

'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 problematic, 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; relationalidad; 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 co-ordination, 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, Kuitenhout 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: