

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

The context for developing reflexive co-agency

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

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