

Transforming the relational dynamics of urban governance

Bartels, Koen

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**Transforming the relational dynamics of urban governance:
How social innovation research can create a trajectory for
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Transforming the relational dynamics of urban governance: How social innovation research can create a trajectory for learning and change

Abstract

This article examines how social innovation (SI) research can coproduce transformative change in cities. A key challenge is to diffuse and sustain SIs in ways that transform the relational webs that constitute local spaces and their governance. The relational approach to SI is conceptually promising in this respect, but its foundations and practices need to be further developed. Therefore, I develop a relational ‘theory-methods package’ of practice theory and action research. By co-producing immediately usable insights, experiences and artefacts in the daily practice of SI, this approach enables researchers to gradually create conditions for a transformative trajectory of learning and change in urban governance. I critically appraise four research practices in the context of a SI in Dutch urban governance and reflect on the transformative potential of this relational theory-methods package.

Keywords: social innovation; urban governance; relationality; transformation; practice theory; action research

Introduction

Social innovation (SI) is hailed as breeding ground for more just, democratic and sustainable cities (Moulaert et al., 2005, 2010; Blanco and León, 2017; May, 2017). Especially since the 2008 financial and economic crisis, policy discourse has actively encouraged new ways of thinking, acting and organising to address unmet local needs. Grassroots initiatives nurture innovative ideas, practices and artefacts in local communities that can generate radical, systemic change in power relationships and worldviews underlying dominant institutions that prove increasingly unsustainable (Seyfang and Smith, 2007).

A key challenge is how SI can have such ‘transformative’ impact—understood here as fundamental change in local practices and structural (discursive, material and institutional) contexts (Grin et al., 2010; Grin, 2018). More often than not, innovative initiatives are successful in their own local situation, but efforts at diffusion, upscaling and mainstreaming tend to falter in inhospitable environments rife with aversive actors and institutional resistances (Bartels, 2017). Going beyond a regressive David vs. Goliath dichotomy, SI research has explained this recurrent pattern in terms of strategic niche management (Smith, 2007; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012), the multilevel perspective (Hargreaves et al., 2013), and the relational approach (MacCallum et al., 2009; Moulaert et al., 2010; Bartels, 2017; Haxeltine et al., 2017). Whereas the former two focus on the interface between ‘niches’ and ‘socio-technical regimes’ dynamically nested in a wider ‘landscape’, the latter is explicitly concerned with unpicking “the complicated relational picture” (Cornwall, 2004: 6) of contingent factors that shape efforts at transformative change.

While most studies focus on analysing how these relational dynamics of change and resistance unfold, it has recently been argued that SI researchers can play an active role in bolstering transformative change (Pel et al., 2017; Wittmayer et al., 2014; Wittmayer et al., 2017a; Frantzeskaki and Rok, 2018). By “explicating and developing actionable knowledge through a participative and action-oriented research process” (Wittmayer et al., 2017b: 9), researchers and local actors can coproduce systemic changes in engrained ways of thinking, (inter)acting and organising. This relational approach is an attractive way of intervening in ‘SI-in-the-making’ that chimes with a major relational strand of urban studies (MacCallum et al., 2009; Khan et al., 2013; Blokland, 2017; McCann, 2017). Here I draw especially on Doreen Massey’s reconceptualisation of “space as the sphere of relations, of contemporaneous multiplicity, and as always under construction” (Massey, 2005, 148) to both

- *understand* space as constituted through the ways local actors negotiate and construct their interdependencies and institutional configurations, and

- *intervene* in these relational dynamics by developing collective capacities for relating to a plurality of knowledge, experiences, values and institutions (Healey, 2007; Fraser and Weniger, 2008; Vandenbussche et al., 2017).

The relational approach to SI research thus means engaging in processes of reproducing and transforming the social relations that constitute local spaces.

The conceptual foundations and methodological practices of this relational approach to researching SI need to be further developed (Pel et al., 2017; Wittmayer et al., 2017a). We currently lack clear guidance on how SI researchers can create knowledge of these relational dynamics (epistemology) and analytically intervene in them (methodology); that is, how to actually *do* such research. This article takes up this challenge by asking: *how can SI research contribute to transforming the relational dynamics of urban governance?* The main aim is to develop a relational “theory-methods package” (Nicolini, 2012: 7, 14, 217) that clarifies how theoretical assumptions and methodological choices can work together to produce relevant knowledge and desirable forms of socio-political organisation. I do not seek to develop an abstract analytical scheme, but to cast light on the *practice* of research: the work we do when interpreting, participating in, and representing socially patterned ways of interaction, and what this enables us to know and do differently (Jasanoff, 2004; Law, 2004; Pickering and Guzik, 2008; Bartels, 2012).

More concretely, I develop a relational theory-methods package of *practice theory* and *action research* in which knowledge is co-produced with local actors in the course of their everyday mutual engagements in urban governance. In this relational approach, SI researchers create conditions for transforming relational dynamics by *coproducing immediately usable insights, experiences and artefacts that create a trajectory of learning and change*. Transformative processes are not big leaps but are won in tiny incremental steps that SI researchers can stimulate by 1) *doing things together* to find ways to assist in and promote change; 2) *animating fleeting feelings* as invitations for mutual learning; 3) *responding to emergent dynamics* to make the research more inclusive and usable; 4) and *taking many small steps* to carve out spaces for proximal learning and change.

The first section builds on relational thinking in urban studies to conceptualise SIs as transformations in and of urban governance. Next, I explain how practice theory and action research can be combined to further develop the theoretical and methodological foundations of the relational approach to SI. After outlining my research on SI in urban governance in Amsterdam, I critically appraise four research practices for enacting this relational theory-

methods package. Finally, I reflect on how this approach contributes to transforming the relational dynamics of urban governance.

Transforming the relational dynamics of urban governance

Following the celebrated perspective that space is socially produced, a wide range of relational approaches has developed in which local interactions do not take place *within* territories, cities and communities but are *constitutive of* these spaces (for an overview, see Khan et al., 2013). “Physical and social spaces of the city are created out of contestation between networks of actors with diverse geographical imaginations of what they want the city to be” (Fraser and Weninger, 2008: 1436; see also Cornwall, 2004; Blanco et al., 2014; Blokland, 2017). Massey (2005) articulates three propositions underpinning such a relational ontology: 1) space is enacted through interactions, unfolding in-between interdependent local actors and physical, discursive and institutional settings; 2) space is a sphere of plurality, of a multiplicity of co-existing interests, identities and experiences; 3) space is always becoming, an emergent process of being reproduced and transformed. This relationality necessitates attention to what she evocatively calls the “throwntogetherness, the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now” (Massey, 2005: 140).

Urban governance of these interactive, plural and evolving spaces asks for a ‘double shift’ in our thinking, combining a relational ontology with epistemic, methodological and normative assumptions about how to know, analyse and improve relational dynamics (Healey, 2007; Khan et al., 2013; Vandenbussche et al., 2017; Ison et al., 2014; Paschen and Beilin, 2015; Karlsen and Larrea 2017). First of all, this means recognising the (increased) omnipresence of webs of multiplicity, interdependency and institutional contingencies. Second, it means generating knowledge and interventions “that act as catalysts to enhancing connectivity and qualities of transaction in the future” (Khan et al., 2013: 294). Urban policies and strategies cannot be fixed, linear and imposed, but should be evolving and adaptive based on collaborative processes of sense-making, negotiating, strategy-making and relating (Healey, 2007; Pierre and Peters, 2012; Vandenbussche et al., 2017). In other words, urban governance is understood as the capacity to engage with and transform the relational dynamics of local spaces.

In the relational approach, SI is conceptualised in similar terms as “‘realities that become’, rather than stable projects with clear prime movers and established goals” (Haxeltine et al., 2017: 69). Innovative forms of thinking, acting and organising are not posited as polar opposites to urban governance regimes, but as assemblages of social relations and practices

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enacted at their interface (MacCallum et al., 2009; Blanco et al., 2014; Bartels, 2017; Haxeltine et al., 2017). Transformation is a situated, emergent and contested process of “prolonged interactions between heterogeneous elements (practices and structural contexts) that gradually undermine the conditions for stasis and prepare change” (Grin, 2018: 431).

Up to now, the relational approach to SI research has mainly involved longitudinal archival research and ethnographic observation to generate evolutionary accounts of transformation pathways (e.g., Vandenbussche et al., 2017). Recently, it has been proposed that SI researchers can facilitate participatory spaces for coproducing new knowledge and actions that empower local actors to transform their relational dynamics (Wittmayer et al., 2014, 2017b; Richardson et al., 2017; Frantzeskaki and Rok, 2018). Yet, as the theoretical and methodological foundations of the field of SI as a whole are still underdeveloped (Howaldt et al., 2014; Domanski and Kaletka, 2017; Wittmayer et al. 2017a), Pel et al. (2017) call for further developing a framework for this relational approach. Therefore, I develop a relational theory-methods package and examine how it works and what it helps us do.

A relational theory-methods package of practice theory and action research

Practice theory and action research are obvious candidates for strengthening the relational approach to SI. Practice theories have been key to conceptualising SI (Howaldt et al., 2014; Hargreaves et al, 2013; Khan et al., 2013; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012), while action research provides a methodological basis for coproducing transformative knowledge and action with SI stakeholders (Aiken, 2017; Wittmayer et al., 2017a, 2017b; Frantzeskaki and Rok, 2018). However, SI research has not yet combined practice theory and action research, despite their shared relational nature and grounding in classical pragmatism¹.

Practice theory is increasingly used in urban studies to explain change in terms of the reconfiguration of everyday practices (Shove, 2010; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Hargreaves et al, 2013; Ison et al., 2014; Paschen and Beilin, 2015). It does not offer a unified theory but joins a family of approaches from different disciplines and philosophical traditions based on three main principles (Reckwitz, 2002; Cook and Wagenaar, 2012; Nicolini, 2012; Shove et al., 2012):

- 1. The main unit of analysis is not institutions or individual action but *practice*: the practical activities routinely enacted and improvised while engaging with concrete situations.
- 2. Practices are not static actions-in-context ‘out there’ (practices-as-entities) but evolving, contingent activities in everyday life that dynamically reproduce and

adapt seemingly stable social, cultural and historical institutions (practices-as-performances).

3. Knowledge is performative and situated. Learning what is going on and should be done occurs through experiencing, communicating about, intervening in, and reflecting on concrete situations.

The uptake of practice theory in SI research is predominantly situated within the Continental European tradition of social theory, in which practices form habitual routines which unconsciously guide behaviour (Howaldt et al., 2014). However, the classical pragmatist tradition lends itself particularly well to a “relational conception of practice, knowledge, and context” (Cook and Wagenaar, 2012: 5) in which practices emerge, and are sustained in the course of getting things done. When we cook, play tennis or teach, we piece together a range of interdependent elements—shared background knowledge, feelings, values, materials, discourses, power relations, etc.—to accommodate the resistances that situations throw up to our interventions. As such, practice, knowledge and context, and all the various elements involved, mutually constitute each other (Pickering and Guzik, 2008; Wagenaar and Cook, 2011; Shove et al., 2012; Paschen and Beilin, 2015).

Practice theory has mainly been combined with ethnography to capture what local actors actually do, say and feel, observe how these practices unfold in action, interpret their meaning from local actors’ perspectives, and provide thick, grounded accounts (Bueger, 2014; Gherardi, 2012; Nicolini, 2012). Action research extends this methodological repertoire based on its orientation to collaborative change (Wagenaar, 2007; Bartels, 2012; Pain and Kindon, 2007; Paschen and Beilin, 2015). While doing action research inevitably includes participatory ethnography, due to their historical cross-fertilization (Schatz, 2009; Erickson, 2011), it is distinctly geared to becoming part of a practice *with the purpose of changing it* through joint inquiry and practical action with stakeholders towards democratic societal change (Greenwood and Levin, 2007).

In urban studies, action research is widely used to raise awareness of the socio-spatial embeddedness of power and promote social justice and sustainability (Kindon and Pain, 2007; Kindon et al., 2007; Paschen and Beilin, 2015; Karlsen and Larrea, 2017). Also action research is a broad family of approaches, germinating from three main principles (Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Kindon et al., 2007):

1. Researchers and stakeholders seek to develop shared understandings as a basis for *action* in response to a problematic situation.

- 2. Actionable knowledge is generated through a collaborative *research* process of knowledge gathering, reflecting on habitual patterns, and learning about change.
- 3. Ensuring *participation* of a wide array of stakeholders is vital to effectively addressing complex situations and empowering them to challenge hegemony.

The relational foundations of action research are widely acknowledged (Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Burns, 2014; Bartels and Wittmayer, 2018). Based on classical pragmatism and General Systems Theory, it depicts a world of interdependent actors and institutions related through webs of connection. Action research creates spaces in which dialogical relationships, joint experiences and mutual learning enable stakeholders to surface and transform their habitual patterns of interaction. Similar to practice theory, knowledge is not a fixed, individually held precondition to action but a dynamic and experiential process unfolding in-between people entangled in concrete situations and wider systems.

Besides widespread consensus on the importance of maintaining fruitful relationships, the relational nature of action research is interpreted in various ways (see Bartels and Wittmayer, 2018). For instance, Systemic Action Research involves conducting multiple parallel inquiries that enable systemic change of stakeholders' interrelated practices (Burns, 2014). Action research of SI has mainly focused on creating multi-stakeholder engagement spaces that facilitate mutual learning about transition dynamics (Wittmayer et al., 2014, 2017b; Frantzeskaki and Rok, 2018). While this approach engages *with* the daily practices of local actors, it has been criticised for not enabling action researchers to participate *in* this practice to generate change 'from within' (Aiken, 2017).

Therefore, I propose a relational theory-methods package of practice theory and action research aimed at *transforming relational dynamics by co-producing immediately usable insights, experiences and artefacts*. The pivotal attribute of this approach is that researchers take part in the daily practice of SI in order to create a transformative trajectory of learning and change. By addressing immediate, emergent needs, SI researchers are instantly woven into its relational dynamics, encountering resistances and unearthing ways to promote change. SI researchers cannot control or redesign these emotionally-laden and conflict-rife dynamics, but can drive transformative change in small, incremental steps by keeping mutual learning going, interactively redesigning the research, and carving out a zone for proximal change.

Research project: Area-focused working in practice

Between September 2013-2014, I conducted the research project ‘Area-focused working in practice’ in Amsterdam (the Netherlands). The Municipality of Amsterdam had recently developed a city-wide policy for ‘area-focused working’ (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2013) in response to the national discourse of a ‘participation society’ of active citizenship and civic energy trumping welfare state dependence and bureaucratic resistance (see e.g., Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2013). Area-focused working aimed to generate tailor-made urban policies in response to a problem in a local area as and when it emerged, driven by the dynamics of the problem and area rather than municipal policy norms or organisational procedures. In light of recent decentralisation reforms coupled with austerity cutbacks, area-focused working would empower local actors to take more responsibility for local wellbeing and do justice to massive differences between sub-local areas. Yet, it remained unclear how to actually *do* area-focused working in practice and *sustain* this new way of thinking, acting and organising in urban governance.

At the forefront of area-focused working were the Neighbourhood Practice Teams (*Buurt Praktijk Teams* – BPTs) in City District West². BPTs were multi-disciplinary teams mandated to ‘do what’s necessary’ to turn things around in neighbourhoods caught in a vicious cycle of youth crime, anti-social behaviour, and distrust, disengagement and conflict between residents and public agencies. Intricately linked to often hidden problems of poverty, domestic violence, poor housing and social segregation, these deep-seated problems only seemed to worsen from interventions by the 10+ public agencies involved in each neighbourhood. BPTs iteratively learned what was going on and could be done to transform engrained patterns by being present, listening, developing a shared focus, organising small-scale activities, and joint reflection. This innovative approach not only generated immediate solutions to the aforementioned problems but also rekindled a sense of collective ownership of public space, social activity and relationships, and trust in public agencies. The unprecedented success of the first BPT on the *Columbusplein* (main square in the *Baarsjes* neighbourhood) garnered widespread praise and media attention at a local and national level and led to the creation of three other BPTs in City District West and several spin-offs throughout the city. The second BPT also managed to turn things around in the *Landlust* neighbourhood, even though this success was deeply contested by some stakeholders, while the other BPTs had significant yet considerably less definite impact (for more details, see Bartels, 2016, 2017, 2018).

Yet, BPTs constantly faced resistances that frustrated their activities and efforts at transforming urban governance (Bartels, 2017). For instance, they ran into a snake pit of top-down policy-making, hierarchical management and interagency competition when trying to

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diffuse and upscale their approach. With budget cuts and the upcoming abolishment of City Districts on the horizon, BPTs feared that their innovative area-focused approach would ultimately be smothered by a turn to centralisation and codification. Indeed, seven years after the first BPT started, all BPTs have formally ceased to exist, even though its principles and practices are still enacted (personal communication main collaborator, December 2018).

My research entered the scene two years after the first BPT started, which proved to be a crucial stage for transforming urban governance in Amsterdam. After their initial successes, BPTs now needed to sustain their approach by widening understanding and engagement of a greater range of local actors. After three weeks of shadowing and talking to a wide range of stakeholders, participating in neighbourhood activities and meetings, and hanging out in local offices, squares and streets, I identified three key tensions between the BPT approach and its governance environment: 1) evaluating their innovative approach in conventional planning and management systems; 2) collaborating with colleagues and organisations who felt criticised, unappreciated and threatened; and 3) diffusing and sustaining the approach in complex networks characterised by distrust amongst citizens, public professionals and managers. Through a range of iterative discussions in response to emergent dynamics (see the third section below), a group of seven core collaborators and I decided that my research would address these tensions in three ways.

1. *Conducting an evaluation* of the second BPT was supposed to increase understanding of the approach amongst (critical) outsiders, help extend the team’s mandate, and develop an alternative evaluation approach. Within two months, I conducted twelve interviews, studied thirteen policy documents, participated in team meetings, went on three neighbourhood walks, worked in the neighbourhood office, co-organised a resident meeting, and participated in an executive meeting. Together with a professional editor, I turned the evaluation into a neat-looking booklet for further distribution. Publication was deferred for several months because I had to revise it in response to protests by a few stakeholders against its contents, format and process.
2. *Co-organising a cleaning event* together with residents of the neighbourhood in which the third BPT operated was different to the intervention my collaborators and I had initially planned. Our plan was to co-organise an innovative initiative that would help to uncover and address organisational resistances to new ways of engaging with anti-social behaviour on the main square. However, this turned out to be too big of a step in light of the dynamics of the neighbourhood. Over a period

of 2.5 months, I discovered what to do instead by meeting with various active residents five times, co-organising four community engagement activities, going on neighbourhood walks, participating in three team evaluation meetings, conducting two in-depth interviews with active residents and taking 258 pictures of litter on the main square. The resulting cleaning event for students of the local elementary school was such a success that it became a regular event aimed at triggering wider community engagement.

3. *Conducting a 'needs analysis' with a multi-agency team of youth workers* was supposed to improve their abilities to engage with youngsters in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, as well as embed the BPT approach within and across the stakeholders in the absence of a BPT in this area. For three months, I closely collaborated with the team leader, had five meetings with his managers and other stakeholders, participated in six team meetings, went on five neighbourhood walks, conducted two in-depth interviews with youngsters, co-organised a focus group with fifteen youngsters and composed the final report based on team members' daily reports. I facilitated the team in letting go of their pre-structured approach and adopting a BPT approach of having open-ended conversations and interpreting youngsters' stories. Despite many resistances along the way, it led to a shared view, practice and collaborative commitment, as well as wider learning through a reflective report (also turned into a professional booklet) and a 'whole-system-in-the-room' workshop I co-organised several months later.

After four months of fieldwork, I organised four co-inquiry meetings with my core collaborators over the course of eight months to evaluate the research approach, findings and implications, and sustain the transformative trajectory of learning and change created through the immediately generated activities, workshops, reports and collaborative processes. While all collaborators and several policy-makers unequivocally praised the usefulness and impact of my research on the short to medium term, it has not prevented that the BPTs have ceased to operate—I will return to this issue in the conclusion.

The next sections explain the four research practices of my relational theory/methods package (see table 1) and reflect on their wider implications. I defined and developed these research practices through a grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006) of my written field notes (two notebooks), transcribed research diary (34 pages) and memos (four documents of in total 160 pages). I coded these documents based on an open-ended, abductive approach that was not guided by a priori concepts. I labelled pieces of data (meaning units) with active and

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evocative codes that both captured the concrete issues described and broader patterns, issues and themes. Coding generated 19 initial codes, which I narrowed down, synthesised and refined through memo-writing and theoretical sampling, including an iterative review of practice theory and action research literature. I present these practices separately, illustrated by one critical example, even though in practice they strongly overlap.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Doing things together

Doing things together is an ongoing process of performatively learning about (how to relate to) the issues, people and relationships constituting urban governance, with the purpose of identifying where and how to promote change.

By participating in the BPTs I constantly engaged in seemingly random activities. I drove a borrowed scooter through the pouring rain from one meeting to the next, picked up garbage in the streets, did dishes, fixed a skipping rope, cooked for eight people, used a cargo bike, helped moving office, made tea and coffee, and played street soccer. I was constantly doing things, scooting off from one thing to the next, racing on my bike, or making some quick notes in the tram. All kinds of small things had to be quickly arranged in response to sudden issues that popped up. ... I could hardly keep up, let alone change something. Team members would often rapidly exchange detailed knowledge, not talking about “the group of problematic youth” in general but “*that* boy with *those* brothers, going to *that* school, with *these* parents, where *these* interventions haven’t worked.” (research diary, November 2013)

This experience of feeling both adrift and productive is part and parcel of *legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave and Wenger, 1991). A practice cannot be known or changed from the outside but only performatively (Ison et al., 2014; Law, 2004; Cook and Wagenaar, 2012). By participating in it, we gradually learn what is going on and what should be done differently. Entering a new environment is a socio-spatial process in which the initial experience of ‘strangeness’ turns into a sense of belonging and identity the more we (learn how to) interact with others and concrete situations (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This is not a comfortable tag along; it involves grasping, participating in and trying to change

practices as they are relationally (re)produced in open-ended situations rapidly unfolding beyond our control (Cook and Wagenaar, 2012).

The overwhelming, interactive and improvised nature of participating in a previously unknown practice is a familiar theme in participatory ethnography (Cerwonka and Malkki, 2007). In action research, doing things together creates shared views, experiences, language and trust *with the intentionality to find ways to assist in and promote change*. This *co-generative learning* (Greenwood and Levin, 2007: 66, 134) is a deliberate yet emergent strategy for developing joint readings of unfolding events and crystallising where to intervene and how to give shape to change. It produces immediate actionable understandings by creating a reservoir of places, names, experiences and stories for saying meaningful things as well as a range of practices and artefacts for effectively intervening in situations.

By doing things together, I quickly came to appreciate the high-paced, varied and unpredictable nature of the BPTs' practice as the key focus for promoting change. While the BPTs demonstrated the ability to respond to the multifaceted and evolving dynamics of local spaces, as required for area-focused working, to many local actors it was unclear what the BPT approach exactly was and how it worked. Doing things together enabled me to empathise with these actors; sometimes I too felt the urge to resort to more conventional, structured and safe ways of working (in my case non-participant research methods) because there was so much going on and to get comfortable with. And so, rather than casting the research in dichotomising 'they do not understand us' terms, I coproduced interventions targeted at three key tensions (see previous section) that sustained unproductive relational dynamics between the BPTs and other local actors.

Animating fleeting feelings

Animating fleeting feelings means undergoing a wide range of positive and negative emotions and turning these into occasions for mutual learning and change.

After I circulated the first draft of the team evaluation, two planners tried to block its publication with harsh qualifications like "untrue", "worthless", and "unprofessional". This caused me significant stress, anxiety and resentment and it took me considerable effort not to respond in similar vein or see these statements as personal criticism. I responded respectfully and apologetically, included their experiences and views and explained why I felt certain revisions were not appropriate. As a result, they accepted the final draft, which had also become more nuanced towards 'outsiders'. Upon

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reflection, I have come to interpret their responses as a defensive coping mechanism to protect their rationalistic planning approach against the innovative BPT approach and evaluation format. I now also appreciate how emotionally charged and power-laden evaluating a SI can be. (research diary, March 2014)

Participating in a practice is not restricted to developing an intellectual grasp but involves *embodied experiences* of the ‘push and pull’ of concrete situations (Wagenaar and Cook, 2011; Wenger, 1998). A practice cannot be engaged in partly; it entails learning how to be a ‘whole person’ in relation to others. That is, our experiences of concrete situations holistically engage our senses, bodily presence, identity, status and competences vis-à-vis others. By animating a range of embodied experiences—doubt, satisfaction, frustration, friendship, anger, energy, exhaustion, amazement, insomnia, stress, etc.—we learn what it takes to move things along, develop relationships (who knows and is good at what, who can I (not) get along with), and handle conflicting interpretations of events.

It is crucial to use these embodied experiences as “rich points” (Agar, 1996: 31)—signals that something or someone is resisting our knowledge, competences and identity—for mutual reflection, learning and change. Ethnographers have long acknowledged the need to learn from the ways in which their “dramathurgical presence” (Prus, 1996: 107) triggers emotionally charged and power-laden responses (Cerwonka and Malkki, 2007). In action research, fleeting feelings are not just additional resources for better understanding relational dynamics. Action researchers negotiate their abilities to transform relational dynamics by animating embodied experiences with feeling (un)fit, (in)competent and (not) in control. They seek to create space for change in response to the “identity costs” (Wagenaar, 2007: 323) they incur when their role, findings and legitimacy are challenged. By *holistically negotiating their positionality*, action researchers strive to strike a balance between nearness and distance to a multiplicity of stakeholders in order to entice all of them to enter into a process of mutual learning and change (Kindon and Pain, 2007; Bartels and Wittmayer, 2018).

Animating fleeting feelings was fundamental to my ability to coproduce a more inclusive evaluation of BPTs and trigger learning about their relational dynamics. The governance of urban spaces is constituted through a multiplicity of experiential engagements. In this case, the planners had a radically different experience of the BPTs, especially contesting that it was thanks to an intervention by the BPT leader that a conflict they had with residents was resolved. It is tempting to retreat to a defensive posture towards local actors critical of a SI when facing distrust, disregard, criticism or hostility, while in turn feeling appreciated by

and connected to those involved in the SI. But ignoring fleeting feelings would have fuelled a narrow common denominator between the normative orientation of the BPT actors and myself uncondusive to transforming the relational dynamics of evaluating SI.

Responding to emergent dynamics

Responding to emergent dynamics means adapting the focus, assumptions, methods and findings of the research to emergent needs and unforeseen developments in order to make it more inclusive, usable and, hence, transformative.

My initial plan to co-develop and implement a resident initiative fell flat. It took weeks just to get together with an active resident and we failed to get other residents to get involved in our idea to tackle anti-social behaviour by children on the recently refurbished main square. From subsequent talks with the local elementary school's principal about levels of parent engagement and domestic problems we learned that a cleaning event would be more appropriate to start addressing this. Adapting our ambitions and impact accordingly actually reflected the BPT approach: pragmatically enacting small-scale interventions that accumulate into structural change interwoven with—rather than detached from or imposed on—the texture of the neighbourhood. The cleaning event was a success to those involved, but, based on earlier experiences, the BPT leader and I felt that his line manager would dismiss it as ambiguous and insignificant. (research diary, December 2013)

Our hold on practice is inherently provisional and constantly evolving through *dialogical processes* of 'coming to an understanding' (Wagenaar, 2007). While a rationalistic worldview drives us to monologically apply knowledge we 'have' in our minds to concrete situations, taking a practice approach means dialogically adapting our pre-held assumptions, beliefs and knowledge when the situations in which we intervene 'talk back' (Schön, 1983; Brown and Duguid, 1991; Pickering and Guzik, 2008). Dialogical does not imply dyadic; it is multi-directional communication with the diversity of views, experiences, relationships and materials inherent to any practice (Greenwood, 1991).

Adapting to sudden turns of events or emergent needs is a common ethnographic strategy (Cerwonka and Malkki, 2007). In action research, "*ongoing and purposive redesign*" (Greenwood and Levin, 2007: 133) is a relational process in which action researchers and stakeholders collaboratively craft interpretations, adapt research methods and stimulate change

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(Kensen and Tops, 2003; Loeber, 2007; Pain and Kindon, 2007). Multiple methods and work forms can be used depending on what knowledge turns out to be needed (Greenwood, 2007; Greenwood and Levin, 2007). However, such responsiveness can also render the research ambiguous to rationalistic actors (for whom research should paint a clear, orderly picture of reality instrumental to their goal achievement), make it dependent on stakeholders with significant hinder power, and limit its scope, pace and impact (Greenwood, 1991; Bartels and Wittmayer, 2014).

Responding to emergent dynamics meant I repeatedly had to explain to various local actors who I was, why I was doing research and what this meant for them. The case of the resident initiative shows how immediate action can be delayed, and more fundamental change inhibited, by accommodating the views, feedback and consent of various local actors. Urban spaces such as this neighbourhood—with its complex mixture of increasing anti-social behaviour, a refurbished main square, concentrated civic activism, domestic problems and history of youth gangs—are always becoming. By responding to its relational dynamics, SI research can produce insights, experiences and artefacts that actually help to coproduce a transformative trajectory.

Taking many small steps

Taking many small steps means very gradually creating a trajectory for transformation and embedding it in practical opportunities for learning and change.

After the needs analysis, I wrote a reflective report about our experiences and emailed the executive of one of the youth work agencies about organising a learning workshop. He never replied to me but casually consented to one of my collaborators a few weeks later. Over the next months, I had numerous meetings and email exchanges with three collaborators to prepare the workshop. When the executive realised we were going through with it, he requested to first have a meeting to discuss my report and the necessity of a workshop. This delayed our plans by two months but did get him on-board. And even though it took another two months before I received his input and feedback on the report, he supported its publication and enthusiastically participated in the workshop. Taking such ‘baby steps’ helped to gradually spread the BPT approach, with systemic change lying far beyond the horizon of my research. (research diary, November 2014)

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A practice does not change by forcing big leaps in a multiplicity of engagements with it, but by facilitating learning in everyone's *zone of proximal development* (Vygotsky, 1978: 86-90): a space of budding but not yet matured development potentialities. A practice is not a coherent and singular entity but an assemblage of a multiplicity of realities (Law, 2004; Law and Singleton, 2014). We might allegedly participate in the same practice but will perform (do, see, feel, value) it in such different ways that we are really not 'doing' the same thing. Incongruent daily routines, frames, moral stances, emotions, identities, etc. trigger (explicit or implicit) misunderstanding, friction or unintended consequences (Wagenaar and Cook, 2003: 164-171). These relational dynamics can only be transformed through *social* interaction with other participants in the practice. This is not a steady accumulation of knowledge but a trajectory of confronting our diverse practical engagements to gradually learn to adopt qualitatively different ones more in tune with one another (Wertsch, 1984).

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Facilitating such a transformative trajectory requires that action researchers *keep the conversation going* (Greenwood and Levin, 2007: 72, 133). By having meetings, sending emails, making phone calls and organising activities at various places and points in time, they create handles for next steps. This gradually carves out a trajectory for transformation that includes an increasing multiplicity of stakeholders in mutual learning and change and embeds it in the flow of their everyday practice. Working through the discords of their relational dynamics like this creates "a politics of possibility" (Fraser and Weniger, 2011: 1440). It does not achieve a final resolution but accrues small, yet significant, temporary improvements that accumulate into transformation (Greenwood and Levin, 2007: 61; Wagenaar 2007).

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Taking many small steps is a long and, at times, frustrating process with no guarantees that it will have any effect beyond getting something done there and then. Since I was already responsive to emergent dynamics, it was all the more frustrating when not getting the little help, feedback and cooperation I did ask for. This could be people not responding to emails, not turning up for meetings, not or only half-heartedly doing what was agreed, or posturing with critical-aggressive or vague-hesitative questions. By taking many small steps to organise the workshop, I stimulated local actors entangled in a web of decentralised responsibilities—four youth work agencies, social work, police, neighbourhood management—to start working on ways to address their 'throwntogetherness'. SI research can thus achieve successes that might seem small at the time but actually create a trajectory for transforming relational dynamics.

Conclusion

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This article has explored how researchers can address a fundamental challenge of SI: how to spread and sustain locally successful initiatives in ways that are transformative of urban governance regimes? Transformative ambitions for more just, democratic and sustainable cities are reshaped by the intricate, emergent relational dynamics that constitute local spaces and their governance. Building on relational thinking in urban studies, the relational approach to SI aims to enhance capacities for transforming these relational dynamics by coproducing actionable knowledge with local actors. But more needed to be done to develop its theoretical and methodological foundations for conceptualising, analysing and improving SIs ‘in-the-making’.

Therefore, I have developed a relational theory-methods package of practice theory and action research focused on *transforming the relational dynamics of urban governance by co-producing immediately usable insights, experiences, and artefacts that create a trajectory of learning and change* (see table 1). The notion ‘package’ should not create the impression that it is a neatly wrapped, abstract scheme; it is a strategy quite systematically enacted in various dynamic, interpersonal practices, as well as a stance as the orchestrator of a learning and change process in an emerging context. It provides a bundle of research practices for gradually creating a transformative trajectory for learning and change embedded in the daily practice of SI in urban governance. By doing things together, animating fleeting feelings, responding to emergent dynamics, and taking many small steps, SI researchers can experience everyday resistances to innovation, unearth practical opportunities for change, and stimulate a sequence of proximal learning moments that accumulate into transformation.

Rather than creating reflective spaces that take local actors out of their daily practice, the distinguishing feature of my relational theory-methods package is that SI researchers take part in the relational dynamics of urban governance and embed a transformative trajectory in the course of local actors’ multiple engagements with its daily practice. An important advantage of this approach is that it produces immediately usable knowledge, actions and artefacts. For instance, besides the multitude of mundane things I did together with local actors to address specific situations, my evaluation helped to extend a BPT’s mandate and became a resource of wider legitimacy and learning; my efforts at co-organising a resident initiative fostered joint reflection on how to engage with the neighbourhood; and the ‘needs analysis’ activities, reports and workshop created a shared view, practice, commitment and learning (Bartels, 2016, 2017, 2018).

My approach does not negate the need for reflective spaces; a key issue for further developing the relational approach to SI is how to link systemic learning and everyday practice

(Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Ison et al., 2014; Wittmayer et al., 2014; Frantzeskaki and Rok, 2018). Another issue to explore is what timescale is conducive to transformative change; my research project turned out to be too short to sustain the transformative trajectory it generated. It is also advisable to better include the voice of local actors in research reports and publications than I have admittedly done in this paper (for one possible approach, see Bartels and Wittmayer, 2018). A final lesson is that SI researchers need to critically reflect on ways to balance their inevitable tendency to share a normative orientation with SI actors with the need to be inclusive of other local actors resistant to SI. Further unpicking the relational nature of researching SI along these lines will be key to supporting transformative change in cities.

Note

¹ Classical pragmatism is a stream of philosophy that understand the world in terms of human experience in association with others and the ability to exercise practical judgment while engaging in concrete situations (Healey, 2009). Practice theory and action research have both been influenced by this experiential and relational worldview (see Cook and Wagenaar, 2012; Greenwood and Levin, 2007).

² The BPTs originated from the innovative efforts of a public safety officer, policy advisor and consultant who got charged with resolving alarming youth work problems that emerged in City District West.

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Table 1. A relational theory/methods package for SI research

Relational practices	Practice theory	Action research
Doing things together	Legitimate peripheral participation	Co-generative learning
Animating fleeting feelings	Embodied experience	Negotiating holistic positionality
Responding to emergent dynamics	Dialogical understanding	Ongoing and purposive redesign
Taking many small steps	Zone of proximal development	Keeping the conversation going