

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.

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

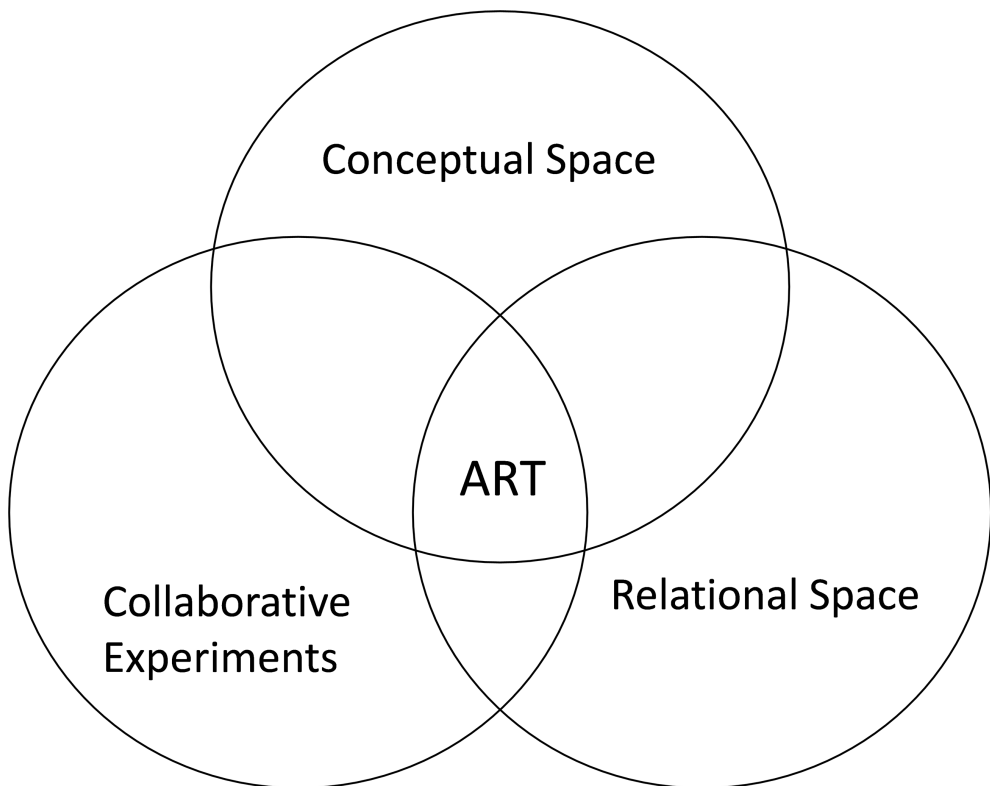
The approach to action research used for the case and the learning chronicle derives from Action Research Transformations (ART; Bradbury et al., 2019). Key contrasts between ART and its heritage within action research is the new emphasis on reflexivity with attention to issues of power and emotion. The 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, Xabier², 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 over³ 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 Nietzsche, 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’s words 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 synthesised 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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