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TOWARDS SOCIAL HOLISM

Social innovation, holistic research methodology and pragmatic collective action in spatial planning

Frank Moulaert and Abid Mehmood

Introduction

Why would spatial planning care about holism? And what about social innovation? Or both combined? This chapter explains how, from a social science perspective, holism is to be recommended as a methodology that catches the diversity of social relations, while at the same time showing their common features across different communities or sectors in society. If social innovation then is about improving social relations through collective action, its role in spatial planning is logical, for spatial planning is about collective action with the purpose of transformative change. And this change can be effective only if it takes societal complexity into account; whence the recommended use of holism to analyse this complexity, and as we will see, its natural connection with pragmatism.

Holism, as we show in this chapter, as an offspring of the pragmatist era, responds to most of the features of planning research inquiry recognised in the introductory chapter of this book: action-oriented, an explicit normative focus, a recognition that systematically produced knowledge has value in shaping and evaluating interventions in the practical world, a recognition of the political-institutional contexts within which knowledge is produced. By recognising the complexity of relational patterns in society, holism explicitly contests logical positivist approaches to the study of human behaviour.

Social innovation can be defined broadly as innovation in social relations, institutions and delivery systems to satisfy human needs that hitherto have been insufficiently met within existing allocation systems. An appropriate research method to analyse social innovation with a comparative perspective is that of ‘holism’ (Moulaert 2002). Developed as a method of research in the 1920s, holism has over the last few decades re-emerged in many scientific debates as an instrument of comparative analysis. From a methodological point of view, it gives particular consideration to the relationships between ‘parts’ and ‘wholes’ across different institutional contexts. Moreover it has natural links with pragmatism as a social philosophy and a scientific approach (Ramstad 1986) in which, as in social innovation studies, collective action is a main focus.
There exist a variety of interesting theoretical debates across different disciplines about the meaning and substance of ‘collective action’. However, in this chapter we use the loose definition put forward by Tilly (1978) as “people acting together in pursuit of common interests” (p. 7). No further analysis of the socio-psychological and emotional dynamics feeding or embedding collective action (Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005) is made. We focus on the use of comparative analysis as part of the social learning process involved in many social actions and movements. The first part of the chapter describes the relationships between holistic analysis and collective action. The second part discusses holist methodology as used in a theoretically structured comparative case study analysis using the ‘quality of social services’ as an example of an analytical theme. Different theories can be used to select themes eligible for analysis in holism and to identify the relations (pattern models) between them. Subsequently, the importance of holistic theory in social innovation analysis is discussed using a multi-sited case study framework. We explain how holistic theory can be used to set up a sound framework of empirical research on social innovation as collective action, as well as a strategy to overcome social exclusion within different yet comparable socio-institutional settings. Both qualitative and quantitative data play an important role in such analysis. To illustrate this, we use the example from an earlier research project on ‘Social INnovation GOvernance and COMmunity-building’ (SINGOCOM). The project made a holistic-comparative analysis of sixteen socially innovative initiatives as case studies in nine European cities. We propose ‘social holism’ as an ethically founded approach that connects holism more explicitly to pragmatism. We support using comparative analysis to develop knowledge that contributes to socially progressive aims, with the specific purpose of enhancing collective action and public policy.

Collective action and scientific analysis

There are certain questions to be addressed when looking at the significance of holistic methodology for social innovation research. These questions primarily concern the connections between collective action and scientific analysis.

Collective action is defined as action undertaken by an ensemble of actors with a particular objective to change a situation of shared concern, work towards more cohesive social relations, improve social conditions or devise policy initiatives that allow improving the condition of groups or communities in a society. The desire for improvement leading many collective action initiatives owes a lot to collective sentiments (Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005). Yet collective action emerges as a result of purposeful mediations or negotiations between the different participating actors. According to the pragmatist approach to policy and change agendas, participation strategies should be based on (collective) practical and situationally specific judgement. Dewey (1993, p. 206) argues that such judgement involves

a combination of analytical, moral, and emotive modes of thought not conducted as abstract principles but articulated in the flow of life. And the flow of life is not lived in the splendid isolation of the autonomous individual but in the social contexts in which what it means to live in a ‘polity’ are in continuous formation.

(as cited in Healey 2009, p. 279)

The comparative case study research we have undertaken in recent years has given support to a number of prerequisites for collective action. It demonstrates that collective action requires
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leadership (Moulaert et al. 2013). It also includes other aspects, such as the involvement of complementary agencies, modes of cooperative and associative behaviour, and institutional codes to gather and mobilise people and to share knowledge in order to identify existential conditions and opportunities for change.

Scientific analysis is important for the design of collective action. It can help avoid impulsive agency and serve as a tool for setting objectives, solving problems, identifying solutions and looking at potential consequences of solutions. It also requires methods that reveal needs and preferences, and can be used in a process of norm-setting guiding collective action. By means of such analysis we can also identify modes to satisfy those needs. This does not necessarily imply that each and every collective action requires analysis. Some collective actions can be quite immediately responsive (or spontaneous) to needs without much reflection, due to the lack of time for analysis, which is often the case when needs are quite pressing. Examples of such urgencies are: natural catastrophes, epidemics, immediate welfare needs, food shortages, etc. Gut feelings and collective intuition empathising with urgency situations and the surrounding conditions of people facing these may sometimes offer better guidelines for direct action than recipes drawn from logical thinking.

Analysis can also serve problem solving. When different types of actors are involved in research – which should be the rule in social innovation research – they bring in their visions and ambitions to actively explore change potential through co-designing solutions and strategies. But even before thinking of solutions, simple exchanges between participants and the search for a common language can already have a positive impact on the path to problem solving. Collaborative designing can be done through a shared practice of drawing, mapping, narrating, developing, implementing, etc. (Toker 2012). Collaborative designing often requires the preliminary agreement between actors on shared terms for desired spatial quality (Goethals and Schreurs 2011). Different types of analysis can be combined to make the desired and shared ideas more tangible. Thus transdisciplinary research, combining skills and knowledge from scientific disciplines and fields of practice, can help to negotiate solutions and strategies with partners and to discern how some actions, when introduced at different stages in a problem solving process, are more effective than others. Transdisciplinary perspectives in social innovation research, by putting into practice an ethics of solidarity and collective pursuit of human development, reflect the deep concern to innovate in social relations with the purpose of building a better world (Novy, Swiatek and Moulaert 2012; Cassinari and Moulaert, Chapter 5.3, this volume).

In this context, experience, contextualisation, comparison and part/whole relationships in transdisciplinary holistic analysis are of vital significance (Moulaert et al. 2011). The part/whole relationships form the core of holism. The dynamic interaction of parts ensures that the holistic system does not remain closed or static but is more adaptive and evolving. Mapping the lessons drawn from experience, contextualisation and comparison into dynamic part/whole relationships refers to the need to learn from the history, to learn from other places and to exchange knowledge with each other (Moulaert and Van Dyck 2013). This mapping provides a ‘process-oriented’ link with social learning as put forward by pragmatism (Healey 2009, p. 281). There is another link with pragmatism, in the form of feedback relationships between theory building and analysis on the one hand and collective action, policy and planning on the other hand. One of the main principles of pragmatism, as a philosophy of science and reflective intellectual agency, refers to the ‘robustness’ of a theory. Pragmatists argue that theories are robust if they reflect those aspects of reality that are important to a diversity of collective action agendas. In holism terms, this would mean that theories substantiated by evidence are capable of placing into the flow of collective action practice new significant observations and lessons. These
lessons are based on relevant practices in collective action, either as meaningful exceptional or as confirmation of particular elements from such theories.

Holism as theoretically structured comparative analysis

Now that we have explored the link between collective action and scientific analysis, it still needs to be explained what holism actually is, how it should be used as a methodology and why it is suitable for social innovation analysis and practice. In the practice of experience-based research (i.e., the analysis of experiences of particular types of interventions and processes in different places), the central focus is on the comparison of different cases, concentrating on similarities and differences across cases and the contexts in which they evolve. The research aim is to elucidate how similarities can relate to variety while still guaranteeing comparability. This requires identifying a number of concepts that will enable a comparative analysis to be made. In the vocabulary of holism, these concepts are usually introduced as ‘themes’ that are common to a relatively large number of situations. A typical question in holistic analysis, for example, could be how the theme of *quality of social services* is analysed across different neighbourhoods, localities or (in the holism speak) ‘subsystems’. (See also ‘residential development’ in Booth, Chapter 2.4, this volume). Further, how could this analysis lead to better grounded proposals for socially innovative collective action and social policy? The holistic methodology applied in the SINGOCOM project, which will be explained in the next part, involved the selection of a first analytical ‘theme’ (e.g., people with welfare needs) for a particular (territorial) ‘subsystem’ (e.g., an urban neighbourhood). The theme was then analysed for a number of selected subsystems, checking for its relevance to figure out similarities and differences in all subsystems, by referring to the dynamics of social exclusion but also socially innovative strategies to overcome exclusionary conditions. This first theme was subsequently brought into relationship with a second theme, which ultimately leads to the construction of a ‘pattern model’, as we explain ahead.

The role of theory in holistic analysis

Theory has an important role in identifying specific themes and the potential relationships between them. Within the perspective of social innovation analysis, the relations between the different themes and how they materialise within case studies should be analysed by using a methodological framework that recognises the inherent interactions between Agency, Structure, Institutions and Discourse – ASID (Moulaert and Jessop 2006, 2012). This framework recognises the important issue of the specificity of structural dynamics and individual or collective behaviour. Also, it focuses analytical attention on the relationships between the two, which implies looking at their institutional mediation. In such mediation, cultural dynamics – with discourse at the centre – play a major role. These dynamics are about why and how people in certain situations act according to specific codes, routines and norms, while in others they may behave in a spontaneous way, in an individual or collective capacity, in a creative or even a routine manner.

Defining holistic theory

Holistic theory provides linkages between specific themes across specific subsystems and explains the presence (or absence) of these relationships by use of partial theories fitting a meta-theoretical framework. In more conventional scientific terms, we could say that we are in
a systems perspective. But at the same time, we accept the role of the particular, the specific and the local as key elements of our explanatory process, certainly as important as the generic rules or patterns (as they say in holist analysis) which would stem from a systemic analysis. In holistic knowledge production, therefore, the exceptional or the particular matters as much as attention to the structural or the systemic. Holistic theory in this sense is more like a dialectical synthesis between theorising according to its conventional meaning – as the synthesis of available knowledge in abstract terms – and the empirical verification as well as improvement of explanatory frameworks connecting different research themes to each other.

Diesing (1971) classifies the concepts in holistic theory in terms of systems, subsystems and analytical themes. Social services were cited earlier as an example of an analytical theme. The general provision of social services can, for example, be measured by means of the categories of services (such as care for children, young adults, elderly), types of services available to different social and age groups, and the quality of those services. These variables can then be measured for a given neighbourhood (subsystem). The quality of social services (as the first theme) can thus be established for each neighbourhood. The approach used is comparative in time and space. Figures 2.5.1(a) and 2.5.1(b) can be related to the preliminary assumptions that for a neighbourhood subsystem A, the score of the quality of social services is higher than the score of the quality of social services in another neighbourhood B or C.

The first theme can be subsequently correlated or connected to another theme which is relevant for the first theme’s understanding or contextualisation. For example, if the quality of social services depends on public spending by the local authorities, then public spending by the local authorities could become the second theme. In a simple correlation model, it can be argued that the quality of social services across different neighbourhoods (or subsystems) will significantly depend on the level of spending by the local authorities for the types of services offered and the variety of social groups covered (see Part 4, this volume). But to enrich the comparative perspective, the relationship can be made more complex by looking at other themes, such as the age, relative incomes, mobility and family support situation of the different households in these neighbourhoods. Hence, significant themes are identified step-by-step and connected to each other. As the cases are compared, more and more similarities and differences emerge between different subsystems. “Over time, a typology will be developed that summarizes the systematic differences encountered” (Ramstad 1986, p. 1072). Once a theme is identified and empirically established, the researcher can move on to more themes and try to create links between different neighbourhood subsystems through a set of identified themes (Diesing 1971). These links reveal the interconnectedness within the system, as shown in Figure 2.5.1(c). The themes and relationships (e.g., quality of social services and the level of public spending by local authorities) also render some provisional patterns that can be verified through a selection of qualitative or quantitative methods (surveys, statistics, case studies, etc.) suitable for ‘contextual validation’ (Diesing 1971, p. 147). These procedures can be repeated to validate selected themes across the neighbourhood subsystems. It is noteworthy that themes should not be identified in a haphazard manner. Their identification should be based on the (available) theoretical and contextual knowledge brought together in the meta-theoretical framework. The group of validated themes helps to develop an interconnected network or pattern model. The pattern model can be refined or modified by adding more thematic correlations, examined for each subsystem and strengthened through exchanges between empirical work and theoretical formulations. Thus, in the urban system that is being addressed, the comparative analysis moves across neighbourhoods, the shared analytical themes and the patterns connecting them. The typology of neighbourhoods and their social services can significantly
change if variants and circumstances in individual cases display behaviours different to the
generalised patterns.

The SINGOCOM case-study analysis

So far we have explained the holistic methodology: how themes are selected, connected to patterns and examined across subsystems within a broader system. In the SINGOCOM research (Moulaert et al. 2011), subsystems were taken to be neighbourhoods within their urban environment. In its selection of themes, SINGOCOM was inspired by a diversity of collective action initiatives, mainly driven by an ethical position pursuing human progress. In these collective actions, different forms of social exclusion which impede human development were connected to options for social innovation which could counter them or turn them into opportunities for further development. These connections were established by studying a range of processes and (rational) strategies: mobilisation strategies, social economy initiatives, new governance forms, etc. For the comparative analysis of different cases, an analytical ‘model’ (ALternative MOdel of Local INnovation – ALMOLIN) was developed from a post-disciplinary perspective using elements from various social science literatures.

In building ALMOLIN as a pattern model connecting different themes, the role of existing theories on social innovation originating from a diversity of disciplines was significant. These included theories on horizontal and more democratic management structures from business science, on the social nature of economic and technological innovation, on the socially innovative character of corporate social responsibility, on the interaction between business administration and social-cum-environmental progress, on promoting social innovation through fine arts, on the role of social economy in community development (Moulaert et al. 2005) and on social innovation in spatial planning and governance (González and Healey 2005). Combined according to the ontology of community development based on the pursuit of social cohesion within a community through a diversity of social practices and innovation in social relations, these theories provided the pillars of a meta-theoretical framework for analysing human development within localised communities that would also frame the empirical investigation (Moulaert et al. 2010). The sixteen case studies that were investigated in depth in the course of the SINGOCOM research were the result of an interactive selection process from a larger databank.
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of socially innovative initiatives, drawn together by the network of local research teams at the beginning of the project. These cases represented a wide spectrum of socially innovative experiences in community and neighbourhood development. Their holistic analysis encompassed interesting cross-country comparisons, highlighting how the different historical and institutional contexts and cultures influenced the nature and impact of social innovation. The basic features of their socially innovative impact, historical roots and spatial reach as framed by the ALMOLIN analytical approach are charted in Figure 2.5.2.

ALMOLIN as a meta-theoretical framework shows the interplay between social exclusion and social innovation dynamics capable of countering it. These dynamics may include reactions to deprivation and exclusion, mobilisation and organizing around a shared vision of change – often in the form of social movements – and reproduction of a culture of change based on the pursuit of a new identity, thereby cutting away from the depths of humiliation and alienation. Overcoming situations of exclusion requires mobilisation of resources within, or against, the existing organizational and institutional settings. Figure 2.5.2 does not manifest the role of civil society or grand political actions. These are indirectly included through the path dependency of agencies and institutions (see also Chapter 2.4, this volume) and the institutionally interconnected nature of spatial scales (neighbourhoods, local communities, municipalities, cities, regions, etc.). The boxes in the figure are named in generic terms but, when applied to case-study analysis, take on concrete contents. Hence, ALMOLIN models ‘holism’ as a scientifically established research method to address shortcomings in contemporary urban and regional development analysis.

Figure 2.5.2 ALMOLIN (Alternative Model of Local Innovation).
Source: Adopted from Moulaert et al. (2011, p. 52).
The strategy for collecting the empirical information for the SINGOCOM study was entrusted to the local research teams, as each of them possessed the unique local knowledge for the respective case study and its context. National, regional or local statistics were gathered, policy documents were analysed, interviews conducted with local experts and, in some cases, participatory research was carried out (e.g., the Leoncavallo case in Milan and to some extent the City Mine(d) case in Brussels). In the case of Alentour in Roubaix, a survey by questionnaire was conducted among the residents of the neighbourhood, which proved a rich source of tangible information. What ensured consistency and comparability across the different cases, and the sometimes different nature and depth of quantitative and qualitative information, was the holistic analytical, meta-theoretical framework.

Nijman (2007, p. 1) maintains that authentic comparative urban research reveals “what is true of all cities and what is true of one city at a given point in time”. The analysis in SINGOCOM moved between these two poles. As for any multi-sited research, maintaining comparability between different case studies while keeping room for the specificity of each was a challenge. It was clear from the beginning that social innovation, despite the shared definition given at the beginning of the project, was going to ‘mean’ different things for different people in different places. While, for example, collaboration between private and public institutions was considered as ‘socially innovative’ in southern Italy, it was seen as common practice and often as a threat to social innovation in the UK. But the researchers maintained their holistic ‘methodological’ consistency across case studies by referring back to the common concepts and theories of social innovation at the neighbourhood level.

While ensuring comparability, the analytical framework of the ALMOLIN model also allowed the researchers to identify and assess – across the different case studies – those features and dynamics of alternative initiatives that were most conducive to the introduction of durable social innovations for specific places, by responding to basic social needs in innovative ways, by empowering excluded or marginalised social groups, or by changing the power relationships between different actors and/or scales of governance, in the direction of a more democratic, inclusive and equitable society. SINGOCOM in this respect offers an ethically driven approach. In other words, it was an exemplar of a type of holism framed by a pragmatic perspective which we designate as social holism.

In conclusion

To sum up, the relationship between pragmatism and holism in social innovation research is historical and remains highly relevant today. Both emerged at about the same time in the US during the first quarter of the twentieth century (Ramstad 1986; Healey 2009). With pragmatism as a philosophical and scientific approach to be associated with collective action, holism provides the method to study specific cases, exemplars and situations in a comparative way to support collective action and inform policymaking. Both have evolved significantly over the last century or so, but pragmatism has especially had a strong influence on discussions in the philosophy of science and in collective action. Holism in contrast mainly subsisted as an obscure label for the study of the ‘whole and its parts’, which is regrettable as both pragmatism and holism show two complementary sides of the epistemological approach used in social innovation research. Integrating the two in a better way would offer real opportunities for an ontologically coherent social innovation research methodology.

Pragmatism provides a way of defining the attitudes and behaviours of the scientists and the collective actors among them. It strongly refers to an ethical positioning that can lead to
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the improvement of the condition of human beings, as well as a more humane development of society as a whole. In a variety of ways, it addresses the ethical and methodological connections between analysis and collective action. It stresses the need for understanding the social context in which collective action and public policy occur. It uncovers the limitations of ‘logical positivism’ and shows strong affinity with institutional analyses of social reality and agency. It underlines the need for collective and transdisciplinary learning across ‘communities of inquiry’ as the individual capacity of human learning is limited and the unity of learning and acting essential. As Healey puts it, “The core of this ‘unique method’ was the habit of questioning and exploring, testing answers and discoveries in relationship to empirical evidence of one kind or another” (2009, p. 280). The connection with holism is implicitly present all the time. As Ramstad explains, the connection between pragmatism and holism became explicit in the works of (old) institutional economists such as John Commons, who clearly adopted a pragmatist epistemology in his economic analysis. Commons considered the subject matter of economics as “collective action in control of individual action according to the evolving working rules of the various customs and concerns” (Commons 1961 [1934], p. 655, cited by Ramstad 1986, p. 1076).

The link between holism and pragmatism is quite natural. The ethics of pragmatism can be a starting position to lead a holist empirical research project and to give it a place in collective action and behaviour. It is an ethics that is solid in the sense that every collective action that is undertaken should contribute to the progress of humanity and to the improvement of the well-being of as many social groups in society as possible.

Connecting this ethical positioning to holism, we can say that we are applying what could be called ‘social holism’. Referring to the example of the quality of social services at the neighbourhood level, pragmatism can direct us to analyse the quality of social services because it recognises that, as researchers, we care about the quality of service provision (whether public or private) and decent welfare services for all groups in the neighbourhood. But it also stresses the role of collective action and public policy in establishing such conditions. Holism as a methodology will instruct us to identify the different themes, patterns and relations that help to understand why the social services are needed and what the factors are which affect their provision (or not). Additionally, it can ascertain and analyse relationships between the actors and agents involved in collective action and public policy, but also between these, their goals, and objectives. Holism helps to materialise the reflexive interrogations that are essential to pragmatism, while pragmatism makes sure that holistic scientific practice remains self-reflexive (Moulaert et al. 2013). Thus the two entries into a reflexive methodology for social innovation research continue to revitalise each other.

Notes
1 Part of this chapter is based on Moulaert and Mehmood (2013).

References


