Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions 24 (2017) 45–56

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/eist

Actor roles in transition: Insights from sociological perspectives

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 19 February 2016
Received in revised form 5 August 2016
Accepted 4 October 2016
Available online 10 October 2016

Keywords:
Sustainability transition
Multi-actor process
Actor role
Actor relations
Transition governance

ABSTRACT

To date, the field of transition research lacks a suitable vocabulary to analyse the (changing) interactions and relations of actors as part of a sustainability transition. This article addresses this knowledge gap by exploring the potential of the concept of 'roles' from social interaction research. The role concept is operationalized for transition research to allow the analysis of (changing) roles and relations between actor roles as indicative of changes in the social fabric and shared values, norms and beliefs. It also allows considering the use of roles as a transition governance intervention. This includes creating new roles, breaking down or altering existing ones and explicitly negotiating or purposefully assigning roles, as well as the flexible use of roles as resources.

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1. Introduction

In 2007, the Netherlands introduced the Social Support Act, which focused on the 'active' role of inhabitants and citizens in providing social support and enhancing the social participation of vulnerable groups. The economic crisis and its associated budget cuts intensified an emerging discourse on changing responsibilities between citizens and government. Motivated by the changing face of the welfare state, it was argued that citizens needed to take their personal and social responsibility for the common good. In the Netherlands, this discourse is broadly referred to as 'active citizenship' (Marinetto, 2003; Newman and Tonkens, 2011) or 'participation society' (Putters, 2014; Tonkens, 2014), the latter as coined by King Willem Alexander in his yearly King's speech of 2013. In their emphasis on the necessity for more active citizens and the devolution of power to the local level, both discourses can be closely linked to the 'Big Society' discourse in the UK (Kisby, 2010; Ransome, 2011).

These ideas are especially reflected in national and local policies at the neighbourhood level. The following quote from a report on the current neighbourhood approach of the Ministry of Internal Affairs illustrates this point: "We search for different relationships between governments, institutions and citizens. Attempts to give concrete shape to these, often still in rudimentary form occur precisely in these neighbourhoods" (Deetman et al., 2011, p. 7). The Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations describes its revised role in this neighbourhood approach as follows: "from active financial commitment linked with targets to a more facilitative role, acting on request in relation to what others do" (Ministry BZK, 2014: 2). The role of local government is increasingly understood as moving from controlling and containing to facilitating and supporting; the role of residents shifts from receiving services and bearing rights to becoming more active in their immediate living environment, and being subject to duties. Thus, changing roles and relations are high on the public agenda (PBL, 2011;

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2016.10.003
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ROB, 2012; WRR, 2012) and have direct repercussions on life and work in cities, towns and neighbourhoods all over the Netherlands.

Set in this context, this article empirically zooms in on Carnisse, a neighbourhood in the city of Rotterdam (The Netherlands) with an accumulation of social-economic problems. Considering these problems to be of a persistent nature implies that tackling them requires a societal transition. A transition is defined as a "radical transformation towards a sustainable society as a response to a number of persistent problems confronting contemporary modern societies" (Grin et al., 2010: 1). The emerging field of transition research has a strong focus on socio-technological innovation (e.g. Geels, 2002; Rotmans and Loorbach, 2010b) in different socio-technical sub-systems or societal domains, such as the energy sector (cf. Verbong and Loorbach, 2012). However, in the last years, transition thinking has also been applied to broader sustainability questions in cities, neighbourhoods and communities (Bulkeley et al., 2011; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Schroeder et al., 2013; Wittmayer et al., 2016). It is in these contexts that changes in the social fabric (related to the concept of social innovations, cf. Franz et al., 2012; Moulaert et al., 2013) become important drivers for change and where the concept of socio-technical transitions is extended to make it more apt for broader social analysis (cf. Grin, 2010).

Transitions are described as "multi-actor processes, which entail interactions between social groups" (Geels et al., 2010, p. 11). Focusing on this multi-actor nature of transitions, this article proposes that fundamental changes in the roles of actors and in their relations with others are a vital element of any transition. Illustrated by the case study of Carnisse, it argues that transition research to date lacks a suitable vocabulary to analyse the (changing) interactions and relations of actors as part of a sustainability transition. We suggest that a promising concept is that of *roles*, which has a long history in social interaction research (Mead, 1934; Linton, 1936; Biddle, 1986). The concept of roles can be situated 'in between' the individual and society and has long been a "simple, but useful means for explaining self-society relationship" in sociology (Callero, 1994; p. 228, cf. Arditi, 1987). Roles are shared conceptions within a particular community and a change in role understandings can indicate changing interactions and relations between actors within such a community. As such, changes in roles can be indicative of changes in the broader social fabric and can provide new opportunities for multi-actor collaboration to deal with societal challenges and hence form an important part of transitions. The overall question we pose in this article is: *What is the potential of the concept of roles for describing and understanding the interaction and relations of actors in sustainability transitions and their governance?*

This question is addressed through a literature overview of transition research focusing on the key points of convergence of different streams within this emerging field and their treatment of actors and agency; and a focused literature review of roles theories, starting from classical works and overview articles and zooming in on three perspectives, which allow us to understand roles in relation to societal change. Throughout the article, we illustrate our argument by introducing a transition experiment in the neighbourhood of Rotterdam-Carnisse, in which we were involved as part of a transdisciplinary engagement funded by an EU-FP7 research project (InContext) and a municipally funded project (Veerkracht Carnisse).[1] We organized a transition management process of problem framing, visioning and pathway development and facilitated actual experimentation to support the creation of alternative more sustainable ideas, practices and social relations in Carnisse. The case description and the illustrative examples are based on numerous interviews, participant observation, informal interactions on numerous occasions, document reviews, field-notes and the organisation and facilitation of seven deliberative meetings and six action-oriented meetings in the period from 2010 to 2015.

In the next section, we highlight the knowledge gap in transition research with regard to its treatment of actors, illustrating the analytical challenge this poses by introducing the transition experiment in Carnisse. This is followed by a focused literature review on roles theories (Section 3) and an operationalization of the insights for transition research (Section 4). We conclude the paper by summarizing the main insights and pointing to future research avenues (Section 5).

2. Analysing actors, roles and agency from a transition perspective

2.1. Transition research

Transition research refers to an interdisciplinary research field focused on structural change in societal systems. Different research streams draw on complex systems theory, social studies of technology, innovation studies, governance literature, and several others (Grin et al., 2010; Markard et al., 2012; Van den Bergh et al., 2011). For the purpose of this article, we focus on key points of convergence across this emerging field (cf. Grin et al., 2010) and its treatment of actors. The focus of transition research is on the dynamics and governance of historical and contemporary sustainability transitions. Transitions, as fundamental societal changes, are described as involving various patterns and pathways (De Haan and Rotmans, 2011; Geels and Schot, 2007), different phases (Grin et al., 2010; Rotmans, 2005), multiple actors (Farla et al., 2012; Geels, 2011; Wieczorek and Hekkert, 2012), and high levels of co-evolution, complexity, and uncertainty (Geels and Schot, 2010; Rotmans and Loorbach, 2010a, 2010b).

[1] The EU-funded FP7-research project InContext (2010–2013), aimed at better understanding the internal and external contexts that influence the ability of individuals and communities to deal with societal challenges through an action research approach based on transition management (www.incontext-fp7.eu). The municipal project Veerkracht Carnisse (2011–2015) aimed at supporting the development towards a greener, more social and child friendlier Carnisse through increasing the resilience and self-organizing potential of the neighbourhood (www.veerkrachtcarnisse.nl).

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