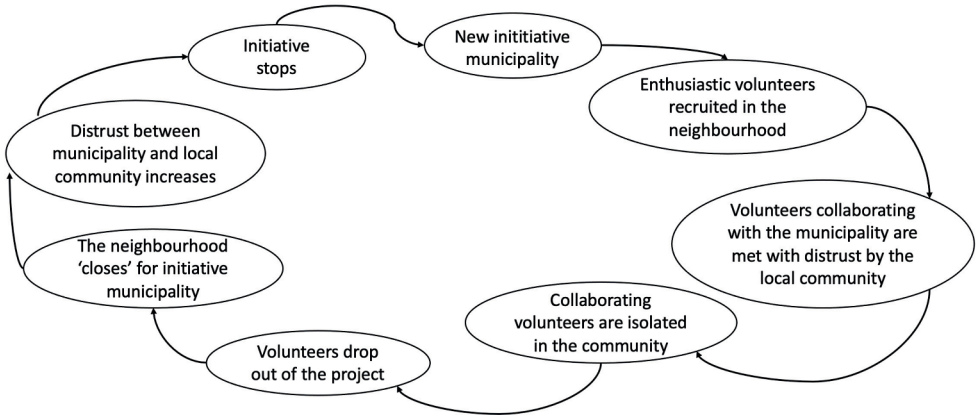
In The Hague, ten months after the initial reconstruction clinic, the programme manager invited the researcher to work with her and two other practitioners. The programme manager expressed a desire to move beyond the sensation of moving in circles and find novel ways to discuss the problems of collaboration. During the collaborative inquiry sessions that followed, three cases were explored: the case that had been the focus in the previous reconstruction clinic, and two other cases that had left the policy practitioner with a similar feeling of repetition. During the conversations, the researcher abstracted the sensation of repetition that was expressed by the policy practitioners, in a number of closed, re-enforcing patterns of interaction. One of the most revealing patterns that was discussed was the pattern where the individual diagnosis of the different practitioners involved did not 'add up' to an alarming situation. As a result, none of the practitioners involved was able to see the tragedies of domestic violence unfolding.

Figure 2. Dynamic pattern of interaction made in The Hague March 2018

In Tilburg, the researcher was invited by a small group of policy practitioners that were present during the reconstruction clinic, and who had decided to take the lead in finding new ways to improve the collaboration within the newly designed network. Like in The Hague, during the collaborative sessions of inquiry that followed, policy practitioners discussed the situation that was analysed during the reconstruction clinic as well as other situations that had left them with similar feelings. During the conversations, the researcher again abstracted the patterns of interaction that seemed most important. As one of the visuals revealed, practitioners were

‘captured’ in a way of working together with volunteers from the community that alienated rather than created trust between the municipality and the community.

Figure 3. Dynamic pattern of interaction made in Tilburg September 2018



In Amsterdam, the researcher was also asked to facilitate a number of subsequent collaborative sessions of inquiry after the reconstruction clinic. Again, the researcher asked practitioners to bring in specific situations that had left them with a feeling of repetition. During the conversation, the researcher drew one of the patterns that had originally been drawn in Tilburg. The visual reflected the sensation of practitioners of starting all-over, time and time again.

The visual provoked a strong reaction of recognition among the policy practitioners in Amsterdam. Not only did policy practitioners recognise the situation in their neighbourhood, they also retrospectively recognised earlier, similar situations as well. One practitioner who was present recalls:

” while we were doing this, I was reflecting upon this other situation in the east of Amsterdam..I always felt that I somehow failed…but now, I understand that it was not just me..we are responsible for these repetitive circles of failure together ..” (Interview 4)

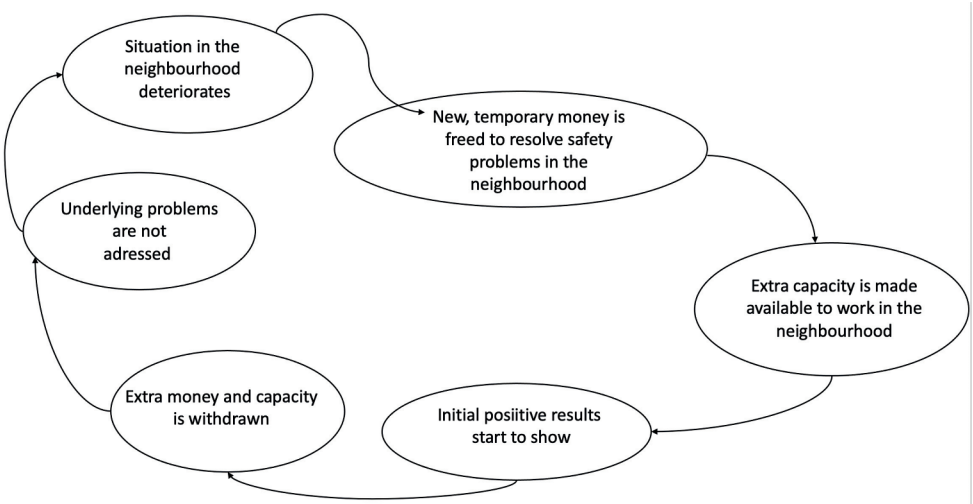
What was noticeable in each of the three practices, is that the visuals helped the policy practitioners to understand each other’s (different) perspectives of the situation:

“during these settings..we finally took the time to sit together and look at the results of our work. We learned each other’s perspectives…(Interview 3).

But perhaps more important, policy practitioners were also able to see the unintended consequences of their actions. The programme manager in The Hague explained:

” it’s not only that we did not know each other’s piece of the puzzle…it was also that we could see how each individual action had unintended consequences…because nobody seemed alarmed, everybody thought: it’s probably not so bad” (Interview 2)

Figure 4. Dynamic pattern of interaction made in Tilburg and recreated in Amsterdam September 2019



In understanding the unintended consequences of their actions, policy practitioners were able to see how they connected. The project manager for youth and safety in Amsterdam revealed:

"when these visuals are drawn, suddenly you see yourself being part of these events….and therefore also how you can help to find breakthroughs" (Interview 3)

What was important that in seeing this abstracted pattern of interaction and the unintended consequences of their actions, policy practitioners seemed to feel lifted from their feeling of impotence and guilt. For the project manager in Amsterdam, this sensation was very powerful:

" with these visuals, it became concrete…all of a sudden we did not feel powerless anymore, it gave us the insights that we needed to find breakthroughs together.." (Interview 3)

What was important here was the sensation of a shared experience of 'captivation':

These visuals really worked…while drawing these visuals, the situation suddenly became 'ours'..we realised we were captured together…and also that we needed each other to find breakthroughs.." (Interview 3)

As a next step, in all three cases, the visuals that were drawn up by the researcher were 'named' by the group. This naming was important for the policy practitioners present, in order to enhance their feeling of appropriation. In Amsterdam, one of the visuals that was drawn reflected a pattern of interaction that occurred when the municipality and other public organisations did not keep their promises of investing in the neighbourhood.

The name that was given to this pattern by the policy practitioners ('we are obviously not worth it') reflected a deeply felt sensation. As one of the youth workers remarked:

'*this pattern is also about us'* (comment made during the collaborative learning session September 2019).

In Tilburg, the group decided to name the pattern (as shown in figure 3) 'a friend of the local municipality is our enemy'. This name had a powerful effect upon the participants:

Figure 5. Dynamic pattern of interaction drawn in Amsterdam September 2019

“people here distrust those who collaborate with the local government…they just won’t….actually, we see that a lot… those who are close to the local administration are mistrusted..” (interview clip area manager Tilburg Groenewoud – Leerdocument Tilburg Groenewoud).

The naming of the patterns allowed the policy practitioners to create their own collaborative language, but also to communicate their experiences to their managers and other stakeholders involved. The project manager in Amsterdam revealed:

“all of a sudden we were able to have a different kind of conversation…we created our own language…By giving words to what we saw and experienced together helped us to communicate among each other, but also to others, our managers, politicians etc..we really understand each other” (Interview 3)

In The Hague, policy practitioners decided to name the pattern that was drawn by the researcher (as shown in figure 2) ‘no need to worry’. The name of the pattern was carefully chosen, not only as a way to appropriate the situation by the policy practitioners present, but also as a way to communicate the situation with others:

“This is something that is said regularly, everybody will recognise this” (care practitioner – comment made during the collaborative learning session – March 2018).

The broader communication and usage of the patterns that were made and named in the smaller group became an important goal in The Hague:

“these visualised patterns of interaction..they are really helpful..you recognise one in a certain situation but immediately see how the same pattern occurs in other situations as well” (Interview 2)

In Tilburg, the named patterns were also used as way to communicate the experiences to the broader network of practitioners in the neighbourhood. The pattern that was named ‘a friend of the municipality is our enemy’ provoked a sense of recognition of other policy practitioners. A housekeeper of the local housing association recalled:

"This distrust vis-à-vis public officials, I see that a lot…people just stop calling because they do not trust us…they think we are just not going to show up…and then they just get angry…and blame public officials for everything.." (Interview clip neighbourhood officer – Leerdocument Tilburg Groenewoud)

Initially, the meetings in Tilburg were facilitated by the researcher, gradually, the core team of the three policy practitioners took over. During the next year, they organised monthly meetings with their network of policy practitioners in the neighbourhood: including the local police, youth workers, social workers, the housing association, and representatives of the local unemployment service. During these discussions, the patterns of interaction became the focus point of the discussion, as conversations centred around what could be done to breakthrough these patterns of interaction:

"If we do not break through this pattern of interaction , we will never succeed in this neighbourhood" (area manager, comment made during the collaborative learning session)

However, breaking through the tenacious patterns of interaction was not always easy. In The Hague, the programme manager intended to show and discuss the visuals in other, similar situations, where policy practitioners felt stuck. However, this turned out to be more difficult the expected:

"We are always really good at saying: oh, this situation is unique..we never really engage in a conversation that is broader that one case" (Interview 2)

Finally, in June 2020, a new collaborative session of inquiry around a traumatic situation of domestic violence, where policy practitioners once again felt a lack of progression, was organised. Although the organisations present were largely the same as the reconstruction clinic held in 2017, the actual policy practitioners present were mostly new. The conversation was facilitated by the researcher and the programme manager together. During the session, the researcher drew a number of visuals originally from Amsterdam, that were subsequently discussed and altered by the policy practitioners in The Hague, emphasising their level of frustration:

Finally, the group discussed how to communicate their insights and engage their managers in what they had just experienced together. This seemed a crucial step for the practitioners for breaking through their sensation of feeling stuck and also to prevent the network from making the same mistakes in the future. Two weeks later, the managers met, and the visuals were presented and discussed. What was interesting was that the visuals helped the managers to have a conversation on a more abstract level that actually helped them to see the tasks they had to do as managers. The programme manager was surprised:

"They do not really like to talk about individual cases…this language we made helps to communicate upon their level as well" (Interview 2)

In Amsterdam, sharing experiences with the managers was also an important step. Policy practitioners decided to invite their managers to one of the collaborative learning sessions and show them the visuals that were made. During the meeting, managers joined in the conversation, sharing the experience. Particularly the visual that was named '*competition of activities*' , demonstrating how different organisations competed for activities in the neighbourhood rather than collaborating, made an impression:

"I can speak for myself here, but my organisation does this indeed…we tend to compete for money for activities, rather than collaborate.." (manager youth work, comment made during the collaborative learning session)

Figure 6. Dynamic pattern of interaction, originally made in Amsterdam, adopted by and adapted in The Hague

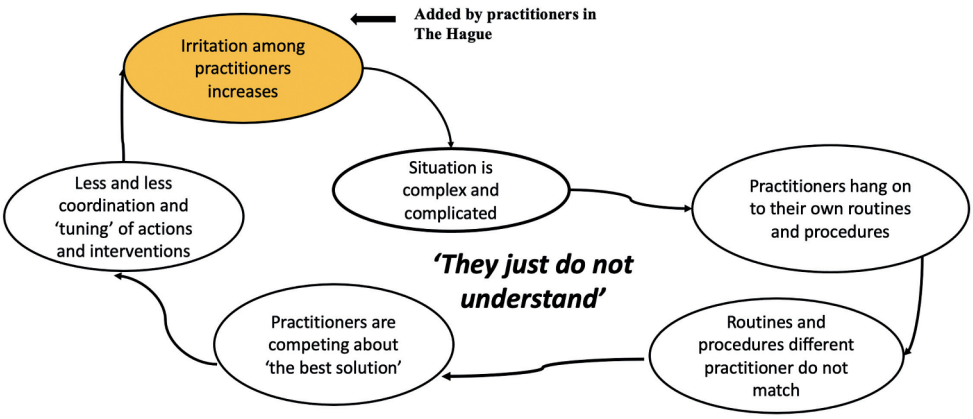
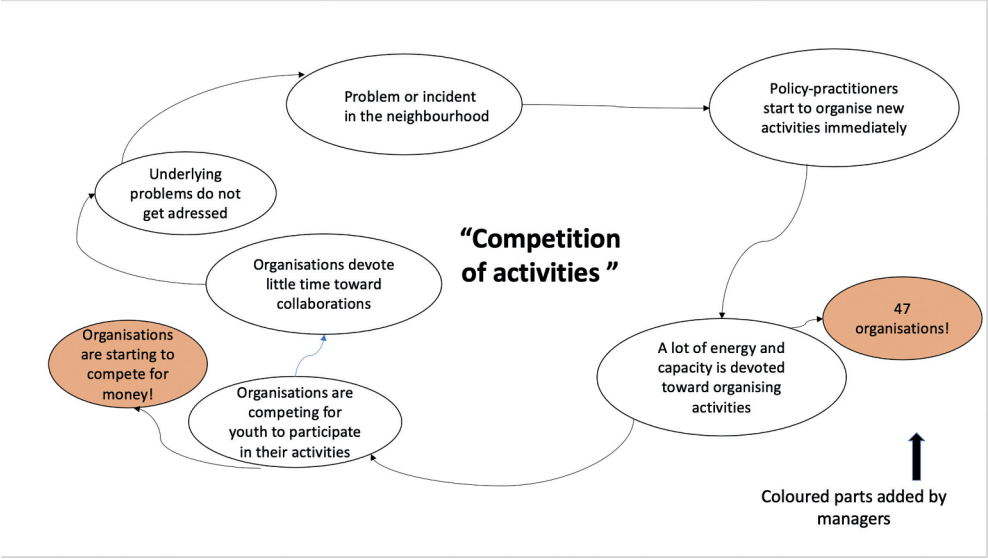


Figure 7. Dynamic patterns of interaction: drawn in Amsterdam September 2019



Finally, in all three practices, transformative change was reported by the core group of policy practitioners involved. In Tilburg, the core group evaluated their work in an evaluative session, one year after the start of their collaborative learning sessions:

” It was really hard in the beginning, but we [policy practitioners] trust each other now..” ...

*"..within each of the organisations that are part of the network, we feel support..we feel no longer alone" (*comments made during the evaluative session September 2019)

The new collaborative approach is now a prominent part of the city broad approach for regenerating problematic neighbourhoods.

In The Hague, two months after the conversation with the managers, one of the participants contacted the researcher and the programme manager. The conversation with the managers certainly had a lot of impact. One of the managers present revealed in an email:

" this meeting stayed in our heads until now.. both the energy we felt as well as the insights that we learned.." (personal communication)

She continued her email by stating that the managers agreed to meet again, and reflect upon their written and unwritten rules, regulations and protocols together:

'we are going to renew our vows together' (personal communication)

In Amsterdam: the network of youth and safety continued their collaborative meetings and worked out a new set of collaborative working principles together:

"we are one team now, we trust each other…we all feel responsible…we feel this ourselves, but perhaps more important, the youth in the neighbourhood feel this as well" (comment made during evaluative session September 2020).

The policymaker of the municipality youth department expressed the desire to initiate this way of collaboration in all problematic neighbourhoods of Amsterdam. In discussing how to transfer what has been learned to other neighbourhoods, she declared:

"We need to find a way to communicate what we experienced during these meetings..these experiences were so powerful…these visuals really work….they can communicate a common feeling of frustration that is recognised in all these neighbourhoods.. (Interview 4).

The municipality recently asked the researcher to set up reflective conversations with policy practitioners around the city, where the patterns of interaction developed in the western outskirts will be used as a starting point for discussion.

5. Discussion and conclusion

When reflecting on the practices described above, a number of findings are important.

As these practices demonstrate, policy practitioners were finally able to find breakthroughs out of their sensation of feeling stuck in their designed networks. Policy practitioners testified about trust that had been built and about their newly developed collaboration. What was perhaps most important, is that policy practitioners testified about how they found new language to discuss their collaboration. Coming back to the key question: *How can facilitative AR enable policy practitioners stuck in designed networks to find transferable and workable breakthroughs?* a number of things stand out.

First, as was demonstrated in the practices described, learning was not so much an individual process, but a highly relational process, of '*influencing and being influenced*' (Follet cf Whips 2014: 409). Striking here is that the initial recognition of the interdependent

relational dynamics helped practitioners to overcome their individual feelings of guilt and underperformance, and by this ending their search for externalised solutions such as 'more co-ordination' and 'more money' and overcoming their previous discussions of defensive reasoning. The facilitated inquiry in underlying perspectives helped to understand that *different* understandings of the situation were not necessarily problematic, but rather beneficial for grasping the complexity.

Second, as was demonstrated in each of the practices, the visualised level of abstraction of the closed, self-enforcing patterns of interactions, helped participants to see the unintended consequences of their actions, as is important in systems thinking (Ison 2008). The visuals helped practitioners to *experience* the dynamic structure of their interdependence and the unintended consequences of their actions. Interestingly enough, the linear timelines that were made previously in the reconstruction clinic did not have the same effect. This seems to indicate that the *actual visualisation* of the dynamic patterns of interaction needs to correspond with the sensation the participants held of their situation over time. While the timeline emphasised *past* events, actions and their consequences, the visuals that showed closed patterns of dynamic interdependence emphasised the sensation of repetitive and recurring events and actions, or in other words: 'moving in circles'. By capturing and communicating their experience, the visuals helped policy practitioners to overcome deeper felt emotions of guilt and solitude.

Third, the subsequent collaborative *naming* of the patterns that were discovered assisted policy practitioners in giving meaning to the patterns. Like metaphors, the names that were given helped policy practitioners to express previously unarticulated understanding of a situation (Yanow 1996 pp 134). The careful selection of these names however also indicated that this was an important step in appropriation of the situation. What became clear over time is that the named visuals also served as a 'borrowing structure': an easily recognisable picture that might help participants to discuss similar problem situations (Martin and Schwarz, 2014: 81). The named visuals assisted policy practitioners to connect their localised, unique situation to a more generic type of situation, within their own practice, and also across different practices. Policy practitioners were able to recognise themselves in the patterns and names that were drawn by other policy practitioners who felt stuck in similar situations. This way, like metaphors, the named visuals were both a reflective model *of* a certain situation, as well as a model *for* a situation (Yanow, 1996 pp 135), enhancing workability and transferability.

Fourth, the examining of different perspectives, the visualisation and naming of the collaborative sensation of moving in circles, enabled a *metalogue* among policy practitioners where trust could be built. Metalogues, as defined by Bateson are conversations where participants'*..discuss the subject and where the structure of the conversation as a whole is also relevant to the same subject*- (Bateson 1972: 12). In other words, as demonstrated in the practices, not only the problematic situation but also the way collaboration was discussed was part of the conversation. The cathartic effect of these conversations made participants open to '*bet about the future contingent actions of others',* in other words to build trust (Szompka 1999).

Finally, underlining the findings of Canto-Farachala and Estensoro (2020), active bridging between AR practices helped to enhance transferability and workability of experiences. What was demonstrated here is that in bridging different practices, the researcher was able to improve design features across practices and that each practice benefited by learning

from the experience of others in finding breakthroughs out of their sensation of moving in circles.

Coming back to the central theme of this special issue, relational, facilitative AR can contribute beyond the limitations of its situated character, in enhancing transformative change of complex societal problems by enhancing *transferability* and *workability* of outcomes. By facilitating a process of inquiry, by adding a (visualised) level of abstraction and by actively connecting practices, policy practitioners are able to (*re)live* and (*re)-experience* the dynamics of their relational interdependence that is needed to find breakthroughs out of the actual situation. Perhaps more important, new language and artefacts can be created that can help to discuss similar experiences in the future and in other similar practices.

However, as a final important comment, transformative change: in the context of complex societal problems, in set routines of politics and policies takes time, effort and enormous commitment from the groups of practitioners involved, as was demonstrated in all three practices. Even if the role of an outside facilitator was important, their willingness to continue, after initial interventions did not have the desired effect, was decisive. If commitment of local practitioners is crucial in order to reach transformative change in complex societal problems, potential lack of commitment poses limits upon the transferability of outcomes of AR practices such as described in this paper. Future research into how to enhance engagement and commitment of local practitioners in AR practices from the start is thus important. Crucial here is that AR not only demonstrates stories of success, but stories of disappointment, hard work and stamina as well.

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Annex I : List of interviews

1. Irene Dijkstra – Manager 'Coreteam' PACT approach – Tilburg-Groenewoud (06/09/19)
2. Ria Andrews – Head of the programme 'Signs of Safety' – Public Health Agency -The Hague (18/09/20)
3. Justin van der Meij – Manager Youth and Safety – Amsterdam New West (13/05/20)
4. Astrid Rinkel- van Diepstraten – Programme manager Youth and Safety – Municipality of Amsterdam (16/09/20)

Annex II : Dates of collaborative sessions /way of reporting

Practice	Date	Type of session	Report format
The Hague	18/ 04/ 17	Reconstruction Clinic	Meeting minutes
The Hague	14/ 02/ 18 17/ 03/ 18	Collaborative learning sessions: discovering patterns in interaction	Powerpoints Summary lessons learned (handleiding/manual)
Tilburg	24/ 05/ 18	Reconstruction Clinic	Powerpoint
Tilburg	20/ 09/ 18	Collaborative learning session: discovering patterns of interaction	Powerpoint
Tilburg	07/ 05/ 19	Collaborative learning session: discovering patterns of interaction	Powerpoint Meeting minutes
Amsterdam	11/ 09/ 19	Reconstruction Clinic	Powerpoint
Tilburg	24/ 09/ 20	Collaborative evaluative session	Meeting minutes
Amsterdam	26/ 09/ 20	Collaborative learning session: discovering patterns of interaction	Meeting minutes

Practice	Date	Type of session	Report format
Amsterdam	26/11/19	Collaborative learning session with managers	Powerpoint
The Hague	01/07/20	Collaborative learning session: discovering patterns of interaction	Meeting minutes
The Hague	09/07/20	Collaborative learning sessions with managers	Meeting minutes
Amsterdam	17/09/20	Collaborative evaluative session	Meeting mintues

Annex III: Other primary sources

- Leerdocument Tilburg (September-December 2019 > Including interviews clips with Antonie van Quispel (neighbourhood manager Municipality Tilburg); Michael Kanavan (police-officer Tilburg); Joost Franken (neighbourhood officer Breburg /Housing association Tilburg
- Personal email correspondence Jeptha ten Kaate – procesmanager House of Safety / Municipality of The Hague (22/09/20)

About the author

Martien Kuitenbrouwer is the co-founder of Public Mediation and the Public Mediation programme of the University of Amsterdam. In her work, she seeks to find breakthroughs with groups of stakeholders who find themselves stuck in public conflicts. This article is part of her PhD project at the University of Amsterdam where she also works as a lecturer in public policy.

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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 socioambientales 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 desegregación 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 desegregación, 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; Szőke, 2015), housing (Maestri, 2017), and schooling (Paniagua-Rodríguez & Beremenyi, 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, Jörgensen, Bauler, Ruijsink & O'Riordan, 2019; Bradbury, Waddell, O' Brien, Apgar, Teehankee, & 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

"the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives" (Narayan, 2002, pp. 14). In this paper, we will link processes of practical political empowerment to framings of empowerment (theoretical or rhetorical conceptualisations of power relations: see section 3), showing the complex interrelationships between the two, and the ways in which neoliberal framings can reduce the transformative potential of a given situation.

1. Transformation

So great are the structural social challenges we face today that they are often characterised as wicked or persistent problems (Avelino et al., 2019). If we are to intervene meaningfully, numerous scholars and social actors emphasise the need for deep social transformation, a view that sees *"mounting problems in the environment and/or society as rooted in fundamental features of society"* (Hopwood et al., 2005, pp. 45). From this perspective, the superficial reform of social institutions is inadequate to meet the extent of the challenge, which is *"located within the very economic and power structures of society"* (Hopwood et al., 2005, pp. 45). Instead, political and social action is needed, with researchers emphasising grassroots actions outside centres of power (e. g. with and for indigenous groups, the poor, or women).

Transformation is also a central concept in PAR (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2015; Bradbury et al., 2019). This research methodology aims not only to change power relations among academic and non-academic participants during knowledge production, but also to effect changes to *"structural forces that inhibit thriving"* and *"power dynamics that hold us on this unsustainable path"* in order to achieve *"a more beautiful world, for all."* (Bradbury et al. 2019, pp. 9). Transformation in PAR is a normative and structural concept: it is associated with social justice; challenges to unequal systems, policies, cultures, and values; and changes to the assumptions, systems, policies, culture, and values of both everyday organisations and major institutions (Seifer & Gottlieb, 2010).[1] According to Freire's triangle of transformation (Schugurensky, 2015), a major pillar of transformative action involves politics, recognising the power dynamics and ideological struggles that work against progressive change. Yet despite this counterhegemonic emphasis on a challenge to types of structural inequality, the concept of transformation lacks clarity when it comes to its operationalisation, especially with regard to evaluation of actual social processes. Part of the problem is that conceptual commitments in the literature are rarely tested in empirical research (Feola, 2015). When it comes to application to real world processes of change, the concept is rather used as a metaphor for fundamental, systemic, or radical change.

Transformation might also be operationalised via examples. Avelino et al. (2019), in a descriptive manner, lists the development of collective social security systems; the modernisation of agriculture and the generalisation of a food industry; the development of multimodal mobility and adaptive water management as examples of transformative system innovations. Bradbury et al. (2019) describe a large-scale participatory and action-oriented health service research and development process that radically enhanced access to certain

1 Beside normative conceptualisations, transformation might also be operationalised via examples with a descriptive function, see Avelino et al. (2019).

health care services and power relations within the health care system as a *"living example of action-oriented research for transformations*" (pp. 4). The varied nature of these examples indicates the extent to which a vaguely defined concept of transformation pervades PAR: as Smith notes, the *"literature is full of the rhetoric of revolutionary change and social transformation"* (Smith et al. 2010, pp. 409). Yet this broad usage fails to distinguish between more superficial types of reformist change and deeper types of socio-economic transformation.

The concept of transformation is closely related to that of empowerment within PAR, because achieving social and economic change inevitably also involves changes to power relations (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller 2015). Thus, PAR theorists have tended to assume that political empowerment has an instrumental value in achieving transformative social change, and that it is an unequivocal 'good'. To give someone authority, or enable them to gain power (Aziz, Shams & Khan, 2011) *"fosters capacities in individuals, groups and communities to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions… [it] is about understanding existing power relations and taking practical actions that challenge oppressive power structures. It involves the exercise of power by the powerless, such that they become more able participants in decision-making processes and gain control over the resources in their environment."* (Pant, 2015, pp. 290–291). In terms of policymaking, empowerment can also be conceptualised as *"the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives."* (Narayan, 2011, pp. 14).

In the next section, we discuss the ways in which framings of empowerment, autonomy, and solidarity affect the transformative potential of PAR to produce changes to policymaking. We compare and contrast reformist/hegemonic framings with more radical and counter-hegemonic forms of structural questioning, showing the ways in which different conceptualisations of these core concepts can lead to very different types of challenge.

3. Operationalising transformation for PAR – framings of autonomy, empowerment and solidarity in the context of power asymmetries

In order to mount a serious challenge to structural disadvantage, it is necessary to distinguish between structural transformation and more superficial types of mildly reformist change. In order to build a framework to do this, we explore different variants of three key concepts: autonomy, empowerment, and solidarity.

Autonomy can be framed in ways that emphasise individual choice, or in a manner that places emphasis on the structural. Ideas of individual choice are often inflected with a libertarianism that focuses on individual capacities, ignoring the social contexts and structural determinants of individual choices. By contrast, structural framings of autonomy are more attentive to the role of the social environment and social, political, and legal institutions in enabling or constraining individual freedoms (Mackenzie, 2014a). From a relational and feminist perspective, autonomy is a matter of social positionality: some relationships and environments are disproportionately hostile to certain groups as they endeavour to make decisions. Environments characterised by corrosive disadvantage (social, political, economic, educational) or social relationships characterised by abuse, coercion, violence, or disrespect

may seriously thwart the development of many of the skills and competences required for self-determination, or may constrain their exercise (Mackenzie, 2014a). To lead a self-determining life therefore requires not just capacity and opportunity, but the ability to regard oneself, and to be recognised by others, as an autonomous agent (Mackenzie, 2014a). Such failures of recognition are quite typical in social relations involving domination, coercion, or inequalities of power, especially when these are inflected by gender, race, ethnicity, or disability. A more critical view of autonomy therefore places collective action against unequally distributed opportunity structures at the centre of empowerment (Avelino et al. 2019).

Similarly, neoliberal framings of empowerment promote the responsibilities of both communities and individuals, to the neglect of racialised and gendered structural oppression. They thus stand in sharp contrast with those of participatory democracy, which recognises the limitations of representative models of democracy that tend to construct state-society relations in a manner that favours the already privileged (Maya & Boada, 2019; Dagnino, 2011). Framings of empowerment that draw on the ideals of participatory democracy emphasise the right of the structurally marginalised to participate in public spaces and political decision-making, and the need to engage with them in new and different ways to encourage this. In such a view, public spaces can be seen as spaces in which conflict is both legitimised and managed (Dagnino, 2011).

Any project that aims to transform oppressive structures must also move beyond philanthropic framings of solidarity, which promote relations of personal dependence in which recipients are trapped in a permanent position of inferiority. Philanthropic solidarity thus supports social hierarchies and existing inequalities (Laville, 2014) as well as justifying paternalistic forms of intervention, which express or perpetuate relationships of domination and inequality among members of a community or between the state and its citizens (Mackenzie 2014a). Democratic solidarity, by contrast, is a nonpaternalistic form of protection. It recognises vulnerable persons or social groups as equal citizens who may need targeted forms of assistance. This is provided as a basic right, enabling them to reach the threshold level of capability to realise equal citizenship. In contrast with philanthropic solidarity, democratic solidarity promotes autonomy by assuming the legal and social equality of those who receive assistance (Laville, 2014).

In each of these cases, one framing enables deep structural change and confronts hegemonic ideology, while the other short circuits intervention and limits ideological challenge. This suggests that deep-seated systemic transformation will only be possible from a perspective that pursues participatory democratic empowerment, democratic solidarity, and a relational approach to autonomy. In the empirical discussion that follows, we will analyse this insight from the perspective of a specific PAR process, to better understand the relationship between these framings and the use of PAR methodologies to challenge the oppressive gendered and racialised structures in which local housing policies and politics are embedded.

4. Context and methodology: segregation, desegregation, participatory action research

4.1. Roma segregation in Szeged

Our research focused on a segregated Roma community in Szeged. Szeged is the fourth largest city in Hungary, located approximately 15 kilometres from the Serbian border and 30 kilometres from the Romanian border. It functions as the administrative, cultural, and economic centre of the Southern Great Plain region of Hungary. The city is currently home to some 167,000 people, of whom between 4,000 and 5,000 are Roma people. Out if the estimated 4–5,000 Roma residents, approximately 400 lived among segregated circumstances in two local segregated areas until 2017.

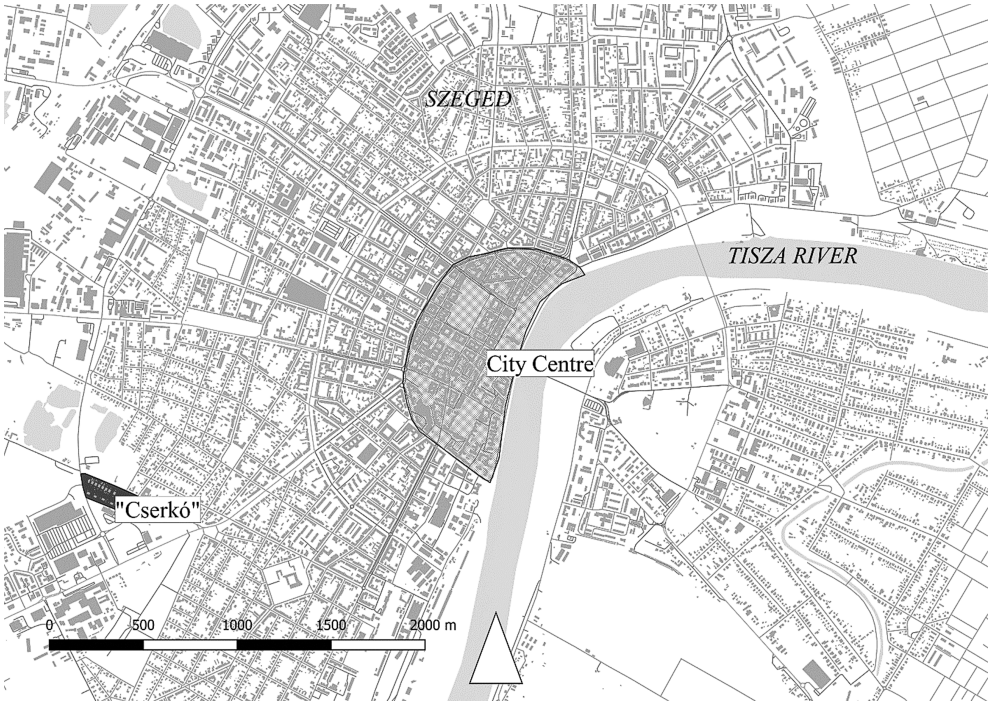
As in the wider European context, Roma in Szeged have been subjected to a long history of stigmatisation (Málovics, Cretan, Méreiné Berki & Tóth 2019a, 2019b). Segregated Roma neighbourhoods existed from the late nineteenth century, though the majority of local Roma residents today live in socially mixed areas. Though the last openly segregated school in the city was closed in 2007, the practical reality is that school segregation remains a problem in both Szeged and Hungary as a whole. In line with national tendencies (Kertesi & Köllő, 2010), Roma people were the first to lose their jobs in Szeged after the collapse of state socialism in 1989, and they continue to suffer labour market discrimination due to a combination of lack of access to a good quality education and stigmatisation (anti-Roma racism).

At the moment, Szeged city has two spatially segregated areas. One of them is "Cserepes sor", known to its inhabitants as "Cserkó". The city council is currently desegregating the area, but it was formerly home to approximately 250 inhabitants, many of whom had a low level of formal education and official employment. Cserkó is located within walking distance of the city centre (Figure 1) yet is considered "beyond the pale" by local authorities (Harper, Steger & Filcak, 2009), like many other segregated Roma neighbourhoods in the CEE Region (Steger et al. 2007). Spatially, Cserkó has extremely poor housing conditions and scanty provision of public services (Málovics et al., 2019a).

4.2. PAR: process, activities, political empowerment of Roma leaders

Our PAR project encouraged co-operation amongst a diverse range of actors, with the aim of promoting the social inclusion and mobility of poor, stigmatised, often segregated local Roma residents. Begun in 2010, it brings together local Roma residents, Roma leaders, and middle-class actors, including representatives of institutions and researcher-activists. The research comprised several elements, all of which were informed by the approach and basic ethical and practical features of PAR: promoting equality and justice, fighting oppression, empowering the marginalised, and pursuing structured inquiry, continuous reflection, and action. The project started by organising co-operative actions to establish and run community and educational centres next to local segregated neighbourhoods, which paved the way for more extended forms of co-operation around educational activities (e.g. running an afternoon school for Roma children); community building (establishing community centres, organising programmes for the socially excluded and materially poor); welfare-oriented activities (collecting and distributing donations; organising a local supportive network of individuals and

Figure 1. The position of the "Cserkó" segregated area within the city of Szeged
Source: own illustration



CSOs); and political activism (representing the interests of Roma towards the municipality). For a detailed account, see Málovics, Méreiné Berki, Pataki, Juhász, Pálné Mihók B, Szentistványi, Nagy & Tóth, 2018.

Local Roma leaders led the project's policy-oriented and political work, representing the wider community. This is a common situation in local decision-making processes (see Hickey & Mohan, 2004), and wider participation was facilitated by the close day-to-day relationships between these community leaders, researcher-activists (two of the authors) and the residents of the segregated areas. Scholar–activists served as partners and consultants on political issues. As a result of committed political work, Roma leaders have gradually gained local influence and institutional position. In 2010, they had no institutional wealth or stable income; now, however, the Local Roma Minority Self-Government (LRMSG)[2] and a closely connected Roma NGO have a relatively stable annual income from city and state sources, with numerous institutional possessions (including furniture, tools, instruments etc.). In 2013, the municipality offered city-owned buildings and contributions to Roma leaders to establish community centres and afternoon schools. From 2014 onwards, the municipality started to spend an increasing amount of funds on Roma issues, following the suggestions of community leaders. By 2017 (the beginning of the desegregation process that is the subject of this paper), the municipality had begun to work in "partnership" with Roma leaders, a long way from their original position as "voiceless" stakeholders.

2 For an analysis of the LRMSG system in Hungary see Schafft & Ferkovics (2018).

Such partnership increased material support; a consultancy role on the spending of the city's desegregation budget (approximately 30,000 EUR annually); allies within the city council who advocate openly and covertly for better Roma representation; and established communications channels to increasingly cooperative and responsive city leaders. Local Roma leaders have also become part of local middle class networks beyond the city council, partnering with local CSOs; educational institutions and educators; media workers; university actors; local public and private firms (including public service providers), and other institutions (e.g. police). Because of these shifts, the socio-economic challenges of segregated urban Roma in Szeged have gained increased and new visibility on the local political agenda. Whereas formerly their concerns had the status of "claims to be heard", they now have an established space in local policymaking processes (Málovics et al., 2019b).

As this institutional landscape suggests, power dynamics play a large role in the PAR process. Power asymmetries characterise the relationships between (1) the municipality and PAR participants (researcher-activists, middle class Roma representatives, marginalised residents of slums); (2) middle class researcher activists and marginalised residents of slums; and (3) middle class Roma representatives and marginalised residents of slums.[3] Political empowerment is therefore unevenly distributed within the PAR process. Prominent Roma community leaders, being middle class local residents, are sufficiently empowered to have established a less uneven relationship with the municipality, while poorer, stigmatised, and segregated inhabitants remain comparatively voiceless (a frequent phenomenon in PAR, see Jewkes & Murcott, 1998). This is perhaps a feature of empowerment as a drawn-out temporal process "shaped by social and political context" (Pant, 2015). The different capabilities of participants interrelate in complex ways: there is a degree of interdependence between being physically and mentally healthy, educated, safe, well nourished, happy, respected, and a participant in the social and political life of the community (Mackenzie, 2014b). Our experiences show that different perspectives, intentions, capabilities, levels of marginalisation, etc. all play a role here: the more marginalised someone is, the more structural factors limit their power to influence policymaking. Everyday existential hardships can also work against political activism, as other PAR projects in similar settings have discovered (Harper et al., 2009). Furthermore, the comparative economic and social advantages of Roma leaders also play a role here: these individuals are often more able to conform with hegemonic "white" standards of behaviour, from clothing to use of language, which conduces to political influence.

The PAR process seems to have played a significant role in this process of differential political empowerment. Our co-operation as researcher-activists with local Roma leaders works across several areas, including (1) provision of consultation over political issues; (2) networking support (university, pedagogic experts, firms, CSOs, media etc.); (3) help with writing submissions towards the city council; and (4) supporting and advising on media appearances. However, beside these actual outputs (submissions, projects, relationships, media appearances etc.), Roma leaders also gained legitimacy in front of local policymakers

3 As researcher-activists, it is important to reflect on our own position of power. The concept of "white privilege" (McIntosh, 1992; Oprea & Silverman 2019) helps to structure this understanding of our positionality. It seldom occurs to scholars, policy-makers, and activists that racialised and gendered oppression is happening amongst their own ranks, as though academia, government, and NGOs were somehow exempt from discrimination (Oprea & Silverman, 2019). Departing from this practice, giving up the myth of meritocracy (McIntosh 1992), and conducting self-reflection on white or male privilege is of crucial importance to our research practice. For a general reflection on power differences and their impact on the PAR process among participants, see Málovics et al. (2018).

through the cultural capital conferred by the PAR collaboration. As one explained: "It is totally different if they see that we are not alone, and that university people carried out research and it proved this and that. Then they cannot say that these are only our dumb and unrealistic ideas… Like a crutch for a lame person, this is what you mean to us." (Quote from a Roma leader.) All this contributes to an enhanced and empowered local social and political position.

4.3. Data collection and analysis

The city council has been planning the desegregation of Cserkó since 2007, so it was a hot topic among community members for a decade before the process actually began. It has been the subject of frequent group discussions among Roma leaders and researcher-activists, especially when it comes to decision points where serious practical and moral dilemmas emerge. As researcher-activists, we had to switch between a more responsive or reactive role and a more proactive one: as local stakeholders who felt responsible for our segregated peers (and friends), we raised our own concerns about the process with local Roma representatives, besides being mere political advisors. This enabled us to be conduits between ordinary residents, with whom we had discussed desegregation on numerous occasions, and Roma leaders. We have also supported individual families in their negotiations with the city council, facilitating applications, negotiating with municipal representatives, and even moving personal belongings when requested to do so.

As part of the PAR process, we kept reflexive research diaries, wrote memos of our small group discussions, and conducted extensive interviews with residents of segregated areas and Roma representatives. Data were analysed in an open way, to reconstruct those processes and phenomena that are central to the present article: (1) the political empowerment of local Roma residents and representatives within the PAR project (and the transformation of the local political context towards an openness to Roma representation); and (2) the (in)ability of the PAR project to transform local desegregation policy, due to framings of autonomy, empowerment, and solidarity.

5. Results: local desegregation policy and its relation with PAR

5.1. Local desegregation policy – former desegregation efforts

The desegregation process at hand is not the first in the history of the city. During the state socialist regime, Roma people were resettled several times in Szeged. On some occasions they were displaced from segregated area to segregated area; on others, they were moved to more heterogeneous parts of the city (Málovics et al., 2019b). In rhetorical and constitutional terms, since the 1989 regime change, Hungary has been a democratic state that is committed to respecting the human rights of its residents. Yet the desegregation process under discussion in this paper is the second to which Roma have been consigned during this period. In 2015, another segregated Roma neighbourhood known as the "Reptér" ("Airport", since the flight terminals are close by) was "desegregated". It was home to 17 families, approximately 70

people, who lived in extreme poverty in 11 apartments measuring 28–30 m^2 each. To clear the area, the city council persuaded community members to accept houses outside of Szeged, often farmsteads 60–70 kilometres away, offering them the incentive of a cash payment for moving. However, most families could not adapt to the new environment and returned to Szeged, some after a few weeks, others after several years (Málovics et al., 2019b). Many became squatters in Cserkó, with even fewer housing rights than they formerly possessed.

The council's elimination of Reptér is clearly a process of displacement, where this term is understood as a type of enforced mobility (Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard & Lees, 2020). Even though the authorities did not violently force people to leave their homes behind, they coerced them with unrealistic promises and misinformation about their new living environments. Policymakers did not care about their needs, or whether they were going to be able to adapt to the change, although it was completely predictable that lack of access to the local labour-market, the destruction of social ties, and stigmatisation stemming from anti-Roma racism would hinder their ability to adapt and hinder the process of adaptation to the new environment. Small wonder that people displaced from one segregated area (Reptér) to farmsteads far away from the city moved back to Szeged to another segregated area (Cserkó), but now as squatters with less rights for housing in the city.

The present desegregation process of the Cserkó segregated area is the second one after 1989. According to official planning documents, the municipality aimed to move two families to an "integrated" social environment every year between 2009 and 2029 in order to encourage social mixing. In practice, however, nothing happened until spring 2017, when desegregation started to proceed at a far more rapid pace. Once families had been moved, their former flats were demolished: to date, nine blocks have been destroyed. The city council offered no further support after they had moved these families to a new area.

5.2. PAR and local desegregation policy at the present (the desegregation of Cserkó)

Because desegregation is an issue that divides the Roma community (see below), goals relating to it were not included in the PAR project. However, because it is a major concern for community members, researcher-activists have faced increasing demands to "step in" as supporters and consultants, to shape responses to the policy, from both the wider community and Roma leaders. These demands were intensified by the fact that the research team had developed close working relationships with the community, through seven years of intense, action-oriented co-operation. Our contributions on the desegregation issue took different forms, including (1) co-operating on official petitions and policy recommendations issued by Roma leaders to the municipality; (2) discussing issues related to the desegregation process within the community; and (3) facilitating action in individual desegregation cases between families and local officers.

It is important to clarify the diverse housing status of Cserkó residents, since it heavily influences desegregation's impacts, including the ability of individuals to advocate for their personal and communal interests. Families who own their flats or who rent them from the city council as tenants are legally entitled to compensation for leaving. Tenants receive new, higher standard social housing for a slightly increased rent; owners either receive the value of the property or an alternative flat/house in exchange. However, the municipality displaces

squatters, and those who have lost their official occupancy status due to unpaid rent/overheads without any compensation. As a result of representations from Roma leaders, the city council recently started to offer "crisis flats" for some of these families, but the allocation process lacks transparency, and puts the most vulnerable in a dependent position. The major criterion for eligibility is the ability to assimilate into a mixed community, an "assimilation promise" (Kovai 2018) that places expectations on the structurally oppressed, without dealing with the causes of their oppression. Only those families who are able to "integrate in the majority society" can obtain a crisis flat, something that is arbitrarily measured by middle class standards: having a "well ordered" house, a regular income, and a good record of school/kindergarten attendance for children. Roma leaders have a significant degree of influence on the assessment of eligibility, but this framing means that their ability to influence the municipality on behalf of the most vulnerable is limited.

Picture 2: Home of a squatter family in the Cserkó segregate
Photo taken by Boglárka Méreiné Berki

The desegregation policy divides the local Roma community along the lines of "deserving" (tenants and owners) and "non-deserving" poor (squatters and families without legal status). Furthermore, the community itself is divided on the issue. Owners and tenants often perceive desegregation as an opportunity for a better life, while more vulnerable residents, who lack legal tenure over housing, experience it as a type of top-down displacement that endangers them at an existential level, violating their right to shelter. This conflict is so deep that "those who have property or legally rent here would literally kill squatters" (Quote from a Roma

woman, squatting in Cserkó). These differences of option have hindered marginalised Roma residents from uniting and advocating for their interests.[4] Resolving the disagreement is beyond the capacity of the PAR process, especially since the arguments relate not only to divergent economic interests but also to a perceived division between "old residents" (families who have lived in the segregated area since it was established in the 1970s, mostly owners or tenants) and "newcomers" (families who moved into the area later on, especially former residents of the "Reptér" segregated neighbourhood who came to Cserkó as "illegal" residents or squatters). The "old residents" tend to associate the "newcomers" with a deviance and a deterioration in their living circumstances, such as a more disordered environment full of waste and rats, and social problems such as extensive drug use and prostitution. Consequently, some believe that it is "impossible to raise children in a normal way here" (Roma mother living in Cserkó), creating a hostile attitude between the two groups, which has been exacerbated by the city council's way of negotiating with residents.

5.3. PAR's impact on desegregation policy via the political empowerment of Roma leaders

Even though the desegregation process is independent of the PAR process, the latter has clearly had an impact on the former through the political empowerment of Roma leaders between 2010 and the present (section 4.2). However, these impacts are double edged. On one hand, Roma leaders have been able to represent the community, contributing to create solutions that were absent from earlier desegregation initiatives. These are based on the personalised situation, needs, and interests of segregated families (the unit for desegregation interventions), and include measure like the introduction of "crisis flats" discussed above.

On the other hand, the empowered political position of Roma leaders is not without its challenges (Málovics et al., 2019b). Influential local political actors expect certain compromises in exchange for their support. In particular, they expect "silence" from the community, meaning that its members should not raise their voices about ongoing problems, including the situation of those who are displaced, and not entitled to compensation. Roma leaders fear that raising such issues may result in the withdrawal of public funding, and the cessation of the whole desegregation process. "We will not get even the support for running community centres if I make too much noise about this problem," explained one. The logic here is one of taking the victories that are available within the logic of the existing process: *"This (public claims on behalf of the most vulnerable) would mean that they (the city council) would stop the whole process. Should I harm those Roma that want to integrate for the interest of those few who are not able and do not want to cooperate and integrate?"* In such a situation, Roma leaders fail to represent the interests of all Roma living in Cserkó, and become

4 To date, no squatters or families without legal status (those that are clearly displaced) have been physically forced to leave their homes; all families have left "voluntarily" a few days before demolition. On the other hand, even though most owners and tenants are eager to leave the segregated area because of living conditions, they emphasise that the place "was not like this before" and that "it used to be a nice place to live". The changes to which they point are the result of earlier local policies, including previous desegregation/displacement practices (families from the Reptér eventually moving to Cserkó) and attitudes in the public services (e. g. treating the area as beyond-the pale) (Málovics et al., 2019a) This also highlights the elastic nature of displacement: it involves way more than physically forced moving. What may at first sight appear to be a voluntary act of resettlement can be the result of a number of historical processes of territorial discrimination, a kind of "slow violence" (see also Elliott-Cooper et al., 2019).

complicit with the division of the community into "deserving" and "non-deserving" poor, a divisive and neoliberal framing of autonomy. They thus miss an opportunity to challenge the wider desegregation policies of the municipality at a deeper level, for violating the rights of Roma residents to housing.

6. Discussion – PAR and policymaking: transformational intentions, reformist consequences?

How should we evaluate our PAR's transformative capacity, in light of the different framings of autonomy, empowerment and solidarity introduced earlier in the paper? And how do multiple power asymmetries and community divisions over policy issues influence the practical realisation of the transformative intentions of PAR concerning policymaking?

On one hand, there have been clear changes in local desegregation policy during the past 15 years, and the present desegregation process is superficially more humane than previous incarnations. Around half of the residents of Cserkó support desegregation because of a wish to improve their socio-economic situation by leaving the area and moving to a better-organised, more comfortable environment. It is partly due to the PAR process that this group has better representation in the political process, with local Roma leaders participating more fully in decision-making processes.

However, **this effect is not 'transformative' according to our definition above, since it lacks a counterhegemonic thrust.** Its impetus is one of philanthropic solidarity, since support for those who do not have official housing tenure is conditional on their ability to assimilate and "to adapt to mainstream society". Instead of developing a counterhegemonic concept of autonomy that could grant dignity to the most vulnerable residents of Cserkó, the council has thrown into question residents' basic human right to housing. The logic of autonomy here is neoliberal, racialising poverty and dividing the community along the lines of "deserving" and "non-deserving poor". The acceptance of this division by local leaders empowered by the PAR process meant that our research ultimately reinforced the individualising logic of desegregation, rather than challenging its oppressive tendencies, power asymmetries, and imbrication in a racialised series of expectations that elevated middle-class behaviours at the expense of the most vulnerable (McIntosh, 1992; Oprea & Silverman, 2019).

The empowerment of local Roma representatives did not strengthen participatory democracy within the Roma community, but instead further marginalised the most vulnerable. This uneven political situation created new dependencies on two levels. First, while Roma representatives have better access to resources and decision-making, they became financially dependent on the city council, and fearful of losing this source of revenue.[5] Secondly, the community became more dependent on its representatives to voice their concerns during the desegregation process, but the perceived need to present a united front led to a silencing of the

5 Even though PAR supports addressing "*undiscussables*" (Bradbury & Reason, 2003, pp. 165), there are aspects of financial dependency that may be hidden from us as researchers. For example, according to a tender application, the city council pays a certain amount of money to an individual who is embedded in the segregated community to facilitate the desegregation process. Based on the description it seems possible that one of our PAR partners, a local Roma leader, played this role but never mentioned such a contract/relationship to us. We felt that the subject was too sensitive to ask about, but we are therefore uncertain whether he has a contract with the city council or not. If he does, this might have an influence on his interests and dependencies in the process.

most marginalised for the sake of the better-off residents. **Parallel processes of political empowerment and disempowerment** were therefore in play, and the dominance of representative leaders limited the transformative impact of the PAR process. Instead of a democratic form of solidarity, the desegregation policy built a series of paternalistic relations.

However, even if the Roma leaders and activist-researchers had agreed to follow a relational perspective on autonomy, to pursue a more participatory type of democratic empowerment, and to place their faith in democratic solidarity, their empowerment would have remained relative, and limited by the **highly uneven power relations at play in the political arena. Political empowerment within PAR remains relative.** It is still the local state (city council) who functions as the main policymaker, and possesses a decisive power over the desegregation process. The alternatives that they presented to the community were either (1) caring for the "deserving poor", those members of the stigmatised group that were capable and willing to move towards a white standard of "normality" by assimilating into wider society (2) stopping the whole desegregation process, to the detriment of better-off Roma residents. This meant that leaders faced a trade-off between pursuing short-term, certain benefits for one fraction of the community, and promoting longer-term and more uncertain rights for all. Even though the political power position and resource base of Roma representatives has grown during the past 10 years, they ultimately felt unable to challenge the overweening dominance of the city council, or to influence the municipality's agenda towards something more inclusive.[6] To some extent, therefore, it is possible to argue that the city council "uses" Roma leaders to pacify the community and to legitimate their decision to displace the most marginalised residents without compensation. They were able to do so because of already-existing **community divide, divergences of interest and opinion on desegregation** within the Cserkó community.

The city council thus has full agency in framing desegregation, defining how the interests of local residents are represented in the whole process. Therefore, on the level of actions and material consequences, **even philanthropic solidarity is absent when it comes to those without legal housing status.** The PAR process was not able to challenge the fundamental "rules of the game", leaving Roma representatives and their researcher-activist advisors with a set of moral and practical dilemmas. Arguably, the **power asymmetry in the wider context** means that the city council effectively forces Roma leaders to legitimate desegregation via consultation, thus creating the appearance of cooperative/participatory decision-making. The Roma representatives are well aware of the morally problematic nature of desegregation and its negative impacts on the poorest, but they feel helpless in the face of the city's commitment towards it. This pushes them towards a reformist approach: they choose to stay publicly silent on the dispossession of the most vulnerable, in the hope of winning gains for the relatively better off, perhaps also with a view to persuading the council to deal more justly with the poorest. While reflection helps to identify these moral dilemmas, it does not help to resolve them.

The power asymmetry also caused us to feel helpless, as researcher-activists. We were morally uncertain whether we should advise commitment to a more inclusive future, since this

6 The attitude of the city council concerning the interest of residents without legal property might have several justifications. One is the connection between stigmatised minorities and the utilitarian calculus of politics: it simply does not 'pay' for policymakers to take care of stigmatised, marginalised residents (Gans, 1994). On the other hand, providing meaningful support to the most vulnerable, who often suffer from multiple problems/disadvantages (stigmatisation, poverty, lack of access to schooling, addictions, mental health issues, etc.) is a way more complex process than providing new homes to only those who are able to adapt/assimilate.

would potentially endanger the opportunity for numerous families to achieve a better life in improved housing conditions. We were also unsure what legitimacy we had when it came to representing the most vulnerable. Inertia was a consequence of these hesitations: we did not intervene and left it to our community partners (including Roma representatives and residents) to decide.

In the case of desegregation, the **PAR process did not fundamentally transform policy decision-making.** It fostered not a radical challenge, but a circumscribed and neoliberal picture of autonomy, solidarity, and empowerment which made the very limited and paternalistic assistance for the most marginalised residents of Cserkó dependent on their ability to assimilate to (white) mainstream society. It short circuited any attempt to focus on the structural nature of Roma oppression, silenced the voices of the most vulnerable, and reinforced a situation where the rights of property ownership and official tenure were given moral and practical precedence. In short, the relationship between the PAR project and desegregation failed to question the underlying "rules of the game" in any potentially transformative way.

7. Concluding remarks

What do our experiences with local desegregation policymaking mean for PAR's impact on policy transformation?

First, the ability of PAR to achieve structural transformation depends on wider framings of the social problem at hand. We found that divergent conceptualisations of autonomy (libertarian vs. relational), empowerment (neoliberal vs. participatory democratic), and solidarity (philanthropic vs. democratic) helped to explain the (in)ability of PAR research to achieve transformative policy change in the case under scrutiny.

Second, political empowerment depends on an intricate network of power relations, oppressive structures, and dependencies, and cannot be reduced to any straightforwardly positive idea of "giving a marginalised community a voice". In our case, the increasing power and influence possessed by a number of prominent representative community leaders militated against the interests of the most marginalised and vulnerable within the marginalized community. The relative and uneven nature of the process created new forms of power differential and dependency, to the point that discussions with Roma representatives tended to conceal a fundamental power asymmetry between the city council and the Roma community, and to legitimate a situation in which the underlying logic of desegregation could not be questioned. Community divisions (moral and practical) over desegregation policy led leaders to picture negotiations as an insoluble moral dilemma, in which they should endeavour to achieve a trade-off: the risk of losing benefits for some in pursuit of a more just situation for all outweighed the plight of the most vulnerable, who paradoxically became less visible as a result of a louder community voice.

Third, political empowerment did not necessarily lead to a challenge in hegemonic social and moral values. Desegregation policy promotes a white, middle class model of citizenship, in which those who are willing to assimilate to hegemonic cultures of work, household, family, and property are welcomed as partners and rewarded in policy. The price of this,

however, is that those outside of hegemony are labelled deviants, or "non-deserving poor", in a way that intensifies their marginalisation and disempowerment.

Fourthly, the divisions within the community placed activist-researchers on the horns of a dilemma: whether to support Roma leaders in advocating for the "wins" that were available within prevailing framings and power relations, or to encourage a more radical challenge that would benefit the community as a whole. Part of the problem here concerned the democratic legitimacy of the activist-researcher's position in a situation of community conflict.

Our experiences show some of the difficulties inherent in using PAR to achieve deep-seated, transformational structural change. Challenging prevailing power relations, values, and social structures in order to reduce oppression and build social justice can be practically and morally tricky, particularly where power relations are extremely asymmetrical. Empowering community representatives is not straightforward, and may not ensure the protection of the most vulnerable in cases where the community is divided. Indeed, our research hints that PAR can end up reinforcing oppressive framings and power relations in some contexts, by silencing dissent and legitimating the status quo. We therefore agree with Smith et al. (2010) that there is a chasm between the idealism of PAR and the realities of its use on the ground. If these problems are to be resolved, it is essential to confront them openly and honestly, critically reflecting on the realities of uneven power relationships in divisive situations, and the dangers and challenges of cooperation with powerful policymakers.

Finally, structural transformation and political empowerment are long term processes, unwinding over decades. Our study focuses on a shorter time frame, and may therefore underestimate the trajectory between existing minor policy reform and more major processes of transformation. On the other hand, it may reflect the ability of hegemonic institutions to absorb and redirect radical challenges, and to insist on their dominant framing of the problem. In either case, further reflexive work is needed to consider the weight and intractability of oppressive structures (including patriarchy, institutional racism, capitalism, neoliberalism) and to adapt or develop PAR methodologies to sustain a more radical structural challenge.

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Opinion article

An action researcher in an advisor's hat: A short reflection on lessons the OECD has learned from undertaking action research in the realm of policy and politics

Rebecca Santos

Abstract: Action research has enormous potential for policymakers, and those who advise them, to work in more iterative, reflective, and collaborative ways. For complex systems facing wicked problems, any approach that gets it closer to framing a problem well and drawing upon diverse forms of knowledge to bring about change, is good. Advisors who do action research in policymaking or political settings should be sensitive to the fact that this methodology may confound expectations regarding the 'traditional' advisor role. As such, some careful navigation of this approach (and what it means for the relationship and perception policymakers may have with those they engage to advise them) is required. This opinion piece shares lessons from an advisor working in the OECD's innovation team, which embraced the action research methodology to reflect on and design innovative policy interventions with public sector policymakers. Action researchers who are using this methodology to produce policy advice may be more successful in auguring, and better navigating, new kinds of relationships with government if they heed the following lessons: frame the value of action research with decision makers, diversify your data and follow the story, and prime practitioners to participate.

Key words: International organization; OECD; evidence based policymaking; policy advisory; policy advice

Un investigador-acción en un sombrero de asesor: una breve reflexión sobre las lecciones que la OCDE aprendió al llevar a cabo una investigación-acción en la esfera de las políticas y sobre política

Resumen: La investigación-acción tiene un enorme potencial para que los formuladores de políticas, y quienes los asesoran, trabajen de manera más interactiva, reflexiva y colaborativa. Para los sistemas complejos que enfrentan problemas perversos, cualquier enfoque que los aproxime a encuadrar bien un problema y recurrir a diversas formas de conocimiento para generar cambios, es bueno. Los asesores que realizan investigación-acción en la formulación de políticas o entornos políticos deben ser sensibles al hecho de que esta metodología puede confundir las expectativas con respecto al papel de asesor "tradicional". Como tal, se requiere una dirección cuidadosa de este enfoque (y lo que significa para la relación y la percepción que los formuladores de políticas pueden tener con aquellos a quienes contratan para asesorarlos). Este artículo de opinión comparte lecciones de un asesor que trabaja en el equipo de innovación de la OCDE, que adoptó la metodología de investigación-acción para reflexionar y diseñar intervenciones de políticas innovadoras con los responsables de la formulación de políticas del sector público. Los investigadores-acción que utilizan esta metodología para

producir asesoramiento sobre políticas pueden tener más éxito en dirigir y pronosticar mejor nuevos tipos de relaciones con el gobierno si prestan atención a las siguientes lecciones: encuadre el valor de la investigación-acción con los tomadores de decisiones, diversifique sus datos y siga la historia, y prime por los mejores profesionales para participar.

Palabras clave: organización internacional; OCDE; formulación de políticas basada en evidencias; asesor de políticas; asesoramiento sobre políticas.

Action research is a useful methodology for policymakers, as it grounds general theories about change in the daily reality of politics and policymaking. For those of us who advise policymakers, helping them puzzle through particular policy issues, action research offers us a way to collaborate with our counterparts, build their practice, and produce relevant and readily useful knowledge. Yet, this methodology challenges the typical way governments see and value advisors who work with them, because this approach departs from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) more traditional research. This research has historically been characterised by the amassing of comparative statistics, for example, or one-off assessments or reports of governance arrangements or policies and delivered it to public sector managers, who may (or may not) communicate findings to their practitioner staff. This is something the OECD's Observatory for Public Sector Innovation (OPSI) has reflected on recently, as we seek to build new research traditions within these hallowed halls.

OPSI is a small team within the OECD, that works directly with governments to help them understand innovation, and the governance, systems, and organisation structures that best foster it. To do our work of helping governments innovate better, we need a methodology that allows for dynamism and collaboration with diverse (and perhaps unexpected) actors across a policy system, helping us to work with these actors to design, implement, and reflect on innovative policy interventions. While action research is well suited to public sector innovation projects, it is a new approach for this historic organisation. The OECD (and perhaps by extension any other major research or advisory organisation) is often seen as an 'arbiter' of knowledge. People seek its advice because it offers certainty or an imprimatur. For policy advisors like us who know the value of action research, and want to introduce it into OECD projects, going a little against the grain, the activity can bring to the fore interesting tensions relating to knowledge and power. What forms of knowledge are valued? Who gets to contribute to its creation? Who has the power to act on it? From my experience, I have derived a few lessons that other action researchers might find useful. This opinion piece canvasses a few considerations others may want to keep in mind if they are put in the role of 'external expert advisor' (whether they like it or not!) and want to subvert this mantle by using this research approach to work differently.

Lesson one: Frame the value of action research with decision makers

Action research brings about change through a recursive, self-reflective cycle of acting, observing, and reflecting, in active engagement of practitioners who create contextually relevant knowledge. If you are working with a government on a joint research project, you should ask yourself, are the decision makers who commission and fund action research with

you fully cognisant of what this approach entails? Are they comfortable with it? What expectations do they bring to bear on the kind of knowledge produced in this way? What does a milestone look like in this context? What needs to be reported along the way, to whom, in what way?

I have found that decision makers may hanker after quick wins, or be more accustomed to working with expert advisors on projects that have more traditional, linear forms of management, or those that have deliverables that are ends in themselves, as opposed to precursors to next phases.

I think it is important to take the time to understand what decision makers know about this research approach, and elucidate which parts of the intervention or change process is especially important to them. Be aware that decision makers may have to justify the approach to others who may not have a depth of understanding of its nuances, but are invested in its success.

For example, OPSI managed an action research project that entailed mixed methods research design: a quantitative survey, qualitative interviews, and a series of workshops to plan for upcoming system interventions in a government department. We were aware that the project's decision makers (high-level public officials) needed to justify a strong course of new action to bring about organisational reform to their minister, and to show leadership to other government departments that change was both needed and possible. Understanding these needs, we tailored our communication with them to give primacy to the quantitative results in a timely fashion. This gave them a quick snapshot of where their department was at in its change process, and was something they could easily communicate to their own stakeholders and champion the continuation of the project. Even though other research methods in this project were just as robust as the quantitative phase, we knew hard numbers had currency with them (at least until they got more comfortable with a new approach and contending with different data sets) and communicating these early and succinctly increased their comfort with a new way of working on a policy challenge.

Lesson two: Diversify your data and follow the story

How can action researchers make sense of conflicting observations, and sensitively steer people to ask different questions, or open up new avenues of exploration? How can they use differing stories to shape actions or interventions?

Going back to my previous example, an interesting tension I found in our mixed-methods data was the disjunction between the snapshot the quantitative results gave, and the bigger story the qualitative data yielded. If we looked just at the survey, the government department wanted to adopt a particular organisational model and showed moderate, but not complete, progress on its full implementation. Qualitative research opened up space to comprehend organisation culture more deeply, the systemic issues affecting both its business-as-usual practices, its innovation, and how it related to other parts of the public sector. If this model were to be implemented, these are the challenges that it would face.

Data showed it was both close and so far from this goal.

Reflecting on this with practitioners took an interesting turn! We had organised a data gathering session, aimed at developing a typology of existing activities that could be associated with each of the model's characteristics, in an attempt to apprehend status quo organisational operation. In creating this typology, we asked 'how does your department do X?". People parried with sarcasm. We got more than a few answers that were just simply: 'badly'! That is not an aberration in the data, that is dissent that is crying out for acknowledgement. We knew then that subsequent actions needed to address organisational feedback loops (who contributed feedback on certain activities, whose feedback was valued, and the organisational capacity to act on it for example). The discrepancies in the data prompted further probing which, in turn, created a space for practitioners to express themselves. A takeaway from this anecdote is that it is useful to employ different methods, not just for the purposes of validation, but to be able to read different forms of data against themselves to examine what is missing or inconsistent. When reflecting with practitioners, allow for emotional reactions as much as intellectual ones, and follow your nose to explore *what* is trying to reveal itself.

Lesson three: Prime practitioners to participate

Action research compels practitioners to reflect on their own practice and, through this, help them to build new practice and capabilities. But…what if practitioners are not ready to do this? How can action researchers negotiate practitioner trepidation, resistance, cynicism, or just plain inexperience with participatory research processes?

One way to overcome these perceptions is to prime practitioners to participate. When OPSI was presenting to our practitioner counterparts, we found ourselves in a familiar set-up: us up the front, with a microphone, and them in seats quietly listening. The way we were occupying space encoded a power relation that was not serving the research: our practitioners were quiet, there was no buzz in the air. So, my colleagues paused the presentation and solicited audience participation and reflection, using an online survey tool that people could access on their mobile phones. We polled practitioners on their perceptions of change so far and upcoming challenges. The online tool rendered their responses in real time, creating graphs and word clouds that were flashed up on the presentation screen. Immediately, the audience of practitioners shifted from passive listeners to active creators of the presentation, as it unfolded. Effectively, this mirrored the input process into action research in a succinct and tangible way. The room's energy shifted. Side conversations bubbled up. The poll was not substantive data collection, just something to get people thinking and talking, ahead of the workshop. Yet, this small priming activity helped change the perception of 'who talks' and 'who doesn't' in a room, and got people into a reflective mindset.

Another example of how we primed practitioners was by teaching them a specialised listening and learning method called 'ritualised dissent' (Ritual Dissent – Cognitive Edge, 2020). In a workshop, practitioners developed ideas for possible actions the next phase of research could take. Members of a group visited other groups as 'travelling critics', while some members stayed to be 'idea presenters'. The travelling critics listen to a presentation of possible actions. This method stress tests thinking before the practitioners fully invest

(emotionally, structurally, and financially) in the next interventions. This kind of rigour early on in the idea process is essential, given how common 'path dependency' is in large public sector organisations, where people continue to do what has always been done simply because the power of inertia is stronger than the capacity or desire to innovate. This method shakes people out of the tendency to 'go along to get along' and, instead, encourages them to say "are you assuming too much of this…?" or say, "perhaps you're forgetting that…" or "I think some unforeseen consequences could be…". By teaching practitioners a method to foster reflection and feedback, they were empowered to critique each other. In this context, my colleagues and I faded into the background as light-touch facilitators and scribes of these conversations. This helped overcome the tendency for them to turn to us for approval when asserting their ideas. They were appraising themselves. Priming practitioners to participate, through activities that 'warm them up' or teach them new skills can shift dynamics and yield rich information, in important ways. The power of finding little ways to disrupt power dynamics in this kind of research context cannot be understated. It matters.

Over to you...

Doing this kind of work within an organisation like the OECD, where this approach is not especially known or popular, we face the challenge of needing to build awareness and practice of what this approach is, and what it can do for the countries we work with (and, the corollary, what it is decidedly *not* and what it *cannot* do) so we have a more systematic way of choosing what projects might benefit from this approach. We also need to sensitise more people to understanding, valuing, and using the empirical evidence generated through action research engagements, to expand people's understanding of what constitutes 'evidence' and what such evidence might be useful for. We are not there yet. Action research is new. It is different. These cultural shifts take time especially in historic organisations such as mine. I think the fight is worth it, though.

Ultimately, action research has enormous potential for policymakers, and those who support them, to work in more iterative, reflective, and collaborative ways. For complex systems facing wicked problems, any approach that gets it closer to framing a problem well and drawing upon diverse forms of knowledge to bring about change, is good. Advisors who do action research in policymaking or political settings should be sensitive to the fact that this methodology may confound expectations regarding the 'traditional' advisor role.

You will have to work actively to help renegotiate relationships and expectations, in order to do this kind of work properly. If you are thinking about undertaking action research in the realm of policy and politics, understand what others know of this approach, and meet people where they are at, staying abreast of what decision makers will need from you in order to continue championing your project and the insights it yields. Pay attention to what stories your research unearths and follow your nose, even if the story is not flattering. Be sensitive to how power is conceptualised and embodied in the research process, and do things that actively try to redress it. Building people's practice and encouraging them to participate in research is the kind of empowerment that needs to be felt in the room, in the body. If you are an action researcher in an advisor's hat, mastering that last part is truly the feather in the cap…

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Call for papers, Special Issue of International Journal of Action Research

Issue Editors: Olav Eikeland, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway; Søren Frimann, Aalborg University, Denmark; Lone Hersted, Aalborg University, Denmark; Julie Borup Jensen, Aalborg University, Denmark.

Conceptualising Action Research: Basic Assumptions and Terminology in Action Research

Action research on the rise

Action research comes in many varieties. Regardless, it has for decades and under different designations, been gaining in popularity among different professions and professional studies, in management and organisation studies, community development work, and in other areas concerned with practical relevance, application and development. The situation reflects societal changes concerning the social distribution of education and knowledge creation, from having been monopolised in specialised academic institutions to becoming much more socially distributed.

However, people doing action research often seem to encounter conventional, mostly interpretive social research terminology which is still based on a principal division of labour between intellectual and manual work, knower and known, researcher and researched: more appropriate to the previous, monopolised knowledge management regime. The terminology still used in social research reflects the former division of labour however, "othering" the subjects of study, and thereby making the radical and more basic knowledge generation processes happening in certain forms of action research almost invisible, and conflated with other, inappropriate methods.

Therefore, this special issue calls for papers, which *both* **1)** summarise extant attempts *and* **2)** aim to develop concepts and terminology more and better adjusted to knowledge production from within practices, and to ways of conceiving and describing collaborative knowledge production in action research, as it plays out in cross-fields of tensions between various discourses and institutionalised practices, in a field filled with research and practice dilemmas. This special issue will also **3)** welcome investigations of different "clashes of discourse" typically happening in action research which, from this, might develop new concepts and terminology. AR needs to find and develop a new and proactive language and practice to qualify research practice, based on the basic principles and approaches in action research.

As indicated, social or human knowledge development and creation needs to come into *its* own, find its own form (like natural science and technology might be said to have come into their own during modernity). Certain forms of action research are potent candidates for making this happen. Extant forms of inquiry all need to be critically examined, transformed, and adjusted to radically practice-based knowledge generation in action research.

Ultimately, then, the challenge is more fundamental than merely terminological. There are many terms from conventional research which may serve as starting points for reflections on

this challenge. For instance, the very term "data" entails ideas about the existence of unbiased "bits of information", which are possible to "collect" by means of specific "data-collection" methods. This, however, carries with it logics from natural science and empiricist theory of knowledge, in which human and social phenomena like action, knowing, meaning, emotion, insight etc. escape attention and seem invisible. Hence, in this one small word "data" we see one of many signs of ingrained and institutionalised separation of social research and knowledge into the different internal disciplines of "theory", "data" or "experience", and "methods", which need to be challenged.

Certain forms of practitioner action research are already challenging this. More colloquial and extant understandings of "experience" do not operate with the divisions of conventional research. They are simultaneously theoretical, empirical, and methodological, and even simultaneously descriptive and normative, thereby challenging basic categories of modern research and societies. Action research cannot continue being illegitimately marginalised. The challenge is for it to "come into its own": conceptually and terminologically, In order to create space for action research as an accepted part of the mainstream, it needs *both* to transcend the tendency to reduce its own activity to a niche of complementary "projects" within a conventional status quo, and the expansive terminology and conceptualisation of conventional research needs critical examination and adjustment to the experience of action researchers. How do we think, write and talk appropriately about action research, developing concepts, insights and understandings from within practices, as part of an increasingly mainstreamed socially distributed knowledge-production?

Developing appropriate action research terminology and concepts must attach itself to other schools of thought, critical of the submission of social knowledge to natural science forms and concepts. An important *starting point* for developing concepts and terminology could be basic historical concepts: *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe.* The European tradition also has several continuous critical strands (critical theory, phenomenology, hermeneutics, post-structuralism, social constructionism, etc.), which could and should be explored, mobilised, and utilised. Other, currently emerging, attempts at developing terminology from indigenous, practitioner research and other traditions need to be reviewed as well. Besides starting by connecting to established and emerging critical traditions and approaches, an interesting and promising place to start, could be to explore the different *clashes* between action research and conventional terminology, and understandings experienced by both researchers and practitioners in concrete projects.

Deadlines

Submission of extended abstract: May 15, 2021. Extended abstract: Maximum 1200 words (Including an extended outline, accounting for the content in each section).
Acceptance or rejection of extended abstract: June 15, 2021.
Submission of full article: November 15, 2021.
Review process.
Review will be sent to the authors: March 1, 2022.
Final article submitted: May 1, 2022

Expected publication: August 15 2022
Full article length: 6000–8000 words.

All communication, submission of abstracts, drafts and articles should go to Olav Eikeland and the issue editors at: oleik@online.no.

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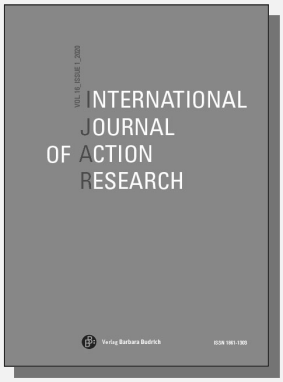

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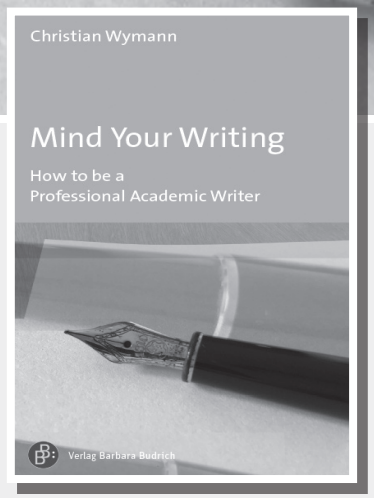

Christian Wymann

Mind Your Writing

How to be a
Professional Academic Writer

2021. 97 pp. • Pb. • 13,90 € (D) • 14,30 € (A) • ISBN 978-3-8474-2459-8
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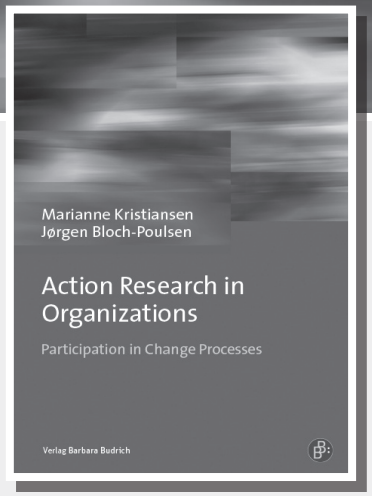
Christian Wymann presents ten of the fundamental questions that every academic writer should be able to answer. He focuses on some questions which may appear trivial at first glance but will likely prove to have more impact on the writer's efficiency and success than initially expected. Wymann's main argument is that writers who become better acquainted with themselves become more productive and happier writers. By knowing their own skills and the specific challenges of academic writing, writing will become a task they can master. Because of its focus on these fundamental questions, the book differs from usual guide books on academic writing. It addresses writers irrespective of their disciplinary background.



Mariannne Kristiansen
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Action Research in Organizations

Participation in Change Processes

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Who decides to initiate change processes in organizations? Who sets the goals? What does it mean for employees to participate in change processes? The book examines organizational change processes based on collaboration between employers, employees and action researchers in Europe and the U.S. in the later part of the 20th century. The authors offer important insights into participation and change in organizations for researchers and practitioners by identifying dilemmas and paradoxes, conflicting interests and exercising of power.

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