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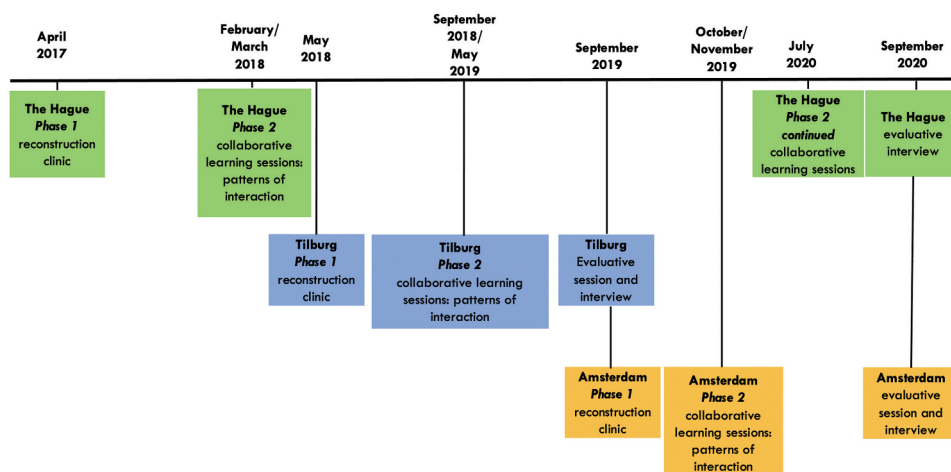
Policy practitioners felt stuck in their attempt to improve their collaboration and reached out to the researcher for help. Together with the researcher, a number of collaborative conversations of inquiry were initiated in order to investigate what was happening.

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
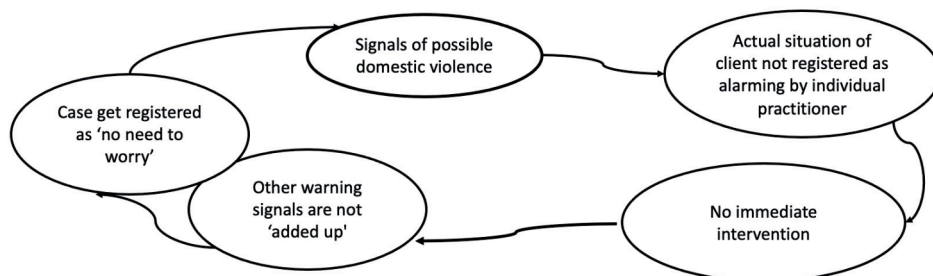
In Tilburg, the researcher was invited by a small group of policy practitioners that were present during the reconstruction clinic, and who had decided to take the lead in finding new ways to improve the collaboration within the newly designed network. Like in The Hague, during the collaborative sessions 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
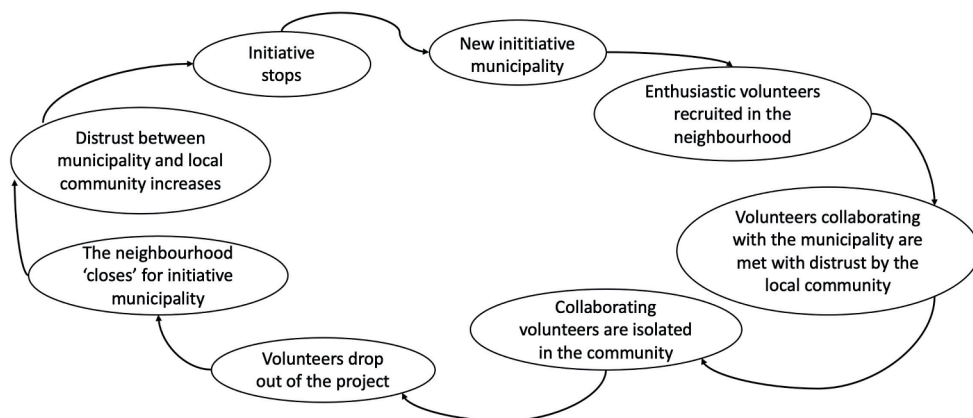
In Amsterdam, the researcher was also asked to facilitate a number of subsequent collaborative sessions of inquiry after the reconstruction clinic. Again, the researcher asked practitioners to bring in specific situations that had left them with a feeling of repetition. During the conversation, the researcher 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
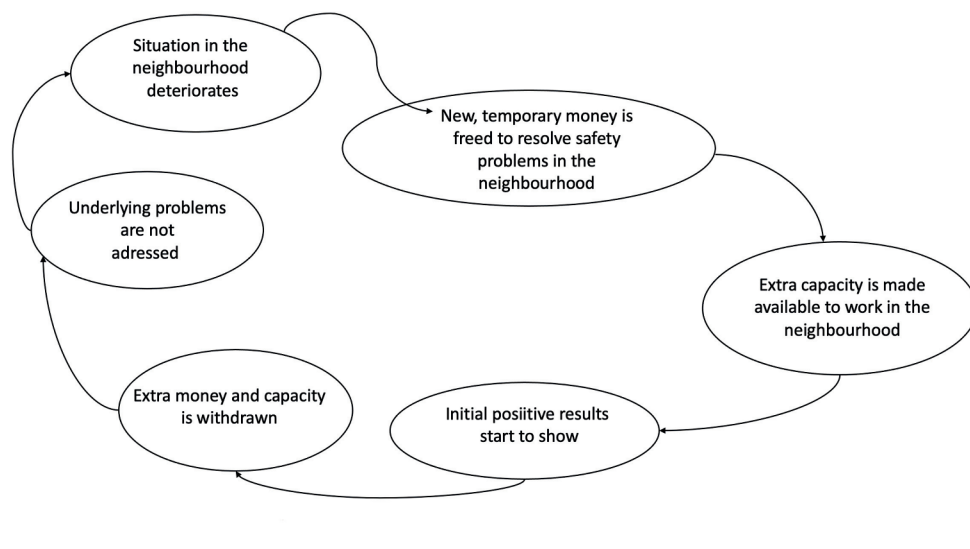
In understanding the unintended consequences of their actions, policy practitioners were able to see how they connected. The project manager for youth and safety in Amsterdam revealed:

"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
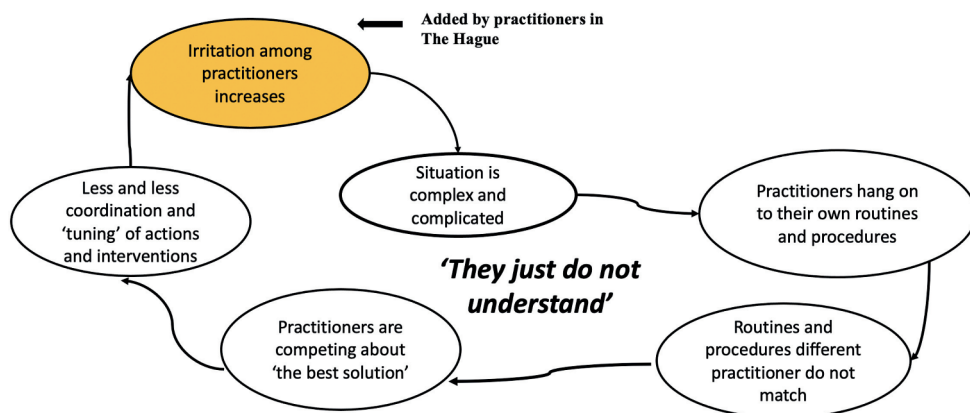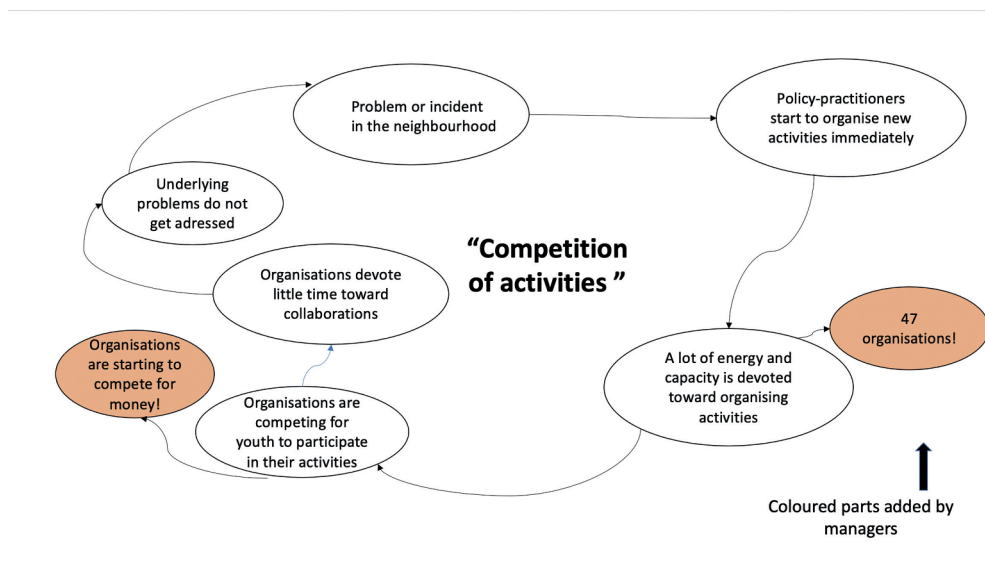

Figure 7. Dynamic patterns of interaction: drawn in Amsterdam September 2019

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.

References

Agranoff R and McGuire M (2001) Big Questions in Public Network Management Research *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (Vol. 11, Issue 3) pp 295–326. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a003504

Ansell C and Gash A (2007) Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 18:543–571. https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mum032

Argyris C; Putnam R and McClain Smith D (1985) Action Science *Jossey-Bass Social and Behavioral Science Series / Jossey-Bass Management Series.*

Argyris C (1991) Teaching Smart People How to Learn *Harvard Business Review* May/June pp 99–109, from https://hbr.org/1991/05/teaching-smart-people-how-to-learn

Axelrod R (1984) *The Evolution of Cooperation* USA New York : Basic Books

Bartels K and Wittmayer J (2019) *Action Research in Policy Analysis.* London: Routledge.

Bartels K and Turnbull N (2019) Relational public administration: a synthesis and heuristic classification of relational approaches *Public Management Review.* https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1632921.

Bartels Koen P.R., Greenwood DJ and Wittmayer JM (2020) How action research can make deliberative policy analysis more transformative *Policy Studies* 41:4, 392–410.https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2020.1724927

Bateson G (1972) *Steps Towards an Ecology of Mind* (reprint 1987). San Francisco: Chandler Publications for Health Sciences.

Börzel, T (1998) Organising Babylon – On the Different conceptions of policy networks Public Administration Vol. 76 Summer 1998 (253–273). https://doi.org/10.1111/1467–9299.00100

Bradbury H et al. (2019) A call to Action Research for Transformations: The times demand it *Action Research* 2019, Vol. 17(1) 3–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750319829633

Brandsen T et al (2012) Street-level bureaucrats tussen organisaties: de hernieuwde relevantie van Lipsky's werk *Bestuurskunde* 2012/3 46–56, from http://tijdschriften.boombestuurskunde.nl/tijdschrift/bk/2012/3/Bk_0927–3387_2012_021_003_006

Canto Farachala A and Estensoro M (2020) Bridging between Action Research Communities International Journal of Action Research 1 pp 5–22. https://doi.org/10.3224/ijar.v16i1.02

Castells M (2007) Toward a Sociology of the Network Society *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol. 29, No. 5 (Sep., 2000), pp. 693–699, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/2655234

Cook SD and Yanow D (1993) Culture and Organisational Learning *Journal of Management Inquiry* Vol 3 Issue 2 pp 373–390. https://doi.org/10.1177/105649269324010

Dewey (1929) *The Quest for Certainty* (Gifford Lectures)

Dewey J (1938) *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* New York: Holt and Company

Emirbayer M (1997) Manifesto for a Relational Sociology *AJS* Vol 103, 2 pp 281–317. https://doi.org/10.1086/231209

Follet MP (1924) *Creative Experience*

Friedman VJ and Rogers T (2008) Action Science: Linking Causal Theory and Meaning Making in Action Research. In: Reason P and Bradbury H (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research, Participative Inquiry and Practice*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE publications pp 252–265.

Gustavsen B, Hansson A and Qvale T (2008) Action Research and the challenge of Scope in Reason P and Bradbury H (2008) *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research* London : SAGE pp 63–76

Greenwood D and Levin M (2007) An Introduction To Action Research : Social Research for Social Change Thousand Oaks California USA: SAGE Publications

Greenwood D.J. (2018) Action Research. In: Ciesielska M., Jemielniak D. (eds) *Qualitative Methodologies in Organization Studies.* Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi-org.proxy.uba.uva.nl:2443/10.1007/978-3-319-65217-7_5

Ison R et al (2014) Institutionalising social learning: Towards systemic and adaptive governance Environmental. Science and Policyhttp://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2014.11.002

Ison R (2008) Systems thinking and Practice for Action Research in Reason P and Bradbury H in Reason P and Bradbury H (2008) *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research* London: SAGE pp 139–158

Karlsen J and Larrea M (2014) Territorial Development for Action Research. Innovation through Dialogue. Franham: Gower.

Kickert WJM, Klijn EH and Koppejan J ed (1997) *Managing Complex Networks. Strategies for the Public Sector* London: SAGE.

Klijn EH (1997) Strategies and Games in Networks in Kickert WJM, Klijn EH and Koppejan J ed (1997) *Managing Complex Networks. Strategies for the Public Sector* London: SAGE pp 98–118

Klijn EH, Edelenbos J and Steijn B (2010) Trust in Governance Networks: Its Impact on Outcomes *Administration & Society* 42 pp 193–221. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399710362716

Klijn E.H and Koppejan J (2012) Governance network theory: past, present and future Policy & Politics vol 40 no 4 • 587–606. https://doi.org/10.1332/030557312X655431

Kuitenbrouwer M (2018) Getting unstuck: the reconstruction clinic as pragmatic intervention in controversial policy disputes in Bartels K and J Wittmayer *Action Research in Policy Analysis* London; Routledge pp 177–197

Laws D and Rein M (2003) Reframing practice. In Hajer M and Wagenaar H (eds) *Deliberative Policy Analysis.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press pp 180–201.

Lincoln YS and Guba E (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Loeber et al (2007) 'The practical value of theory: Conceptualisation of learning in the pursuit of a sustainable development' in Wals A (ed) *Social Learning towards a sustainable world* Wageningen Academic Publishers pp 83–98.

Mackewn J (2008) Facilitation as Action Research in the Moment In: Reason P and Bradbury H (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research, Participative Inquiry and Practice*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE publications: pp 615–628.

Martin L and Schwartz DL (2014) A pragmatic perspective on visual representation and creative thinking *Visual Studies, 2014 Vol. 29, No. 1* pp 80–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2014.862997

McGuire M and Agranoff R (2011) The limitations of public management networks Public Administration Vol. 89, No. 2, 2011 (265–284). https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467–9299.2011.01917.x

Osborne (2006) New Public Governance? Public Management Review vol 8 377–387. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719030600853022

Peters GB, Pierre J (1998) Governance without Government? Rethinking Public Administration *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory: Vol. 8, No. 2* pp 223–243. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a024379

Peters GB (2005) Horizontal governance: Concepts and theories of horizontal policy management Paper presented at Congreso Internacional del CLAD sobre la Reforma del Estado y de la Administracio´n Pu´blica, Santiago, Chile, 18–21 Oct. 2005

Pinch T and Bijker W (1984) The Social Construction of Facts and Artefacts: Or How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology might Benefit each other *Social Studies of Science* (14:3) pp 399–441. https://doi.org/10.1177/030631284014003004

Rhodes RAW (1990) Policy Networks. A British Perspective Journal of Theoretical Politics 2 (3) pp 293–317. https://doi.org/10.1177/0951692890002003003

Rhodes RAW (2007) Understanding Governance: Ten Years On Organization Studies 28 (08) pp 1243–1264. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840607076586

Rein M (2009) Reframing Problematic Policies in Goodin et all *Oxford Handbook of Public Policy* UK: Oxford University Press

Scharpf F (1994) Games real actors could play. Positive and negative coordination in embedded negotiations *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 6 (1) pp 27–53. https://doi.org/10.1177/0951692894006001002

Schön D and M Rein (1994) *Frame Reflection: Toward the Resolution of Intractable Policy Controversies.* New York: New York Basic Books.

Senge P (1990) *The Fifth Discipline- The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation.* London UK: Random House

Senge P et all (1994) *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook – Strategies and Tools for building a Learning Organisation.* London UK : Nicholas Brealey Publishing

Schein E (2008) Clinical Inquiry/Research in Reason P and Bradbury H The SAGE Handbook of Action Research

Sztompka P (1999) *Trust: A Sociological Theory.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Visser M (2003) Gregory Bateson on deutero-learning and double bind: A brief conceptual history *Journal of the History of the Behavioural Sciences* 39.3 pp: 269–278. https://doi.org/10.1002/jhbs.10112

Whips JD (2014) A pragmatist reading of Mary Parker Follet's integrative process. Transactions (50) 3: 405–424, from https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lib_articles/8/

Yanow D and Cook SDN (1993) Culture and organizational learning *Journal of management inquiry vol 2, no 4* pp 373–390. https://doi.org/10.1177/105649269324010

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.

Author's address

Martien Kuitenbrouwer
Waterspiegelplein 42
1051 PB Amsterdam
The Netherlands
E-mail: martienkuitenbrouwer@gmail.com