

Research relations in researching transformative social innovation

Extended abstract, for the 11th International Conference of the European Society for Ecological Economics, **to be considered for the special session:** *Transformative Science for Transformative Social Change: What kind of Science for Sustainability Transformations?*

Summary (150 words)

In this paper we take social innovation research as a case of transformative science and explore different approaches, attitudes and relations of researchers to the phenomena they study: the normative aspects underlying research design. We zoom in on the relation between the researcher and ‘the researched’ and how this relation is formed by the assumptions about what science is and how it should be performed. A theoretical review as well as empirical research on the challenges in the research interaction, are the basis for drawing lessons and formulating recommendations for researchers with regard to the research interaction as well as in drawing up research designs. Concluding, this study also allows us discuss the necessity and desirability of innovating research relations and practices – as social innovations in research which can inform the further development of social innovation research and more broadly of transformative sciences.

Extended abstract (600-1200 words)

There is an increasing attention for ‘social innovation’ as a necessary driver for societal transformation. In its broadest sense, social innovations are considered to be social in both their ends and their means (Hubert et al. 2010). More specifically a social innovation is considered to be new social relations (Mouleart et al. 2013) or a “new combination (...) of social practices in certain areas of action or social contexts prompted by certain actors or constellations of actors” (Howaldt and Kopp 2012:47). Social innovations are believed to provide answers to challenges our societies are facing, whether of ecologic nature such as the depletion of resources or anthropogenic climate change, or of social nature such as poverty or inequality. The field of social innovation research is emerging with its roots in different (inter)disciplines with different theoretical perspectives (Westley 2013, Howaldt and Schwarz 2010, Moulaert et al. 2013). With a surging national and international policy and research interest in the subject, the need for a common vocabulary and a community of scholars increases (Hochgerner et al. 2011).

Reflexivity inevitable is part of the growth of a research field. It is necessary to more closely examine the whole range of available ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies – which provide different perspectives on social innovation. While ontology (what is out there) and epistemology (how do we know) are often discussed in relation to research designs, what is left open or implicit are the normative, ethical or philosophical considerations of the researcher or research team. The latter is also referred to as axiology, according to Dillon and Wals (2006: 550) it relates to “ethical considerations and our own philosophical viewpoints (the why)—such as, do we take a positivistic stance, use feminist epistemologies, involve participants as researchers?”.

Research on social innovation arguably attracts researchers who are interested in alternatives for the current status quo, in exploring future societal pathways, are engaged in activist practices and/or who (see it as their social responsibility to) address real-life problems through their research. These kinds of interests and considerations do inform what we as researchers study and how we study it (i.e. our epistemological choices). We consider it pivotal to open the debate to these questions, which are eminent not only for the research of social innovation but also for research streams such as sustainability science, sustainability transitions or ecological economics, all of which could go under the broader banner of transformative science.

Taking social innovation research as a case of transformative science, this paper explores different approaches, attitudes and relations of researchers to the phenomena they study: the normative aspects underlying research design. Rather than focusing on concrete methods (e.g. interviews, surveys etc.), the paper focuses on the methodological considerations underlying the choice of methods: it is about the way researchers and ‘researched’ relate to and interact with one another. We zoom in on this relation between researchers and ‘researched’, and how this relation is formed by the assumptions about what science is and how it should be performed.

In doing so, we make use of both, a literature review as well as empirical research. Theoretically, we review a number of texts that focus on the conceptualisation of this research interaction and relationship and which harbour insights on the relation between science and society and the specific relation between researcher and ‘researched’ (i.e. transdisciplinary research, action research, mode-2 research and transformative research). Empirically, we turn to a case of social innovation research, the EU-funded research project, ‘TRANSIT’ (see textbox) which includes in-depth case study work with about 20 social innovation networks. What we see here, is that not only researchers are thinking about alternative ways of researching, also social innovation networks raise demands with regard to the process and outcomes of the research. Focusing on the interaction between ‘TRANSIT’ researchers and the people involved in the transnational networks under study we identify a number of challenges that arise in this interaction, namely a) proximity and distance in the relationship, b) reciprocity in the relationship, c) networks’ participation in the research process as research subject and/or research object, d) normativity in relation to the studied initiatives and e) practical considerations. We discuss these challenges, draw lessons and formulate recommendations for researchers with regard to the research interaction as well as in drawing up research designs. Concluding, this study also allows us draw lessons and recommendations and to reflect on the work done in the ‘TRANSIT’ project as exhibiting the struggle of researchers in giving form to research relations in different ways. Namely, in innovating relations and practices related to science – as social innovations in research which can inform the further development of social innovation research and more broadly of transformative sciences.

OUTLINE OF THE TRANSIT PROJECT:

The aim of the EU FP7-funded TRANSIT project (Transformative Social Innovation Theory; 2014–2017) is to build a theory of social innovation useful to academics, policy makers, civil society organisations, social entrepreneurs, and other stakeholders. The starting point for TRANSIT is the need to understand *transformative* social innovation, which is considered to be the process through which social innovation contributes to transformative change. TRANSIT aims at unpacking and critically investigating the relation between social innovation and transformative change. The main research question is: How does social innovation interact with other forms of (transformative) change, and how are actors (dis)empowered therein? The emerging middle-range theory should draw upon a range of existing theoretical and methodological approaches to innovation and social change, and using research on systems innovation and sustainability transition as a starting point. Empirically, TRANSIT takes an embedded case-study approach to conduct a multi-levelled, cross-national comparative analysis of social innovation initiatives and networks across Europe and Latin America, combining in-depth case-study analysis with quantitative meta-analysis. Among the cross-national case studies in the TRANSIT project are science shops, sustainable energy movements, eco-communities, time banks, credit unions, solidarity economy, and social entrepreneurs. TRANSIT creates an iterative interplay between empirical research on social innovation, the development of a new empirically-grounded theory of transformative social innovation, and transdisciplinary translation to capacity building tools.

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