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Plunging into the process: methodological reflections on a process-oriented study of stakeholders' relating dynamics

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ABSTRACT

Process-oriented approaches increasingly gain attention within policy and administrative studies. A process orientation emphasizes the ongoing, dynamic character of policy phenomena, i.e. their becoming. This article reflects upon the methodological particularities and challenges that come with doing process-oriented research. To do so, it draws on experiences with a concrete process study on stakeholders' relating dynamics within a collaborative policymaking process. This article identifies three methodological particularities: (1) the ongoing amplification of realities, (2) the shifting of positionalities of both researchers and participants, through time and across contexts, and (3) the emergence of historical-aware reflexivity. While each of these are common issues in qualitative-interpretive research, we argue how the longitudinal and poly-contextual orientation of a process study amplifies their impact on the research process and poses specific challenges. We conclude that to effectively deal with these particularities and challenges a process researcher benefits from developing and establishing good field relations, as well as from the courage to come to 'temporary' closure(s), against the background of the continuously becoming of the phenomenon under study.

KEYWORDS

Process-oriented approach;
process ontology;
longitudinal research;
qualitative process-oriented
methodology

Introduction

Process-oriented approaches increasingly gain foothold within the social sciences, including policy and administrative studies (Bartels 2012; Stout and Staton 2011). A process orientation entails a focus on and explicit appreciation of the ongoing, dynamic and evolving nature of social phenomena – an interest in their *becoming* (Chia 1999; McMurray 2010; Stout 2012). It centers attention on how and why phenomena emerge, evolve and change throughout time (Chia 1999; Demir and Lychnell 2015; Langley et al. 2013; Pettigrew 1990; Rescher 1996).

Studies of policy and administrative phenomena increasingly highlight their processual nature (Bartels 2012; McMurray 2010). Staniševski, for instance, suggests to 'conceive of public policymaking not as a set of definite measures to permanently reconcile policy issues, but as an incessant process of exploration of different possibilities of becoming' (Staniševski 2011, 300). Since recently, scholars have also started to set out the ontological and epistemological groundings of process orientations toward policy

and administrative phenomena (Cook and Wagenaar 2012; Stout 2012; Stout and Love 2015; Wagenaar 2011) and, to a lesser extent, to develop process-oriented methodologies (Bartels 2012; Spekkink 2015).

However, till now there has been little critical engagement with the methodological particularities and challenges presented by a process-oriented approach.¹ Yet, as Bartels (2012, 434) argues: ‘our ability to analyse and make sense of process is intimately bound with the methodological practices we employ’. Hence, in this article, we critically reflect on the consequences of *applying* a process-oriented methodology: what are the particularities of a process study and what are the methodological challenges researchers are confronted with when ‘plunging into a process’? We do so by reference to a process study of stakeholders’ relating dynamics playing within a collaborative policymaking process concerning the urban regeneration of an area in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. We discuss how plunging in and drifting with the current of this process confronted us with specific methodological challenges. We also consider strategies to deal with these challenges and (normative) dilemmas associated herewith. Our discussion attempts to ‘codify and organize learning from experience in the hope that such experience may be of value to other scholars seeking to conduct [...] studies of [...] processes’ (Pettigrew 1990, 267). Before taking up this discussion however, we delineate the basic ideas of a process orientation and its value for policy and administrative studies.

Delineating the basic ideas of a process orientation

Process, dynamics and change have long been concerns within policy and administrative theory, for instance in work of Kingdon (1984); Baumgartner and Jones (1993), or Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993). Yet, different scholars argue that current/traditional theories of policy and administrative process(es), dynamics and change herein, are not sufficiently ‘process-based’ for interpreting policy and administrative phenomena in a *deeply* processual way, and for doing justice to the ‘process, transformation and heterogeneous becoming of things’ (Chia 1999, 218; see also McMurray 2010; Stout 2012). Much of us, Connolly (2011, 10) argues, resist this idea of a world of becoming and seek to commune to a mode of ‘being beyond time’, a mode of being that elevates stability and permanence. Indeed, predominant approaches in policy and public administration literature are informed by conceptions of process and change that draw on an ontology that claims the existence of a static (external) and ordered reality consisting of fixed and enduring entities (Bartels 2012; Cook and Wagenaar 2012; McMurray 2010; Stout 2012; Stout and Love 2015).

A growing body of literature now calls for developing a deeper ‘processual sensitivity’ toward policy and administrative reality, in which ‘the basic ontological premise is that processes are distinctive forces constitutive of [...] substantive entities’ (Bartels 2012, 437; see also Connolly 2011; McMurray 2010; Stout and Love 2015). The growing appreciation for a more processual perspective on policy and administrative phenomena increasingly becomes evident in the variety of conceptualizations and theories that emphasize their ongoing, becoming, and dynamic character. Bartels, for instance, urges us to see administrative practices as hinging on ‘ongoing, interactive, and emergent processes’ (2012, 438). Stout and Love, then, argue how a collaborative approach to governance highlights the dynamic and emergent character of governing, since it replaces political authority with ‘dynamic,

situation-specific decisions and actions' (2015, 21). Similarly, Catlaw and Jordan (2009) refer to the 'creativity of collaboration'. These conceptions of collaboration suggest 'a world of becoming', a dynamic understanding of being (or reality) that supports ongoing change (Connolly 2011; Stout 2012).

A process-oriented approach, then, commits to a notion of policy and administrative reality as ongoing processes of becoming (Bartels 2012; McMurray 2010; Stout 2012). Recently, authors in the field of policy studies and public administration have begun to unravel the ontological and epistemological footings of a process-oriented approach toward policy and administrative phenomena (Cook and Brown 1999; Cook and Wagenaar 2012; McMurray 2010; Stout 2012; Stout and Love 2015; Stout and Staton 2011; Wagenaar 2011). Scholars have also invested in exploring its methodological groundings and in developing appropriate methodologies (Bartels 2012; Spekkink 2015). Together these ideas start to open up a process-oriented approach as a distinct analytical approach to policy and administrative phenomena that builds upon a set of ontological ideas, which inform the epistemological possibilities and shape the methodological principles and choices that undergird process studies (see Hay 2011).

Ontologically, a process orientation sees the (social) world as a process, continuously in flux and change (Chia 1999; Demir and Lychnell 2015 2015; Langley et al. 2013; Stout 2012). This view of reality draws on process metaphysics which 'as a general line of approach holds that physical existence is at bottom processual; that processes rather than things best represent the phenomena that we encounter in the natural world around us' (Rescher 1996, 2). This idea of a world in a perpetual state of becoming is foundational to process ontology (Langley et al. 2013). Hence, process ontology is often referred as an ontology of becoming (Bartels 2012; Connolly 2011; McMurray 2010; Stout 2012).

Considering the world as fundamentally processual implies a commitment to ongoing change and evolution (Stout 2012). This foregrounds the temporal embeddedness of processes: they spread out across time (Langley et al. 2013; Pettigrew 1992). Furthermore, 'processists' see processes as spatially or contextually embedded/nested (Bartels 2012). Processes are always interlinked with other processes: 'they run up against each other' (Rescher 1996, 231). Processes spread out across space: they are embedded in multiple sites or contexts. Hence, processes are conceived as being poly-contextual (Demir and Lychnell 2015).

The *epistemological* consequence of this processual perspective on reality, is that knowledge too is considered as fundamentally processual. Rather than seeing knowledge as universal and objective and as a valid and reliable representation of a static, external reality (cf. Cartesian epistemology), processists see knowledge as continuously evolving: knowing is an ongoing process (Bartels 2012; Cook and Brown 1999; Rescher 1996). Furthermore, knowing is embedded both in experience and context: 'what we can know [...] are products of ongoing concrete interaction between "myself" (or "ourselves") and the specifics of the social and physical "context" or "circumstances" we are in at any given time' (Cook and Brown 1999, 389). Approaching knowledge as a dynamic process also implies knowledge is – to some extent – transient, ongoing and open-ended. An implication of seeing knowledge as such, is that what we come to understand is always incomplete and/or provisional (Rescher 1996; Wagenaar 2011). Hence, Wagenaar (2011) argues it is better to reframe knowing or understanding as 'coming-to-an-understanding'.

Methodologically, the question at stake in process studies is how one comes to understand the continuously changing flux of reality? First of all, processists highlight the pivotal role of *experience* to capture reality in flight (Rescher 1996; Stout and Staton 2011). Direct experience of reality, knowledge *from within* is an important aspect for apprehending the flux of reality (Bergson 1946 in Tsoukas and Chia 2002). Hence, Dawson urges process researchers to ‘get their hands dirty’ and to ‘experience and discover new [...] understanding by [...] drawing close to the subject of their study’ (1997, 6–7). Close involvement is considered to be an important methodological principle in process research (Bartels 2012; Dawson 1997; Langley et al. 2013). Furthermore, given the focus on how phenomena change and unfold throughout time, process studies also imply an appreciation of the ‘passage’ of a phenomenon. This presupposes *a longitudinal perspective* on the process under study (Langley et al. 2013; Pettigrew, Woodman, and Cameron 2001; Spekkink 2015). Pettigrew refers to this focus on temporality as the horizontal dimension of process research: researchers aim to capture ‘the sequential interconnectedness among phenomena in historical, present and future time’ (1990, 269). Next to this horizontal dimension, Pettigrew (1990) points to the vertical dimension of process studies. Since processes are embedded in multiple contexts (and interconnected with other processes), process research is bound to take different process contexts/sites into account (Demir and Lychnell 2015 2015). As Pettigrew, Woodman, and Cameron argue: ‘If the [...] process is the stream of analysis, the terrain around the stream that shapes the field of events, and is in turn shaped by them, is a necessary part of the investigation’ (2001, 398). So, process research also implies engagement in *different contextual levels*: it entails a poly-contextual approach.

Figure 1 below sets out – albeit in a schematic and simplified way – the above discussed principles of a process orientation as an analytical approach (lay-out and structure of the figure draw on Hay’s (2011) presentation of the analytical trinity of interpretivism).

In the next section, we discuss how we translated these analytical principles in a concrete process-oriented research approach.

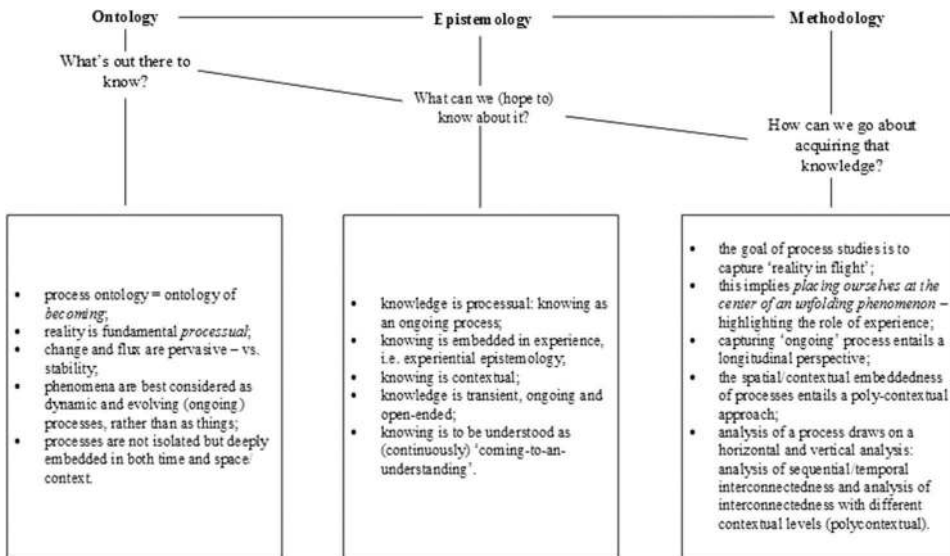


Figure 1. Basic ideas of process orientation

Doing process research: plunging into stakeholders' relating dynamics within the collaborative policymaking process on the urban regeneration of Vreewijk

Urban regeneration of Vreewijk: case study background

In this article, we draw on our research experiences from a process-oriented case study on the collaborative policymaking process concerning the urban regeneration of Vreewijk, an area located in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Of central concern in this process is to jointly develop and implement spatial and social policies directed toward the area's regeneration. The key stakeholders are: the housing corporation Havensteder, which owns the greater part of dwellings in the area; the city of Rotterdam; the borough of Feijenoord; the tenants' association and residents' association. Different collaborative arrangements have been set up to facilitate collaboration among these stakeholders: the most important ones being the steering group (including representatives of the housing corporation, the city and the borough), the project group and working groups (both including all key stakeholders). This collaborative policymaking process started around 2008 and is currently still running. Case study research was conducted between 2014 and 2016.

The broader aim of our study is to gain insight into how stakeholders' relating dynamics interact with framing dynamics. As part of this study, we aimed to develop understandings of stakeholders' relating dynamics, and more specifically, of how and why stakeholders' relational experiences and meanings evolve throughout time. Empirical focus was on what happens on a relational level and on how stakeholders experience their mutual relations in collaborative policymaking processes, rather than on the substantive policy process. In our study, we approach stakeholders' relational experiences and meanings as inherently dynamic and processual, continuously evolving (Duck 1994).

A process-oriented research approach

So, how to capture stakeholders' relating dynamics? To begin with, our focus on relational *experiences and meanings* locates our study in the qualitative-interpretive research tradition. Central aim in qualitative-interpretive research is to find out how people understand, interpret and feel about their lives. We also intend to understand *changes and dynamics* in stakeholders' relational experiences. Hence, our study also implies a process-oriented approach: it centers attention on an evolving phenomenon. Below, we elaborate on how we designed our research to accommodate for the methodological principles of a process-oriented approach, as discussed above: (1) to get close to the process under study, i.e. stakeholders' relating dynamics; (2) to develop a longitudinal understanding hereof, and; (3) to 'move' across different sites/ contexts in which stakeholders' relating dynamics are embedded.

Getting close to the process under study: participant-observer research

The crucial idea behind participant-observer research is that 'being on location' is a requirement for understanding social life (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; van Maanen 2011; Yanow 2007). Participant-observer research emphasizes direct personal involvement, i.e. first-hand contact and sharing with 'the environment, problems, backgrounds, language, rituals, and social relations of a more-or-less bounded and specified group of people' (van Maanen 2011, 3).

Our participant-observer fieldwork entailed attending the project group meetings and the working group meetings (21 meetings in total). Furthermore, we had, what Pinsky calls, several ‘incidental ethnographic encounters’ with individual participants (2015, 281). Such encounters refer to the many personal and chance interactions researchers have with participants in the field that are not specifically part of intentional data gathering, but still offer valuable insights. Such interactions included going out for lunch, making walks, or visiting participants in their offices.

During fieldwork, we positioned ourselves as ‘interactive observers’ as described by Fenno: ‘it is not like looking through a one-way glass at someone on the other side. You watch, you accompany, and you talk with the people you are studying. [...]’ (1986, 3).

Developing a longitudinal understanding: retrospective narrative interviews and follow-up in real time

To develop a longitudinal understanding of stakeholders’ relating dynamics, our study combined a retrospective and prospective approach.

A retrospective approach involves tracing stakeholders’ relating dynamics into the past (Bizzi and Langley 2012). This part of our study mainly builds upon narrative one-to-one interviews. Narrative interviews are well-suited to come to grips with dynamics and processes (Uprichard and Byrne 2006). We interviewed 20 key individuals that were actively involved now or/and in the past in the collaborative policymaking process on the urban regeneration of Vreewijk. Each individual was interviewed two or more times. During the entry interview, the aim was to simply evoke participants’ stories about their individual relational experiences and changes herein (throughout time), in their own words (Pederson 2013). This allowed participants to bring in their perspective and share details and information they find important. During the entry interview, we also asked participants to draw up the evolution of their relational experiences on a diagram, of which the Y-axis represented a scale from positive to negative experiences with stakeholder relations and the X-axis represented a timeline. Doing so, we wanted to facilitate participants to express experiences that may be less easily put in words (Bagnoli 2009). Following the entry interviews, each stakeholder’s account was visualized in a researcher-produced timeline. These timelines visualized participants’ individual relational (hi)stories, and summarized key events and turning points herein. The timeline served as a basis for the follow-up interviews, which aimed at further enriching individual (hi)stories.

Additionally, we relied on archival documents to reconstruct stakeholders’ relating dynamics within the collaborative. These included policy documents, newspaper articles, meeting reports and 20+ short documentaries on the urban regeneration process made by The Portaal.² When closely reading (and watching) these archival documents, we specifically focused on statements about stakeholder relations.

The narrative interviews, combined with the diagrams and timelines and the close studying of archival documents, allowed us to develop a longitudinal understanding of stakeholders’ relating dynamics *in retrospect*.

Next to a retrospective approach, we ‘followed’ stakeholders’ relating dynamics as they unfolded in real time for over 2.5 years (2014–2016). To do so, we relied on participant-observer research (see above). Participant-observer research offers ‘valuable

means of exploring the dynamics of social processes prospectively, for they enable researchers to “walk alongside” their respondents and capture the flow of their daily life’ (Neale and Flowerdew 2003, 194).

The combination of multiple one-to-one narrative interviews with each participant and our attendance as an ‘interactive observer’ during several meetings, meant that we had multiple encounters over time with all research participants. Our field relationships thus extended over time and enabled us to develop a longitudinal understanding of the evolving relational experiences both on individual and group level.

Accounting for the poly-contextual nature of the process: moving across process contexts

Developing an understanding of an evolving process also implies accounting for its poly-contextual embeddedness, i.e. for how the process under study is interlinked with other processes (Demir and Lychnell 2015; Pettigrew 1992; Rescher 1996). Stakeholders’ relating dynamics do not only depend on individual stakeholders’ experiences and meanings, or on what happens relationally between stakeholders within the collaborative group, they also depend on intra-organizational and broader political and socio-economic processes in which they are embedded. In our study, the different methods and tools each contributed to getting insight in specific context levels. First, the one-to-one interviews enabled us to get an understanding of how individual stakeholders experience and make sense of their relations and changes herein, i.e. of what ‘relating’ entails on *an individual, personal level*. In other words, the one-to-one interviews gave insight in the evolution of *subjective* experiences and meanings of stakeholders with their mutual relations within the collaborative (cf. Fuhse and Mützel 2011). Second, we also studied the *collaborative group* as a whole. During fieldwork, we observed the actual communication processes and looked at how stakeholders interacted. This gave us a sense and feel of how stakeholders, through their ongoing interactions, jointly construct and (re)produce *shared experiences* of their mutual relations (Fuhse and Mützel 2011, 1078). Next to our observations of the group meetings, we also encountered individuals in their organizational ‘homes’. Occasionally, we attended meetings concerning the urban restructuring of Vreewijk within stakeholders’ respective organizations. This enabled insight in how stakeholders’ relating dynamics are interlinked with *intra-organizational processes*.

Besides moving ‘physically’ across contexts, we further developed our poly-contextual understanding of stakeholders’ relating dynamics through studying policy documents, reports, and minutes of meetings that had been produced by the collaborative itself, or by the organizations involved. These documents gave insight in the broader policy, political and socioeconomic contexts in which the collaborative policymaking on the urban regeneration, and stakeholders’ relating dynamics herein, were embedded.

All together, we explored stakeholders’ relating dynamics and their embeddedness at five different process levels:

- *individual, personal level*: the *subjective experiences and meanings* of stakeholders with the mutual relations within the collaborative;
- *collaborative group level*: stakeholders’ jointly constructed and (re)produced *shared experiences* of their relations;

- *intra-organizational level*: *intra-organizational processes* throughout time (and interlinkages with stakeholders' relating dynamics);
- *policy level*: the *policy process on the urban regeneration* (and interlinkages with stakeholders' relating dynamics);
- *broader contextual level*: broader policy, political (both local and national) and socioeconomic contexts (and interlinkages with stakeholders' relating dynamics).

Above, we have described how we concretely designed and conducted our research to 'capture reality in flux' (Pettigrew, Woodman, and Cameron 2001). The next section discusses the particularities and challenges we were confronted with while applying this research approach.

Particularities and challenges of plunging into the process

As will become obvious in the following discussion, the particularities and challenges we encountered while 'plunging into the process' are, to a large extent, familiar to researchers committed to qualitative-interpretive research. However, it is our contention that these particularities and challenges become even more challenging in process-oriented studies. Process-oriented research adds a new dimension to them, related to the sensitivity – typical of a process approach – to change, motion and transiency. Hence, process researchers are simultaneously confronted with 'known' and 'new' particularities and challenges.

The ongoing amplification of realities

Qualitative-interpretive researchers are well aware of the multiplicity of realities. Participants' experiences of reality are considered to be *perspectival*: views on the matter will vary because 'the world looks different from different vantage points' (Hay 2011, 169; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). Each participant has his own way of seeing and so researchers are confronted with a multiplicity of accounts of 'what is the case'.

However, process research adds an 'amplifying' factor to the mix, related to its longitudinal perspective. Developing a processual understanding, so Pettigrew (1990) argues, is complicated by the very fact that time goes on and so do people's experiences of phenomena (see also Langley and Tsoukas 2017). Pettigrew (1990) opens his discussion on the difficulties hereof under the heading 'Truth is the Daughter of Time'. Here, he lays bare how process researchers run into the challenge of having to deal not only with *perspectival* understandings, but also with *temporary understandings of phenomena*: judgments about what is happening are conditioned by the time point. Realities *accumulate* because of time: 'truth' is always in the making (Thomson and Holland 2003).

Due to this amplifying factor participants' accounts of relational experiences may change, and even turn over time. Each encounter with a participant may bring new versions to the fore, challenging previous interpretations (Thomson and Holland 2003). Each telling participants may add detail to their experiences. Or participants may reinterpret and revise experiences and events within an altered context or frame of experiences: issues that seemed important at one time-point, may become less salient at another (Lewis 2007). In our study, I³ witnessed how one participant gave two

contradictory accounts of the same events in subsequent interviews. Read along how his experiences with stakeholder relations during a specific period ‘turned’ in my follow-up interview with him:

Entry interview (October 2014)

P: At a certain point in time, we really made a step forward. From a conflictual situation, our relations shifted toward being completely open. Really open, that was amazing! [...]. Openness increased, and so did mutual trust. That is how I feel it. And because of that openness you also get mutual respect. That is also part of it. Openness and respect are, I think, the most important aspects of our relations at this point in time.

Follow-up interview (July 2015)

P: I realized, that sweet face, those nice words that were spoken, it’s nothing else than what it had always been. [...]. I was totally deceived. They said: we are going to do it like this and like that, and all seemed okay. But when push comes to shove... (P whistles)... Bam!

R: You say you were...

P: Deceived.

R: Last time, we talked about how the collaborative made a step forward. That didn’t really happen, you mean?

P: I thought it did, but it didn’t.

R: You thought it changed, but it didn’t?

P: Hoped it had happened. [...]. That was wishful thinking. Totally wishful thinking.

Whatever the reasons are for this participant to revise his perspective, both accounts are part of his experiences with stakeholder relations. Realities accumulate here: new insights make this participant decide that ‘what happened’ was different than he first felt. This poses the researcher with challenges pertaining to making sense of the multiplicities and inconsistencies in the data obtained: What version(s) to take into account? Which version of events carries authenticity? (Warin, Solomon, and Lewis 2007). Hence, the amplification of realities makes the reading of data more complex and challenging (Lewis 2007; Pettigrew 1990).

In our study, focus was on developing understandings of stakeholders’ relating dynamics within the collaborative. We aimed to map the relational (hi)story of the group (as the relational unit of analysis), rather than that of individual stakeholders. To construct the (hi) story of the collaborative’s relating dynamics, we first collected stakeholders’ individual accounts on their relational experiences and changes herein throughout time (see above). This enabled us to explore the evolution of relational experiences of the individuals involved. This, however, also brought to the fore complexities and inconsistencies both *across* and *within* individual relational experiences and meanings.

Two options are possible to deal with these complexities: one is ‘to present a relativist set of competing interpretations and leaving it up to the research audience to choose between these’ (Warin, Solomon, and Lewis 2007, 215; see also Josselson 2007); the other is synthesizing and weaving together competing interpretations of events into an ‘aggregate construction’ (Josselson 2007; van Eeten 2007). The trade-off here is between getting into the specifics, versus, if the text is a highly aggregate

construction, allowing for a wider generalizability of the conclusions (van Eeten 2007). In our study, we chose to construct an ‘aggregate’ – since we aimed to understand relating dynamics within the *collaborative*, rather than relating dynamics as experienced by *individual* stakeholders. In other words, we aimed to reflect the ‘shared experience’ or the ‘jointly constructed versions’ of the collaborative’s relating dynamics.

Creating an aggregate out of an amalgam of competing and conflicting stories however implies that, when analyzing data and reporting about them, the researcher takes control of the data: it places him/her in a position of power (Josselson 2007; Smith 2012). This points to the interpretive authority/power of a researcher: s/he (sometimes consciously, other times unconsciously) decides upon what stories to tell about and what stories to leave out (Etherington 2004; Josselson 2007; Smith 2012). This presents the researcher – as the ‘coordinator of voices’ (Gergen and Gergen 2000) – with the dilemma of, on one side, acknowledging and honoring all participants’ voices, avoiding to over-represent voices s/he empathizes with or to stifle certain voices and, on the other side, creating an aggregate construction which inevitably flattens out (some) participants’ manifest meanings – and by doing so, running the risk participants will no longer recognize what is written about them (Josselson 2007). Having the power to make these decisions is an aspect that should be acknowledged and ethically managed when reporting. This is not an easy exercise, as Smith and Deemer remind us:

we [...] must learn to accept that anything we write must always and inevitably leave silences, that to speak at all must always and inevitably be to speak for the someone else, and that we cannot make judgments and at the same time have a ‘constantly moving speaking position that fixes neither subject nor object’ [Lather 1993, 684]. (2000, 891)

Whilst this dilemma is a challenge for all narrative analysts (cf. van Eeten 2007), we found that it became even edgier in process research. The researcher’s interpretive power, and thus responsibility, is further intensified when s/he not only needs to accommodate for conflicting or competing stories *across* individuals (cf. the perspectival differences), but also needs to find ways to develop an ‘aggregate’ view on competing accounts over time of one and the same individual (cf. the temporal differences). This implies a researcher not only needs to decide upon whose stories are included or emphasized, but also on where to ‘freeze’ his/her interpretation of the participant’s evolving perspectives on stakeholder relations (Gergen and Gergen 2000). Hence, the question how to do justice to the multiplicity of voices and alternative readings gets an extra dimension here.

Shifting positionalities through time and across contexts

The issue of positionality refers to how researchers’ and participants’ ‘positioning’ in the research setting and research relationships affect the research process: from the data that is generated to the knowledge claims that are made (Ohja 2013; Yanow 2009). There are at least two aspects to the concept: one pertains to the *literal* ‘positioning’ in the research setting, i.e. the locational positioning in the research field and within the network of research relationships. Another entails the impact of researchers’ and participants’ *identities* on the tenor and outcomes of the research process (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Yanow 2009).

While the issue of positionality is central to qualitative-interpretive research, it is further complicated when carrying out a process study. As argued above, process studies require researchers to engage in longitudinal fieldwork and, simultaneously, to be poly-contextually ‘mobile’: to move across different process contexts. Concerning the first, qualitative-interpretive researchers emphasize how the issue of positionality becomes more complex when research relationships extend over time (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Thomson and Holland 2003). Other than, for instance, one-off interviews with participants, engaging in longitudinal fieldwork implies that a researcher has multiple encounters with participants over time. Positionalities may shift over time: ‘A researcher’s “presentation of self” is neither simple nor static, but an ongoing process [...]. Other’s constructions of the researcher’s identity may also shift over time, as the researcher becomes better known in the field setting’ (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 63). However, in process research, a researcher not only encounters participants multiple times, but also in different process contexts varying from the individual micro-level to more meso- or macro-level settings. This allows for positionalities to shift not only on a horizontal dimension – across time, but also on a vertical dimension – across process contexts. In each of these process contexts, researcher and researched may ‘position’ themselves in different ways (Mesman 2007).

The complexity we hint at, can be epitomized by my experiences with N., one of the involved residents. I had multiple one-to-one interviews with N. and encountered her regularly during project group meetings. During the one-to-one interviews, I positioned myself as a ‘supplicant’:

seeking reciprocal relationships based on empathy and mutual respect, and [...] sharing [...] knowledge with those they research. [...]. Thus the researcher explicitly acknowledges her/his reliance on the research subject to provide insight in the subtle nuances of meaning that structure and shape everyday lives. (England 1994, 243)

During group meetings, however, I took a different position toward participants that can be described as that of an ‘interactive observer’ (see earlier).

Throughout the one-to-one interviews with N., perhaps because of the mixture of generational difference (I have the age of N.’s son), our personalities, because my positioning as a ‘supplicant’, or...⁴ we came to have familiar and enjoyable interactions. During interview sessions, I came to know N. as a creative and especially gentle and pacificatory character. However, I came to see another facet of N. during one of the project group meetings. Below is an excerpt of my field notes on that meeting:

We watched one of the documentaries of Het Portaal today. While the documentary played, I heard N. and another resident whispering and giving negative comments on the documentary. In one shot, one of the professionals of the housing corporation remarks: ‘we think as professionals’. I saw N. making gestures to her companion, and rolling with her eyes, stating with a contemptuous tone – just a bit louder than necessary: ‘tss, professionals’. While the documentary played, she continued, both verbally and non-verbally, to react negatively on what she saw – clearly she wanted to express her displeasure in some way. I found it difficult to reconcile this behaviour with how I know N. from our interviews. When the meeting was finished more or less – everybody was still in the room – I asked N. about her feelings about the documentary. Again, she sneered at the word ‘professionals’. And again, she made sure others could hear her remark. In some way, I felt as if she wanted me, even expected me to support her in her criticism. I didn’t know how to respond to her, since I was afraid that an answer out

of interest in her feelings would be perceived as one of support by the others and would jeopardize my position in the group. I decided to refrain from saying anything on the matter (not empathizing with her view), keeping a position as 'bystander'. (excerpt field note, project group meeting June 2014)

The above illustrates how both researchers and participants may adapt different positionalities across different process contexts: both our positionalities shifted across the individual and the collaborative group level. Moreover, because positionalities shift across contexts, and researchers act differently toward the same persons depending on the interactional contexts they engage in, positionalities risk to become embroiled. N. may have expected me to behave as a supplicant as I did during the interviews, however, she came to see another facet of me. Shifting positionalities may be confusing and may generate false expectations, as such disappointing participants (Mesman 2007). Furthermore, it may lay bare conflicting loyalties as was the case in the incident described: my loyalty to N. conflicted with my loyalty to the others. Dealing with and accommodating shifting positionalities may be a real relational challenge in process research since a researcher needs to link up/relate and remain linked up/related with different participants both *throughout time* and *across contexts*.

Confronted with this relational challenge, we decided to adhere to the principle of multidirected partiality to further shape our positioning in the research setting. Multidirected partiality, which has its roots in contextual family therapy, is a method therapists apply when engaging with a group of family members in therapy (Boszormenyi-Nagy 2000). The core idea underlying multidirected partiality is that a therapist *sides and empathizes with each person* – also referred to as multilateral advocacy, based on the idea 'that every person has a justifiable reason for actions, roles and beliefs' (Hargrave and Anderson 1997, 64). We considered this principle as an ethically responsible choice for shaping our research relationships with individual participants, since it assumes obtaining data based on respect and on being compassionate toward individual participants (Berger 2015). Based on the principle of multidirected partiality, I continued to position myself as supplicant during one-to-one interviews and as interactive observer during group meetings. However, whenever I felt positionalities became embroiled, I communicated to participants that my main concern was to hear and understand all sides of the story and emphasized how I aimed at giving each perspective due consideration rather than allying with the vantage point of one particular party (Grunebaum 1987; Hargrave and Anderson 1997). This worked well in practice since it gave insight into the rationale behind my shifting positionalities toward participants.

However, once fieldwork was finished, an uncomfortable feeling remained. Yes, we, as researchers, were able to consider and empathize with each participant's perspective, but we did little to make them, as a group, consider each other's perspectives and direct concern toward other stakeholders' needs and values – at least not deliberately. In family therapy, however, multidirected partiality is more than an attitude, it is also a way of intervening: 'interventions elicit, focus, explore and catalyse issues of reciprocity and introduce new options for consideration of relationships' (Grunebaum 1987, 649). Yet, we did not use our insights to open up reflexive processes between the different stakeholders involved: we did not intervene deliberately. However, throughout our involvement, we often felt how stakeholders looked at us – those researchers that had

listened to all of them so carefully – when struggling with the question: and now? As a consequence, we sometimes did feel the invitation and urge to deliberately change or intervene anyways – although it was not our intention to do so, as is the case in action research. Indeed, a deliberate intervention might have helped the collaborative to develop more informed decisions (Westling et al. 2014). Still, we refrained from deliberately intervening.⁵ Time and again, we faced an ‘intervention dilemma’: should we make deliberate interventions to facilitate change? This felt as a matter of ethics with no easy way out (as befits an ethical issue): how to reconcile our non-judgmental and empathizing attitude toward each individual participant as assumed in the principle of multidirected partiality, with the inevitable valuational and potentially partisan investment a deliberate intervention entails (Gergen and Gergen 2000)? And to further complicate the matter: what would have been the right timing seen the ongoing evolution of stakeholders’ perspectives on their mutual relations? Issues in stakeholder relations that seem to need consideration and possible intervention one day, may turn out to be irrelevant the other.

Historical-aware reflexivity

Increasingly, the issue of reflexivity is a central theme in social research methodology (Alvesson 2003; Ohja 2013; Riach 2009). Reflexivity here commonly refers to taking into account the central role of the researcher in the collection, selection and interpretation of data and thus the production of knowledge (Finlay 2002). The *practice* of reflexivity involves checking one’s own sense-making: ‘the self-conscious testing of the researcher’s own “seeing” and “hearing” in relation to knowledge claims’ (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 101). This involves an introspective and skeptical attitude toward one’s own interpretations, and calling into question what at first sight might seem an unproblematic representation of reality (Ohja 2013). Moreover, as Alvesson (2003) argues, reflexivity pertains to the conscious and consistent effort to approach an issue from multiple angles without giving priority to one particular viewpoint.

As reflexivity is an essential element in qualitative-interpretive research, we included different reflexive techniques in our research approach to encourage the ‘self-conscious “testing” of [...] emerging explanations’ (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 101). Besides enhancing reflexivity through personal self-examination of assumptions and interpretations – through taking reflective notes – we also engaged in (research) team reflexivity (most often through group discussions) (Russell and Kelly 2002). Team reflexivity here denotes the conscious efforts of the research team to challenge and clarify different perspectives, understandings and interpretations of the data. We also enhanced reflexivity by way of the researcher-produced timeline (see above). The timeline makes explicit and transparent toward participants how we, as researchers, made sense of their stories. By using the timeline as a guide during follow-up interviews, we invited participants to comment on or call into question our interpretations of their experiences. Hence, we engaged in a reflective dialogue with participants about how their story was represented (Finlay 2002; Ohja 2013). During interviews, however, it became clear that the timeline not only functioned as a structure or guide to discuss *our* representation of relational experiences with participants, but also elicited reflections

of participants themselves. Participants did not only call into question *our* interpretations – which we aimed for, they also called into question their *own* experiences with stakeholders' relating dynamics as they had shared it with us before. We witnessed several times how discussing the timeline created so-called 'sticky moments' (Riach 2009). Sticky moments are 'understood as *participant-induced reflexivity* to represent the temporary suspension of conventional dialogues that affect the structure and subsequent production of data' (Riach 2009, 10). The timeline elicited an 'interrogation of oneself, one's own assumptions, one's own attributions of motives to others, one's own way of thinking and doing' (Yanow 2009, 581). As such, discussing the timeline instilled a sense of reflexivity into the daily practice of the stakeholders involved (Bartels and Wittmayer 2014; Russell and Kelly 2002).

The abovementioned techniques enabled both researchers and participants to cultivate a reflexive attitude toward research practice and representations – an attitude considered important for all qualitative-interpretive researchers. Yet, we also experienced how our process-oriented approach toward stakeholder relations, and our intention to understand and depict relations as dynamic in the timeline further enriched this reflexive attitude. Not only did the timeline invite participants to think through their own typical perspective on stakeholder relations, it also invited them to analyze their relational experiences from a *historical perspective*. As such, it enabled participants to reflect upon their own position and role in the continuous 'becoming' of stakeholder relations within the collaborative. The timeline thus created a sense of 'historical awareness': participants became aware of the historical background of their own actions and thinking, and that of others. Hence, process research, because of its sensitivity to ongoing evolution, added an extra layer to our reflexive attitude and that of participants: it triggered a specific type of reflexivity which we labeled 'historical-aware reflexivity'.

An example of this 'historical-aware reflexivity' comes from our follow-up interview with H. Before we even started off the interview, she commented on the timeline and how running through it helped her to reflect on stakeholder relations and to illuminate how she had made decisions based on, now it seemed, wrong assumptions. During the interview, she continued to question her assumptions and expectations about how stakeholder relations evolve:

You think that relations will become better and better. Off course, you expect that there will be some ups and downs, but in general, you expect relations to gradually improve. But that is not how it goes. That is what I see now. [...]. The things that initially connected us are questioned over time and earlier views are no longer maintainable [because of changing circumstances]. So there is a new kind of tension now within the relations that needs to be addressed. (paraphrase of H.'s reflections)

While we perceived the emergence of historical-aware reflexivity as an asset, it also presented us with a challenge. During our dialogues with participants about the timeline, we became aware that the timeline potentially had 'intervening' capacities. We came to realize that it had the potential to create 'a space for opening up questions, debate, assumptions and for discussing difference' (Westling et al. 2014, 430). However, we did not aim for making explicit and deliberate interventions during the research process (see above). Rather we used the timeline to put our own interpretations into perspective, and as an invitation toward participants to reflect on their own

perspectives, assumptions and on their role and that of their organization in the ‘becoming’ of stakeholder relations in the collaborative process – so, we did not aim to use the timeline as a tool to intervene. Yet, we realized how discussing the timeline already implied a certain level of intervention: simply by engaging with the timeline and discussing it with us, participants possibly open up new understandings of stakeholder relations (Russell and Kelly 2002). The challenge here is, again, if and when a researcher should decide to *deliberately* affect and intervene in the practice s/he studies (Mesman 2007). In this research, we refrained from deliberate intervention. Maybe we missed an opportunity here?

Conclusions

In this article, we aimed to offer an understanding of the particularities and challenges linked to *doing* process research. What are the methodological particularities of conducting a process study? What intricacies and challenges emerge when a researcher plunges into a process?

Our reflections bring out how process research confronts researchers with challenges and dilemma’s related to (1) the amplification of realities; (2) shifting positionalities; and (3) the emergence of ‘historical-aware’ reflexivity. While all of these are common to qualitative-interpretive research, we explicated how the longitudinal and poly-contextual dimension of process research adds a new dimension to them and amplifies their impact on the research process. We also discussed how we dealt with these challenges in our study. Table 1 provides an overview of the particularities, associated challenges and applied strategies.

Table 1. Overview of particularities and challenges of process-oriented research.

Particularities	Challenge	Strategy applied
Amplification of realities	Making sense of multiplicities and inconsistencies <i>across</i> and <i>within</i> participants’ stories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What version(s) to take into account? • Which version of events carries authenticity? 	Weaving together competing interpretations of events in an ‘aggregate construction’: reflecting stakeholders’ ‘shared experience’ Dilemma: how to develop an ‘aggregate’ of conflicting accounts on the same event, by the same person?
Shifting positionalities throughout time and across contexts	Positionalities may become embroiled – may create confusion, generate false expectations; shifting positionalities may lay bare conflicting loyalties. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to accommodate different positionalities? • How to link up and remain linked up both throughout time and across contexts with different stakeholders? 	Multidirected partiality as an attitude: siding and empathizing with each person; giving each perspective due consideration. Dilemma – ‘intervention dilemma’: seizing opportunities to intervene or not?
Historical-aware reflexivity	Historical-aware reflexivity based on the timeline: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing on reflection or intervening: historical-aware reflexivity and the timeline as a tool to deliberately intervene? 	Timeline as a tool to check and reflect upon both researchers’ and participants’ sense-making. Dilemma – ‘intervention dilemma’: seizing opportunities to intervene or not?

Now, what is there to be gained from this reflexive exercise for process researchers? Based on our experiences, we suggest two key pointers we believe worthy to emphasize.

First, our experiences endorse the value and importance of developing good field relationships (see Pettigrew 1990; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Westling et al. 2014). There are at least two reasons to underline the importance hereof in process research. Besides being an important asset to get ‘access’ to participants’ stories, we noticed how good field relationships offered a firm base to deal with researchers’ shifting positionalities. The developed rapport gave us the necessary credit to openly discuss and explain to participants how our positions shifted throughout time and across process contexts and how we chose to adopt the idea of ‘multidirected partiality’ to engage in the research setting. This helped to avoid problems of loyalties – or at least: we could explain our conflicting loyalties. Good field relationships also helped us to make sense of the amplification of realities in process research, in particular to interpret the complexities and contradictions *within* one and the same participant’s stories. Getting to know participants and meeting them regularly and in different process contexts gave insight in their individual (hi)stories and personalities, which helped to contextualize these complexities and contradictions.

Second, this process study also taught us the value of ‘closing down’ (Voss and Kemp 2005). As we argued in our discussion, reflexivity enacts an important methodological value. It makes researchers aware of the way they shape the research process and associated knowledge claims. By not taking own interpretations for granted, checking one’s own sense making, and confronting it with other ways of seeing, a researcher temporarily suspends judgment, keeps the door open to consider alternative possibilities and, as such, avoids a ‘rush to closure’ (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Yanow 2009). Hence, reflexivity highlights the importance of ‘opening up debate’ about assumptions and values and how these impact on the interpretation of data (Westling et al. 2014). In our experience, a process study easily triggers this reflexive attitude. Inevitably, it makes a researcher fully aware of the provisionality and contingency of her interpretations. What one comes to know at one time-point, may differ quite strongly of what one comes to know half a year later. However, while fully appreciating the continuous evolving character of the phenomenon under study, a researcher also needs to be able to ‘temporarily’ close down interpretations: to select aspects s/he deems important, to weigh conflicting interpretations and take decisions on how to display these – i.e. to commit herself at some point in time to a course of action (see Voss and Kemp 2005; Yanow 2009).

On final reflection, the tension between an orientation and sensitivity – typical of process research – toward the evolving character of phenomena and the need to ‘temporarily’ close down at some point, especially culminates when a researcher turns to the task of writing down what s/he learned. Researchers however easily fall back on familiar, linear and ordered structures to represent their findings – as such creating a false impression of order, linearity and neatness (Etherington 2004, see also Langley 1999). The difficulties experienced to abandon these familiar, ‘tried and tested’ structures has to do with the unease and unfamiliarity with new forms of representing findings – which also run the risk of ‘being marginalized by the dominant institutions of academia’ (Etherington 2004, 84). We believe the field would benefit from challenging these traditional modes of (linear) representation in writing and from exploring innovative ways of reporting that allow for the messy, complex and not so neat nature of processes (Langley 1999).

Notes

1. Other authors have drawn attention to *methodological implications* of a process-oriented approach to policy and administrative phenomena. Bartels (2012), for instance, takes up the question how to cultivate a (qualitative) process-oriented methodology. Bartels argues for a methodology that ‘draws on participatory action research, public policy mediation and facilitation, collaborative governance, and communication studies’ (2012, 434). Another example comes from Spekkink (2015) who, departing from a process perspective on the development of industrial symbiosis, suggests to use ‘event sequence analysis’ (ESA). ESA is a type of qualitative, longitudinal case study research. Both authors focus on explicating or developing a process-oriented methodology. In this article, however, we turn attention to the methodological particularities and challenges related to *carrying out* a process study.
2. Since 2008, Het Portaal – a group of communication professionals – follows the collaborative policymaking process on the urban regeneration of Vreewijk. Every two to three months, they make a short documentary on the dilemmas and problems stakeholders face as well as on the progress they make.
3. Throughout this section, we sometimes use singular, sometimes plural pronouns. The process study we discuss in this article was taken up by a research team, consisting of three researchers (the authors of this article). When we use singular pronouns, it involves concrete research experiences of the principal researcher (first author of the article), who conducted most of the fieldwork. When we use plural nouns, we refer to the reflections, thoughts etc. that were products of dialogue, discussion and reflection within the research team.
4. Here I hint at all the aspects of my identity that may have shaped my research encounters. These are numerous and I do not think I can account for every aspect that played a role in how we developed our research relationship. Whatever the reasons, our research relationship developed toward a familiar and enjoyable one – and this outcome was shaped by both our personalities.
5. Two comments are in place here. First, although we refrained from deliberate interventions in this process study, this by no means implies we think we did not affect the case anyways: we believe that simply carrying out the research is in itself an intervention (Gergen and Gergen 2000; Smith 2012). This dispels the myth of ‘hygienic research’ which assumes ‘that the researcher has no influence on the research process’ (Smith 2012, 489). Second, our choice not to deliberately intervene does not as much reflect a specific stance towards interventionist research, as it reflects a situation-specific and reflexive choice we made in relation to this specific case.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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