**How Action Research Can Make Deliberative Policy Analysis More Transformative**

*Koen P.R. Bartels*

Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom, k.p.r.bartels@bham.ac.uk (corresponding author)

*Davydd J. Greenwood*

Department of Anthropology, Cornell University, Ithaca (NY), USA, djg6@cornell.edu

*Julia M. Wittmayer*

The Dutch Research Institute For Transitions, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, j.m.wittmayer@drift.eur.nl

**Abstract**

Hajer and Wagenaar originally proposed Deliberative Policy Analysis (DPA) as an approach suited to transforming a policy world characterized by complexity, pluralism and unpredictability. Because its transformative ambitions have long remained unfulfilled, DPA has begun embracing a variety of Action Research (AR) approaches committed to generating policy change in a world beset by multiple sustainability crises. However, a systematic assessment of how AR can make DPA more transformative has been absent thus far. We argue that AR can strengthen the transformative ambitions of DPA in three ways. First, it helps clarify the purposes of DPA based on a critical and relational worldview emanating from their shared pragmatist foundations. Second, it unveils the structural challenges of becoming more transformative in the shadow of the hegemonic institutional organization of academic and policy systems. Finally, it provides a heuristic framework for engaging in the critical-relational dynamics of generating policy change and sustainability transitions. We conclude with a number of recommendations, based on AR principles, practices and experiences, that deliberative policy analysts can adopt to help their initiatives become more transformative.

**Keywords**: Deliberative Policy Analysis, Action Research, transformation, hegemony, sustainability, criticality, relationality

## Introduction

When Deliberative Policy Analysis (DPA) was originally published, Hajer and Wagenaar (2003) argued we needed a different type of policy analysis, one that allowed us to better navigate the increasing complexity of globalized societies and networked governance. Far from being an epistemological critique of the dominant rationalist conception of policy analysis alone, they proposed a moral-analytical program geared to intervening in policy practice and enhancing capacities for shared deliberation, reflection and learning among policy actors. Grounded in the ‘pillars’ of interpretation, deliberation, and practice, DPA aimed to generate relevant and usable (actionable) knowledge by interpreting sense-making and local knowledge in policy situations, foregrounding the interdependency and unpredictability of policy-making in pluralistic societies, and appreciating the practical judgment and negotiation involved in policy work. Rather than providing conventional “rational” knowledge to policy makers, deliberative policy analysts were to “assist and mediate between relevant policy actors, helping them to articulate their views, deal with disputes, and develop and implement possible collaborative actions” (Li and Wagenaar 2019, 427).

Sixteen years later, the world exists in a more complex and alarming state of affairs. Climate change, the financial-economic crisis, mass migration, and extremist populism are only some of the political, social, economic, and environmental crises demonstrating the unsustainability of hegemonic systems and the urgent need for change. We call these persistent problems ‘sustainability crises’: large-scale, dynamic, multi-dimensional systems problems that require immanent and systemic resolution to prevent irreversible catastrophes. They are profoundly wicked since they are societally embedded and reproduced (cf. Schuitmaker 2012; Rittel and Webber 1973). Sustainability crises demand fundamental transformations of the structures, cultures and practices of societal systems over the long term (Loorbach et al. 2017, Grin et al. 2010). We consider something ‘transformative’ to the extent that it challenges, alters, and/or replaces the dominant institutions and power relations keeping current sustainability crises in place (Avelino et al. 2019) —something Flood and Romm (1996) call ‘triple loop learning’, which includes the examination of changes in the distribution of power coming from change processes. DPA therefore faces a more fundamental challenge than producing more usable knowledge and democratic relationships alone; it needs to take on the very institutional organization within which it is deployed.

This predicament has triggered more deliberative policy analysts to embrace a variety of Action Research (AR) approaches (see Li and Wagenaar 2019a). While AR did not feature in Hajer and Wagenaar’s (2003) book, it is now increasingly prominent in policy analysis and related fields (see Bartels and Wittmayer 2014, 2018). Contributions to the first special issue on DPA in *Policy Studies* explicitly explored its synergies with AR by reflecting on experiences with ‘Action Research for Territorial Development’ (Larrea and Arrona 2019), ‘reconstruction clinics’ (Forester et al. 2019), ‘systemic co-inquiry’ (Foster et al. 2019), the ‘Beijing Laboratory for DPA’ (Li 2019), and ‘transdisciplinary sustainability interventions’ (West et al. 2019). DPA-2019 uses such approaches as strategies for change and transformation that “enrich the interaction and improvization that drives policy forward and opens it up to the emergent outcomes of systemic complexity” (Li and Wagenaar 2019a, 431). The special issue proposes that AR enables DPA to better act on its transformative ambitions as an interventionist, “(actionable) methodology of co-producing inquiry and social intervention with all relevant stakeholders” (ibidem, 432).

However, a systematic assessment of *how AR can make DPA more transformative* has not yet been conducted. We agree that AR offers valuable methodological principles and practices for making DPA more transformative. Based on its three core elements (action, research, and participation), it offers a broad family of approaches for collaborating with policy actors in producing scientifically and socially relevant knowledge and transformative action (Greenwood and Levin 2007). But a focus on specific approaches alone risks reducing AR to a merelymethodological repertoire for DPA and neglects the more fundamental synergies in their moral-analytical programs. For instance, despite the emphasis put on the “relational quality of action research” (Forester et al. 2019, 470), “a complexity-oriented, relational model of knowledge and action” (West et al. 2019, 548), and “the interconnectedness of issues” (Li and Wagenaar 2019b, 582), relationality is not explicitly flagged as core principle for the future development of DPA (in contrast to complexity, deliberation, and practice). We believe that probing AR principles, practices and experiences more systematically enables us to develop a more rounded transformative approach to pursuing policy change and sustainability transitions.

We will show that AR endows DPA with a set of principles and practices oriented to critically transforming hegemonic socio-political institutions restraining the development of the relational tissue necessary to create thriving democratic societies. In the first section, we reveal the shared pragmatist foundations of DPA and AR, which give DPA a more interventionist and transformative orientation than other post-positivist approaches to policy analysis. AR helps DPA to articulate more clearly how this moral-analytical program is grounded in a critical and relational stance to the world. The next section critically reviews the difficulties and possibilities of becoming more transformative in the shadow of the neoliberal hegemony of academic and policy systems. Decades of AR have revealed the mismatch between the nature of sustainability crises, on the one hand, and the institutional organization of the academic systems in place to deal with them, on the other. This is even more of a problem than the actual knowledge and practices needed to address them. Having the resources and institutional support to deploy co-productive approaches to knowledge, research, and policy is a core problem, as is crediting professionally the work of people who try to do this multi-dimensional work in neo-Tayloristic academic organizations with competitive pockets of expertise. Finally, we discuss the critical-relational framework developed in the recently published volume ‘Action Research in Policy Analysis: Critical and Relational Approaches to Sustainability Transitions’ (Bartels and Wittmayer 2018). We illustrate the framework’s four dimensions with different approaches, strategies and practices for pursuing policy change and sustainability transitions. In the conclusion, we formulate a set of recommendations for deliberative policy analysts to enact this critical-relational approach to making DPA more transformative.

## Revealing Shared Pragmatist Foundations

At the heart of DPA lies the connection (or: fit) between its philosophical foundations and the realities of policy making. Hajer and Wagenaar (2003) argue that DPA “is both practically and philosophically attuned to the continuous give and take in networks of actors … around concrete social and political issues” (xiv). With the rise of network governance, policy analysis needed to start unravelling the changing dynamics of policy processes in terms of their concrete problems and potentialities. More fundamentally, it had to recalibrate its epistemological and methodological assumptions away from upholding the hegemonic institutional order. Policy analysis was, and still is, by and large underpinned by a positivist and empiricist conception of science and knowledge in which technocratic scientific procedures generate neutral (allegedly non-normative) evidence for ‘policy makers’ to use in making authoritative decisions (Colebatch and Hoppe 2018). DPA asserts that the assumption that such a sanitised view of what counts as valid knowledge does not influence the kind of information and claims deemed legitimate in political debate, affect who is allowed to introduce these, and ultimately conditions what decisions are taken about society, is both untenable and profoundly undemocratic.

Here DPA explicitly builds on the development of post-positivist policy studies since the 1970s, when great societal unrest and political upheaval generated calls for more relevant social science[[1]](#footnote-1). The epistemological turmoil of the time triggered policy analysts to develop a critical perspective on the normative consequences of certain beliefs about knowledge for how we organize our social and political relationships (Fischer et al. 2015). A key development in this respect was the ‘argumentative turn’ (Fischer and Forester 1993), which reoriented policy analysis to 1) taking ordinary, intersubjective communicative practices as unit of analysis, 2) explicating underlying values and power relations, and 3) promoting democracy, social justice and empowerment. Ever since, a community of interpretive and critical policy analysis has grown driven by the desire to do justice to an increasingly turbulent, complex and interconnected world beset by policy failures and crises (Fischer and Miller 2006; Fischer and Gottweis 2012; Colebatch and Hoppe 2018). But, despite a greater focus on ‘usable knowledge’ (Lindblom and Cohen 1979), mainstream policy analysis has remained predominantly committed to empirical measurement, causal relationships and knowledge outcomes that serve rather than challenge hegemonic systems of power.

The impact of interpretive and critical policy analysis is limited because it is not transformative by default. The critical functions that set it apart from conventional policy analysis often remains on a scholastic level, explaining why policies do not work in practice (e.g. by explaining policy in terms of the views and experiences of a multiplicity of actors, or uncovering taken-for-granted discursive structures and power relations), rather than actively participating in practice to help transform the situation (Ojha et al. 2015). Despite the field’s roots in classical pragmatism (see Dunn 2018), analyses tend to stick to a linear model of knowledge transfer based on their view of ‘policy as text’ (see e.g., Fischer et al. 2015; Yanow 2015) rather than engaging in reflexive coproduction based on an understanding of ‘policy as practice’ (see Bartels 2018). Thus, its transformative ambitions remain more an epistemic property than a moral-analytical program and practice (Wagenaar 2015; Li and Wagenaar 2019a; Foster et al. 2019).

Hajer and Wagenaar (2003) aspired to develop a more transformative approach by proposing “a policy analysis that is interpretative, pragmatic, and deliberative” (xiv). A key principle for DPA is that “whatever knowledge we possess must be assessed for its relevance and usefulness in interaction with the concrete situation at hand, *and* that this ongoing process of assessment occurs in situations of intense social interaction” (ibidem, 24). Its *interpretive* orientation to the way people make sense of the everyday world of policy does not imply a focus on individual cognition but on interactive processes of participating in concrete situations and interacting with others. In other words, the focus is on *practice*: the experiences, relationships, rules, values, emotions and materials through which people negotiate ambiguous, open-ended situations. To understand the best and most democratic course of action, they *deliberate*; that is, they form practical judgments by engaging not so much in systematic, principled reasoning as in interaction with others to work through the conflicting views, value pluralism and ambiguities implicated in the situation.

The three main pillars of DPA have strong overlap with the main dimensions through which AR pursues its moral-analytical program: action (practice), research (interpretation) and participation (deliberation). In fact, they seem to be different terms for the same process: *joint inquiry into problematic everyday situations guided by democratic and transformative aspirations*. Surprisingly, the shared roots of DPA and AR in American pragmatism have hardly been noticed or acted upon[[2]](#footnote-2). In line with its pragmatist foundations (Greenwood 2019)[[3]](#footnote-3), Greenwood and Levin (2007, 3) define AR as

social research carried out by a team that encompasses a professional action researcher and the members of an organization, community, or network (‘stakeholders’) who are seeking to improve the participants’ situation. AR promotes broad participation in the research process and supports action leading to a more just, sustainable, or satisfying situation for the stakeholders.

The inclusion of many different stakeholder views and experiences does more than democratizing the research alone: it enables us to change complex situations effectively, build capacities for fruitfully engaging differences, and enhance the scientific rigor of resultant knowledge (see also Greenwood 2007). This integration of democracy, change and knowledge is explicitly grounded in the pragmatist “emphasis on the interpretive, dialogical, and practice-oriented character of all human knowledge.” (Greenwood and Levin 2007, 72) . Pragmatism sees “democracy as an ongoing, collective process of social improvement … [which] had to evolve through people’s active involvement in making sense of their world and not through solutions imposed by powerful outsiders” (ibidem, 60).

Key to this pragmatist foundation is a *relational* worldview that “rests on the premise that reality is interconnected, dynamic, and multivariate and always more complex than the theories and method that we have at our disposal” (Greenwood and Levin 2007, 54). DPA is based on a similar relational understanding of knowledge, research and socio-political organization, in which the focus “is on the way the different elements *relate* to each other rather than on the elements themselves” (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003, 20; emphasis in original). Greenwood and Levin (2007, 73) explain that this relational stance is intimately tied up with *critical* aspirations for “the transformation of power relationships in the direction of greater democracy” because “everyday experience makes it appear that the world is composed of a pile of independent, self-serving atoms that continually crash into each other” (see also Freire 2000). DPA also embodies this critical-relational worldview in its ambition to inquire into policy practice and transform hegemonic socio-political institutions that inhibit policy actors from using more than “only a tiny portion of their knowledge and capacities to confront important problems” (ibidem, 73).

In other words, the transformative nature of DPA follows from the critical and relational stance to the world it shares with AR. Emanating from their shared pragmatist foundations, DPA-cum-AR means actively participating in policy practice based on a holistic and interconnected worldview to coproduce more democratic, just and sustainable futures against the grain of hegemonic understandings of policy-making, knowledge and research. This is why the next sections discuss a range of transformative strategies and practices for enacting a critical-relational approach to DPA-cum-AR.

## Becoming More Transformative in the Shadow of Neoliberal Hegemony

A fundamental disconnect exists between the problems global society faces and the institutional organization of academic and policy systems that claims to deal with them. DPA and AR, though, offer a vital repertoire of knowledge, methods and practices necessary to deal with these global problems[[4]](#footnote-4). However, researchers are inhibited in pursuing them because of organizational blockages in higher education and the public policy apparatus in which they are embedded. While the policy analysis literature has widely explored the dysfunctions of hegemonic policy systems, it has, to our knowledge, not considered the failures of the current institutional organization of academic systems and the urgent need to transform these institutions towards greater democracy, social and cultural justice, and sustainability (Levin and Greenwood, 2016). As it has extensively documented the unconducive and disabling nature of academic systems, AR helps to understand how DPA can confront this fundamental challenge (see Greenwood and Levin 2007).

All varieties of AR rely on evolutionary theory, General Systems Theory, and Field Theory (see Greenwood and Levin 2007). Accordingly, the core principle of AR is that the problems we are dealing with are the persistent problems we dubbed ‘sustainability crises’ in the introduction. The mismatch between these sustainability crises and the neo-Taylorist[[5]](#footnote-5) academic organization perpetuates failed approaches to resolving them (see Levin and Greenwood 2016; Wellmon 2015). Neo-Taylorist academia approaches sustainability crises by fragmenting complex systems into compartmentalized knowledge areas, structurally embodied in departments that supposedly correspond to academic disciplines. This is reinforced by the academic accounting/quality assurance/ranking system. Moreover, these silos are organized in an extensive hierarchical system that pushes power upward and makes units at each level, and individuals within them, compete for resources allocated by their overseers. Such a system guarantees competition and discourages collaboration across and within units. This organizational design makes sustainability crisis difficult and unrewarding to address. The poor results in dealing with persistent problems over the past 50 years are evident.

Action researchers have developed the knowledge and practices needed to address systemic problems in multiple contexts[[6]](#footnote-6). But academically these activities are undermined by marginalization, accountability based on privileging professional journals where peer review reinforces the status quo, and by outright censorship. This is neo-Taylorist academic organization in action (Strathern 2000). The consequences are the proliferation of inconsequential research and publications that few care about but that count toward academic promotion, salary improvements, and institutional rankings.

Added to this is the sharp boundary line drawn between academic and applied work and between pure and applied activities generally (Flyvbjerg 2001). This epistemological and political error condemns the academic social sciences to being both unscientific and irrelevant by breaking the necessary connection between theory, method, and context needed to discover if they give reasonable real-world results and to learn in which contexts these theories and methods actually work. The pure/applied split is also used to create an intellectual hierarchy between those who “think” (and thus are intellectuals) and those who “do” (and thus are drones). By reinforcing the pure/applied split so fundamental to organizational neo-Taylorism, the ongoing neoliberalization of academia globally has encouraged the passivity of academic social science and the humanities as spectator activities.

Hiding behind the mask of the “new public management” (Behn 2001), academic systems are governed through strategies of command and control in a simulacrum of “scientific management” a la F.W. Taylor. Senior administrators and policy enforcers evaluate and rank work that they do not substantively understand and reinforce the mutual irrelevance and competitiveness between the silos reporting to them. They also spend a king’s ransom of resources on multiplying administrative staffs whose very activities multiply the problems and further distance the decision-makers from the information and understanding needed to make intelligent choices (Katzenbach and Smith 2015; Levin and Greenwood 2016; Van Eijnatten 1993). (Senior) management and their “decision support” staff claim to embody rationality, transparency, and respectability. In fact, as Karl Polanyi pointed out as early as in 1944 (Polanyi 1944), this is an expression of the “obsolete market mentality” based on the failed utopian idea that self-correcting markets will produce an ideal social world in which costs and benefits are shared justly. In fact, this mentality has produced the greatest global socio-economic and political inequality ever seen in human history and the impending collapse of the planetary ecosystem for the benefit of a tiny group of hyper-wealthy elites (Piketty and Goldhammer 2014; Chomsky 1997).

We acknowledge that a significant number of interdisciplinary and applied social and policy institutes do exist in universities in general and in the field of policy analysis in particular. Examples are the Beijing Laboratory for DPA (Li 2019) or the Dutch Research Institute for Transitions (DRIFT) that one of us works for. But decades of experiences with such institutes shows that their security and longevity is always at risk (Hollmen 2015). Often they survive during the time when they can attract extra-university funding that can buy off researcher time or when the issues they deal with are politically “hot”. When the notoriously short-lived attention to these issues loses traction with funders, most of these interdisciplinary activities evaporate and neo-Taylorism reasserts itself. When this is combined with the increased demands of the “audit culture” for research grants and publications in highly ranked disciplinary journals, even the most successful interdisciplinary researchers are forced to capitulate and gain the support of within-discipline colleagues to prosper in an increasingly precarious academic employment scene.

Though by no means dominant in social research, AR is now more widely known and published[[7]](#footnote-7). Still, the so-called “third mission” of European universities and the “public service missions” of American public higher education institutions have been undermined by neo-liberal discourse, reforms, and cutbacks. For neoliberalism, the only justification for higher education is vocational training for existing jobs and research that can help the private sector make more money. The vocational curricula are taught by increasingly precarious and part-time faculty and require students to take on rising amounts of educational debt. While most public universities claim a public mission necessary to retain public funding, their internal management and budget practices reveal that to be a low priority at most institutions. While mission statements and public relations often focus on the “public” value of higher education, the budgetary and political operations of universities privilege academic departments, patentable research, university rankings based on publication rankings, and ever higher administrative salaries. These departmental and disciplinary rankings rarely include the public mission and faculty promotions are unlikely to be decided based on faculty fulfilling that public mission.

As a result, doing meaningful policy work and action research on sustainability crises locally, regionally, nationally, and globally requires confronting the organizational structures of neoliberal academic organizations, a confrontation that is dangerous for most academics. Without fundamental institutional and budgetary reforms that promote and reward cross-silo team-based collaborative efforts to deal with systems problems in systems terms, little change can be expected.

The mismatch between neo-Tayloristic policy systems and critical, innovative and transformative research and practice is a well-known trope in the policy analysis literature (Stone 2002; Richardson and Durose 2016; Wagenaar 2016). The intransigent conception of policy analysis as a detached, rationalistic process of providing evidence for authoritative decision making (Colebatch and Hoppe 2018, 495-498) is not conducive to research that generates immediate action, improves relationships, and builds capacities and resources for reflexivity and systemic change (Fischer and Gottweis 2012; Ison 2017). Moreover, policy systems are steeped in a neoliberal ideology that promotes individualism and competition, values directly opposed to the solidarity and cooperative principles of coproduced knowledge and research (Richardson and Durose 2016). As a result, the prefigurative potential of DPA to challenge and overcome what Stone (2002, 7) calls “the rationality project” are inevitably frustrated by the policy language and administrative logics hegemonic institutions employ to reassert their hold on the world (Heidelberg 2006). Doing DPA-cum-AR in policy settings is always at risk of instrumentalization to hegemonic powers (Bartels and Wittmayer 2014). So, as Li and Wagenaar (2019b) put it, “how do we escape the hegemonic cage of providing compelling evidence to policy elites that they then choose to ignore?” (431).

While ideally new public higher education institutions with the proper organizational characteristics will be created[[8]](#footnote-8) (Levin and Greenwood 2016), we insist on doing DPA-cum-AR in our own academic institutions. Ultimately this means that senior academic administrators, extra-university policymakers and private sector interest would have to support these multi-disciplinary approaches just as they have supported and funded multi-disciplinary scientific and engineering studies. This is not a simple matter. Showing that people with vested interests are being exploitative and showing the victims that they are being exploited has produced little change thus far. The strategy of the last decades of surviving academically under the radar and working outside of academia mostly in *pro bono* projects that remain invisible to senior managers is a losing strategy in an environment of scarce and highly-controlled research and project funding.

One way to proceed is to pretend to believe the pro-social public statements of academic administrative leaders and policymakers and then to act on these statements in well-publicized ways so that leaders are held accountable publicly. Well-publicized DPA-cum-AR work could create a space of our own in academic institutions by being more strategic in deploying information about the successes and value of DPA-cum-AR. There is political room for such operations because the current generation of academic and public leaders cannot admit openly that they do not care about their public mission and responsibilities.

Many of these leaders have ruled by using the “sword” of accountability to hierarchize their institutions, occasionalize their faculty, and outsource many of their services. However, the sword of accountability can and should be applied to university managers themselves too. A well-organized campaign to include the public mission in the evaluation of university leaders could attract political support. Academics who have been too passive and slow in defending themselves against the “accountability” movement should now organize to take responsibility for revising the narrow and unequal indicators currently used and extending their application to everyone employed in higher education, not just to faculty. One example of doing this in the British context would be to build on the inclusion of ‘impact’ in the government’s Research Evaluation Framework (REF) but demonstrate that AR generates more meaningful and sustainable change than the REF’s narrow, instrumental Mode-1 interpretation of impact. These kinds of interventions could cause senior academic managers and policymakers to see DPA and AR as valuable tools for their own professional survival.

In sum, we recommend a strategy of challenging hegemonic academic and policy institutions to publicly embrace and work with research approaches that promote the kind of interconnected and systemic ways of thinking, acting, and organizing they have victimized. Key to pursuing this strategy is to work from a foundation that supports such a transformative conception of research, knowledge, and policy. The next section further explains how the critical-relational foundation of DPA-cum-AR can be enacted to promote transformative change in the face of hegemony.

## Critical and Relational Action Research in Policy Analysis

In this section, we extensively draw on the arguments and critical-relational approaches developed in *Action Research in Policy Analysis* (ARPA; Bartels and Wittmayer 2018). ARPA takes stock of the increasing uptake of action research in the fields of policy analysis and sustainability transitions research by reflecting on the ambitions, challenges and practices of a diversity of approaches. Motivated by the urgent need for effective and sustainable responses to contemporary sustainability crises, ARPA develops a framework that indicates what kind of knowledge and research is involved with promoting policy change and sustainability transitions. As its core, it argues that we need to co-create usable knowledge in ways that are both relational and critical; i.e., recognizing and strengthening interdependencies as well as critically and constructively transforming hegemonic systems. Such critical-relational action research unfolds along four dimensions: (1) negotiating ‘the starting point’, (2) enacting ‘multiple roles and relationships’, (3) addressing ‘hegemonic structures, cultures, and practices’, and (4) evaluating ‘reflexivity, impact, and change’. Here we share the main lessons and insights this critical-relational framework offers for pursuing the transformative ambitions of DPA-cum-AR.

ARPA defines AR as “critical and relational processes through which researchers and their co-inquirers aim to collaboratively produce scientifically and socially relevant knowledge and transformative action” (Bartels and Wittmayer 2018, 4). On the one hand, AR involves taking a critical stance towards injustices, exclusion, and inequalities as well as mainstream conceptions of knowledge and research. For instance, Clement (2018) reports on participatory action research aimed at empowering Nepalese farmers to challenge hegemonic climate change discourse. Audio-visual media and deliberative meetings were used to question the status quo and push for transformation of deeply engrained ideas and relationships. On the other hand, AR’s relational worldview focuses on the interconnections between people (including action researchers), other entities, and situations, through which we co-create the world. In this vein, Kuitenbrouwer (2018) facilitated ’reconstruction clinics’ to raise awareness of relational dynamics in urban and environmental policy conflicts. Here the emphasis was on building respectful and trustful relationships and enabling pragmatic change.

Integrating criticality and relationality can be deeply challenging. To put it bluntly, policy actors can be aggravated and alienated when pressured to step out of their comfort zones and change. In turn, action researchers can get instrumentalized and co-opted when trying to accommodate practical realities and bridge worldviews. For example, Henderson and Bynner (2018) struggled to ‘hold steady’ to mutually agreed principles, expectations and accountability when they encountered resistance to transforming hegemonic structures, cultures, and practices in Scottish collaborative governance. In practice, this means navigating challenging critical-relational dynamics of policy actors and researchers who are critical, frustrated, and want change. Crucially, this is embedded in webs of relations with both tentatively supportive people and people invested in the status quo.

However, critical-relational dynamics are more than a trade-off or dilemma; they harbor great and vital potential for synergy. As captured by Arrona and Larrea’s (2018) evocative notion of ‘soft resistance’, pragmatically building good relationships creates a buffer of mutual understanding and trust for people to tolerate critique and institutionalize new policies and relationships. Similarly, a critical stance to our relational interdependencies can create awareness of possibilities for transforming an otherwise taken-for-granted reality – an idea championed by Freire (2000) and enacted by Van der Arend (2018) as she co-produced policy novels about environmental governance and sustainability in the Netherlands.

There is no one best way or easy path for engaging with the critical-relational dynamics of generating policy change and sustainability transitions. What is vital is that action researchers and co-inquirers methodically engage in shared reflection on inherent issues, tensions, and synergies that arise in specific places and moments in time. In doing so they carve out and cultivate reflexive space within, or in parallel to, existing structures and dynamics for the exploration of issues, planning and execution of actions, and design of transformative institutions. In AR, these spaces are referred to as arenas for co-generative dialogue (Greenwood and Levin 2007) or communicative space (Wick and Reason 2009). Similarly, in Mode-2 Science, ‘agoras’ are considered primary modes of knowledge production (Nowotny et al.2003; for an application to AR, see Karlsen and Larrea 2017), while in process-oriented forms of (sustainability) research (Miller 2013) ‘transition arenas’ are constructed to generate radically different knowledge of and solutions to real-world problems (Wittmayer and Schäpke 2014).

The first dimension of the ARPA framework is the *starting point of (action) research*. This is not a fixed point in time and space – rather, it is a fluid and relationally co-created context. AR, more so than other types of research, does not just start and develop ‘like that’; it is born out of a specific context and active interaction with, and negotiation of its various elements (e.g., glocal challenges, policy developments, discourses, concrete needs, funding opportunities, governance cultures, power relationships). It might be tied up with personal engagement with the civil society network for sustainability transitions in Flanders (Paredis and Block 2018) or couched in the context of the grant-funded research project TWENTY65 aimed at transformative change in the UK water sector (Westling and Sharp 2018). Action researchers and policy actors need to determine what specific approach is most suitable in this context and regularly adapt what they do, why, how, when, where, and for whom. Therefore, the starting point needs to be subject to ongoing joint reflection on and negotiation within, inter alia, the local situation and wider context, funding institutions and governance, problem ownership, and openness to critical reflection and change. In this way, action researchers can actively create and cultivate ‘sanction and sanctuary’ (Henderson and Bynner 2018): safeguarding time and space for learning or sustaining commitment.

Second, it is crucial to engage reflexively with the *multiple relationships and roles* of (action) researchers and policy actors. One of the defining characteristics of the critical-relational space created through AR is that it blurs existing role understandings and relationships since it takes place ‘outside’ of existing social structures. AR tries to do research *with* rather than *for* policy actors, often leading to questions about positionality: Where are my boundaries? What is expected of me? Who is my counterpart? It is important to acknowledge that action researchers and policy actors have many overlapping or even conflicting roles and engage in multiple relationships –which, moreover, evolve and change throughout the research process (Wittmayer and Schäpke 2014). This can be dealt with by clearly dividing up roles within the research team (Kuitenbrouwer 2018) or deliberating about and assigning roles between researchers and policy actors (Baláz and Pataki 2018). Negotiating roles and relationships can be time-consuming and frustrating. Gardner (2018) tried to establish a dialogical relationship through Appreciative Inquiry with a British local authority, which expected a conventional, neutral research role and relationship. Ideally, the research design caters for ongoing negotiations about changes in roles and relationships to adjust to the ‘rhythm of the process’ (Paredis and Block 2018).

The third dimension of the ARPA framework involves addressing and challenging *hegemonic structures, cultures, and practices*. This goes back to the critical foundation of AR, which renders it inevitably normative and encourages researchers to let go of even creating the impression of neutrality. It involves putting a spotlight on what is ‘normal’ and scrutinizing the complex dominant structures, cultures and practices that keep it in place, including institutionally embedded perceptions and expectations of what constitutes research (see preceding section). There are many ways to challenge the status quo, whether through bringing out issues of power and social justice in mobilisation strategies for water management (Westling and Sharp 2018), experimenting with innovative practices in urban gardening (Jhagroe 2018), or co-producing new narratives of civil society and sustainability (Paredis and Block 2018). A key question is here whether AR actually contributes to changes in the status quo or turns into ‘putting lipstick on a pig’ (Gardner 2018). In practice, it might transform certain elements while reproducing others, as power struggles, instrumentalization and systemic constraints inevitably arise. Crucially, in dealing with these critical-relational dynamics, action researchers should avoid taking a firm ideological position by carefully negotiating challenges in practice through ‘soft resistance’ (Arrona and Larrea 2018). Rather than outright rejection of and protest to power holders and hegemony, a series of ‘mild interventions’ (Paredis and Block 2018) is more likely to prepare the ground for a transformative trajectory.

Finally, AR aims at generating reflexivity, impact, and change. However, what impact and change mean, or how to evaluate them, is by no means obvious due given a diversity of values, worldviews, and interests. A common approach is to focus on tangible outcomes, which can range from agricultural policy change in Hungary (Balázs and Pataki 2018) to concrete local interventions in the Ghandi-garden in Rotterdam that reassert counter-hegemonic transition knowledge of food regimes such as permaculture, socio-ecological resilience and eco-spiritualism (Jhagroe 2018). Another approach is to evaluate the research process itself, since creating space for criticality and relationality can also be seen as a form of impact and change. For instance, Westling and Sharp (2018) consider the creation of space and legitimacy for critical action research imperative to more socially and environmentally progressive futures. But we can also think of relational change by facilitating policy actors in getting ‘unstuck’ and into a position to move forward regarding a policy problem (Kuitenbrouwer 2018) or by stimulating public imagination of interdependencies through co-producing non-conventional knowledge, such as policy fiction (Van der Arend 2018). Facing the broader quest for sustainability transitions, local experimentation and small steps can simultaneously seem insignificant and hard to achieve, leading to anxiety about failure (Gardner 2018) or scepticism about potential impact (Westling and Sharp 2018). Yet, shared reflection on possible solutions and dead ends can foster a deeper understanding of (changing) institutional and material contexts. In other words, reflexivity about normative directions and impacts may generate learning about system change for sustainability.

In conclusion, we believe that AR, in all its varieties, is increasingly imperative to generating much needed policy change and influencing sustainability transitions. However, we also acknowledge that it is inherently challenging to engage with its critical-relational dynamics. ARPA provides a guiding framework to navigate the contingencies of critically challenging hegemony and strengthening relational interconnections. Crucially, it moves us away from studying or criticizing hegemony from an ideological position; if we want to achieve real and sustainable policy change, we need to engage in its critical-relational dynamics in everyday practice. By interweaving principles with practice, we can co-produce transformations with, against, and beyond the hegemonic institutional organization of both academic and policy systems.

## Conclusion

We have explored how Action Research (AR) can enable Deliberative Policy Analysis (DPA) to become more transformative. Adding depth and breadth to the increasing usage of AR approaches in DPA (see Li and Wagenaar 2019a), we have clarified the critical-relational foundations of DPA-cum-AR and reviewed a set of reflexive practices for critically transforming hegemonic policy and academic institutions that impede relational responses to contemporary sustainability crises. We argued that academic and policy systems steeped in neoliberal ideology and neo-Tayloristic organizational principles will frustrate research that co-produces usable knowledge and systemic change. Hierarchical and detached management structures, disciplinary silos producing compartmentalized knowledge, budgetary competition and conflict across units, and a sharp boundary line between academic and applied work; all fundamentally undermine claims to academic research driven by a public mission and impact. In the face of this hegemonic institutional organization, we suggest three ways in which DPA-cum-AR can become more transformative.

First, we argue that deliberative policy analysts could operate from more solid transformative foundations if they would draw on AR as a critical and relational stance to the world. Besides its rich methodological repertoire, AR is a moral-analytical program with the same pragmatist foundations as DPA. Both AR and DPA pursue a conception of research, knowledge and public policy that emphasizes the interpretive, deliberative, and practical nature of our engagement with the world. DPA-cum-AR proposes that we make sense of and change policy through democratic processes of joint inquiry and intervention. Underlying this transformative framework is the combination of a critical orientation to the divisive and suppressive nature of hegemonic institutions with a relational view of the interconnected and holistic systems we are nested in. Taken together, the goal is to transform hegemonic logics and languages towards more relational knowledge and action.

Second, we recommend a Trojan Horse strategy. Policy analysts need to develop realistic strategies for using what the current system has to offer to embed DPA-cum-AR principles and practices. For too long, we have stuck with the survival strategy of operating under the radar or the counter-hegemonic strategy of exposing and criticizing exploitative relationships driven by the idle hope of being able to jettison these. We argue that researchers need to go public and use the current discourse of ‘mission-driven research’ (Mazzucato 2018), impact strategies, third missions, and public mission statements of those in power and control of resources. By publicizing the successes and value of DPA-cum-AR and connecting them to the public statements of academic administrative leaders and policymakers, we could create space and support for the interconnected and systemic ways of thinking, acting, and organizing sustainability transitions need. We admit this is a massive and daunting task. To convince a group of academic leaders and those faculty who are the major beneficiaries of the current system to give up their hegemony on value and community service grounds is not a recipe for an easy life. Moreover, even if academic and policy institutions would change, this would still leave in place the pervasive financial-political-economic complex that is at the heart of our sustainability crises (Wagenaar 2016). Thus, we are not suggesting tweaks but profound changes in a deeply flawed system.

Finally, we offer deliberative policy analysts “a clearly recognizable and replicable methodical approach” (Li and Wagenaar 2019b, 580) for navigating the challenges and contingencies of strengthening relational interconnections as both a path to and result of challenging hegemonic institutions. Criticality and relationality can stand in opposition to each other and need to be actively integrated for policy change and sustainability transitions to take hold. Action researchers and policy actors can do so by using the four-tier guiding framework for (1) negotiating the starting point, (2) enacting multiple roles and relationships, (3) addressing hegemonic structures, cultures, and practices, and (4) evaluating reflexivity, impact, and change. Reflexively engaging in these critical-relational dynamics of policy change and sustainability transitions leads us away from a bunkered standpoint in opposition to hegemonic academic and policy systems into a practice of co-producing transformations with, against, and beyond their institutional organization.

In conclusion, we have argued that AR can make DPA more transformative by understanding it as a progressive, pragmatist philosophical program and practice of engaging in the critical-relational dynamics of policy change and sustainability transitions. While we have sought to systematize the most common approaches to DPA-cum-AR, we do not intend to oversimplify and reify DPA and AR. There are twenty or more names for activities that are AR in various ways, which in DPA have been taken up under different headings (cf. Forester et al. 2019; Foster et al. 2019; Larrea and Arrona 2019; Li 2019; West et al. 2019). This cacophony covers up different worldviews, politics, methodological preferences, etc. DPA-cum-AR must be a cross-boundary activity, since the systems problems it is about are not discipline-bound. Further systemization can be achieved by learning more about the strengths and weaknesses of diverse approaches for fostering transformation of the status quo and embracing DPA-cum-AR as a way of being and operating in the world rather than a ‘method’ (see also Li 2019). Hence, we recommend further research and reflection around these questions:

* In which ways do AR approaches to DPA adopt and enact their critical-relational worldview?
* How does DPA-cum-AR engage with hegemonic policy and academic systems to enable institutional transformations?
* What different forms of and pathways to policy change and sustainability transitions do DPA-cum-AR approaches provide?
* What are the unique strengths of DPA-cum-AR that might not be found in other approaches to AR?
* How can DPA-cum-AR balance ambitions for systemic transformation with operating at ‘local’ scales where the feasibility of change is constrained by hegemonic institutions?

A continued concern with the transformative ambitions, practices, and impact of DPA could not be more pertinent to a world in dire need for sustainable knowledge, action, and policy.

**Acknowledgments**

We like to thank the Editors for their valuable comments.

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1. It is no coincidence that AR gained tremendous traction in the same period. It is also important to recognize that this ferment was accompanied by the golden age of university funding and growth. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Most probably this is because AR and DPA scholars read different literatures and study different problems. As we will argue below, this is evidence of how neo-Taylorism keeps the troops in silos. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is also grounded in General Systems Theory (GST). Greenwood and Levin (2007) discuss the synergies between pragmatism and GST at length. Curiously, GST has not really been of significant influence within DPA (but see Wagenaar 2007), something that is starting to change (Ison 2017; Foster et al. 2019; West et al. 2019). Drawing on the field of sustainability transition research, which is based on complex systems theory and GST (Rotmans and Loorbach 2009; Loorbach et al. 2017), could help to further move in this direction. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We are of course not claiming that DPA and AR are a panacea; their practices are by definition localized, their long-term impacts have not been systematically studied, and there are many other valuable approaches. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In a way, there is nothing ‘neo’ about neo-Taylorism. Reading F.W. Taylor gives a clear portrait of the neo-Taylorist world. Neo here really means a return to the past after a period of more collaborative, matrix-like organizational systems that limited arbitrary apical power. What is different is that unlike in Taylorism that justified it in terms of productive efficiency, academic Neo-Taylorism is justified by accountability and surveillance technology. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Examples are given in Greenwood and Levin, 2007, chapter 3; see also Hepsø and Botnevik 2002; Bartels and Wittmayer 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Journals specializing in action research include Action Research, the International Journal of Action Research, and Systemic Practice and Action Research. There are three Sage Handbooks of Action Research. In addition to specialized educational action research journals, increasingly, action research is published in mainstream social science journals and funded under regular funding schemes. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There currently are vanishingly few such institutions: the Mondragón University, the Department of Educational Anthropology at Aarhus, Berea College, Evergreen State College, and the emerging Cooperative College. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)