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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Critical, Engaged and Change-oriented Scholarship in Environmental Communication. Six Methodological Dilemmas to Think With

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ABSTRACT

While calls for critical, engaged and change-oriented scholarship in environmental communication (EC) abound, few articles discuss what this may practically entail. With this article, we aim to contribute to a discussion in EC about the methodological implications of such scholarship. Based on our combined experience in EC research and drawing from a variety of academic fields, we describe six methodological dilemmas that we encounter in our research practice and that we believe are inherent to such scholarship. These dilemmas are (1) grasping communication; (2) representing others; (3) involving people in research; (4) co-producing knowledge; (5) engaging critically; and (6) relating to conflict. This article does not offer solutions to these complex dilemmas. Rather, our dilemma descriptions are meant to help researchers think through methodological issues in critical, engaged and change-oriented EC research. The article also helps to translate the dilemmas to the reality of research projects through a set of questions, aimed to support a sensitivity to, and understanding of, the dilemmas in context.

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1. Introduction

Our society faces a broad and complex set of urgent socio-environmental challenges that have no easy solution and are difficult to govern. These challenges, as well as the strategies that the international community have developed to tackle them – Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – are characterized by complexity, uncertainty, disputed facts, conflicting values, high stakes and a pressing need to act (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1994; Sardar, 2010). As such, they call for an entirely different governance approach (Kooiman, 2003), in which environmental communication (EC) scholarship can be a crucial component for understanding and facilitating transformations to sustainable societies, i.e. processes that involve profound innovations in social practices, structures and technologies (Stirling, 2014).

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Research-as-usual, however, may not be able to help address these challenges, and therefore we join other EC scholars in a call for – what we would term – critical, engaged and change-oriented EC scholarship (Anderson, 2015; Besely, 2015; Cox, 2007; Raphael, 2019). *Critical* research is driven by a commitment to social justice and rights (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Hudson, 2000), aims to challenge taken-for-granted knowledge (Leach & Mearns, 1998; Mosse, 2005), and acknowledges that research itself is inherently political (Humphries, 1997). *Engaged* research aims to involve non-academic individuals and groups in the research process and focuses on issues of social concern, i.e. research *with* and *for* people rather than *on* people (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). *Change-oriented* research is problem-driven and targets processes of social change (Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2006). The three concepts together promote the idea of research as an embedded and reflexive practice that cannot stand on the sidelines of society.

While such scholarship is increasingly called for in the journal Environmental Communication (Hansen & Cox, 2015; Katz-Kimchi & Goodwin, 2015), its methodological consequences are not in focus in the journal. A lack of development of a collective methodological body of knowledge may, at best, lead to individual researchers re-inventing the wheel and, at worst, to "engaged, critical and change-oriented scholarship" becoming an empty phrase.

With this article, we aim to contribute to a methodological discussion, by presenting six methodological dilemmas as reflexive devices for thinking about what critical, engaged and change-oriented EC scholarship might entail in practice. These dilemmas are (1) grasping communication; (2) representing others; (3) involving people in research; (4) co-producing knowledge; (5) engaging critically; and (6) relating to conflict. We present each dilemma based on our experience and draw on methodological debates from the wider social sciences, such as anthropology, social movement studies, feminist studies, human geography, political science, communication, planning theory and cultural studies. Rather than offering solutions, we present dilemmas and suggest that they can be used to think through critical, engaged and change-oriented research practice. We hope and believe that such an approach will find resonance in our readers' experience and form a useful resource for the further development of EC scholarship.

2. On critical, engaged and change oriented

Throughout the existence of the journal Environmental Communication, scholars have called for the discipline to work in critical, engaged and change-oriented ways. In 2007, in the inaugural issue of the EC journal, Cox positions EC as a crisis discipline, i.e. one characterized by urgency, uncertainty and ethical duty. He consequently argues that scholars in the field have an obligation to work to enable people to participate in environmental decision-making affecting them (2007). In 2015, in a special issue critically reflecting on the development of the field, Besely stresses the need for EC to increase its societal relevance and impact, making sure that our research matters beyond theory development in academic settings. And, in that same issue, Anderson calls for more collaboration, outreach and multi-stakeholder engagement in EC (2015). In 2019, Raphael also positions EC as a discipline of ethics and care, and suggests that EC scholars should engage more with matters of environmental justice (2019). We share these ideas with the above-referenced scholars, and gather them together under the umbrella of critical, engaged and change-oriented EC scholarship.

While it is outside the scope of this article to discuss *critical*, *engaged* and *change-oriented* beyond the definitions in the introduction, we outline here how they are related and often inseparable aspects of EC scholarship. *Critical* research in EC has its investigative focus on the socio-material historical processes that create inequalities and injustices (Alarcon, 2015; also, Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), and highlights intersecting relations of power and privilege (connected to race, gender, class, sexuality and species) with sense – and decision making, voice and influence (Powell & Arora-Jonsson, 2015; also Gaard, 2017; Plumwood, 2002). It has the explicit aim to uncover unequal power relations in social struggles over sustainability, environmental resources, landscapes and representations, and through that contribute to socio-environmental justice (Agyeman, 2007; Sowards, 2012). As such, it

is part of the *change-oriented* agenda, inherent to EC as a "crisis discipline" (Cox, 2007), which seeks to contribute to advocacy and environmental justice (Depoe, Delicath, & Elsenbeer, 2004), climate change activism (Endres, Sprain, & Peterson, 2009) and research for social impact (Pezzullo & de Onís, 2018). Such an agenda always needs to be accompanied by *critical* questions about whose change, why and how. And, it needs to be based on the *critical* understanding that knowledge production is a political activity in which we as researchers (Grosz, 1993; Jupp, 2006) also take part in (re)creating dependencies, power relations and social inequalities (Castro-Gomez & Martin, 2002; Mignolo, 2000). This calls for a critical reflexivity of our own research practices (Holland, 1999; Jupp, 2006) and propels us to involve non-academic actors. Indeed, critical and change-oriented EC research is often *engaged*, driven by the ambition and ethical stance to recognize multiple ways of knowing and, consequently, the need to co-produce knowledge together with non-academic actors (Endres et al., 2009), through, e.g. community based participatory research (Chen, Milstein, Anguiano, Sandoval, & Knudsen, 2012), rhetorical field methods (Pezzullo & de Onís, 2018) or collaborative governance (Walker & Senecah, 2011).

How do you "do" such critical, engaged and change-oriented scholarship? It is certainly not a small thing to aim for. When we add the demands, that we have on research design (collaborative, equal, equitable, democratic, inclusive, participatory, trans- and interdisciplinary) to the broader aims of our research (to help ameliorate socio-environmental problems and contribute to socio-environmental justice), the task of such scholarship seems daunting (Powell, forthcoming). Inspired by feminist scholarship (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991) – that emphasizes how larger structures are reproduced in everyday life and how the everyday therefore is a place for possibility and change - we here aim to contribute to EC scholarship through highlighting, reflecting on and improving the practices of our academic work. To this end, we open up the "backstage" of our work as researchers through laying out the methodological dilemmas we struggle with, wishing to help explicate the kind of questions and worries such scholarship may deal with.

3. On writing this article

This article is different from the articles that we normally write, because it is a collaborative effort from our research group in which we describe our research practice. Therefore, it is appropriate to present ourselves and our writing process.

We all work in the Division of Environmental Communication at SLU, an interdisciplinary group of around 20 academics from, e.g. environmental communication, agronomy, political science, anthropology, gender studies, sociology and human geography. Different from the majority of EC research in this journal (Evans Comfort & Eun Park, 2018), our work focuses less on media, content and rhetorical analysis in North America, and more on qualitative, process-oriented and collaborative research across a variety of contexts, primarily in the Nordic and European countries, but also in, e.g. Australia, India, Ethiopia and Mozambique. We collaborate with public agencies, indigenous and local communities, NGOs and industry, to study and contribute to the democratic challenge of developing legitimate environmental policies and inclusive governance processes that are needed for a transition toward a more sustainable and just world.

Even if we work in different contexts, many of the dilemmas we encounter in our research are similar. In order to learn from and with each other, and to contribute to the development of EC scholarship, we decided to gather and synthesize our collective experiences through this paper. We identified six dilemmas that are relevant in our research practice, assigned a core team to draft each dilemma, and developed the dilemmas and the article through an iterative feedback process between co-authors and the lead authors (Joosse and Powell). Through workshops and seminars, the article was developed for submission.

Co-writing this article was both a challenging and rewarding process. It became clear that we, as close colleagues, did not always share the same understanding: we discovered that terms we believed

we agreed about, have different meanings depending on context and disciplinary traditions. Discussions about these differences led to a better understanding of each other's scholarly perspectives and a deeper engagement with the dilemmas.

4. The dilemmas

Here we present six dilemmas. Each of these dilemmas is "unsolvable" and will play out differently from project to project. Off-the-shelf solutions are therefore unhelpful, and our aim is instead to both highlight the dilemmas as important issues to think about in research, and explicate what the dilemmas may consist of. We do so based on our own experience, and each dilemma starts with a vignette contextualizing it in our research practice. While each dilemma deserves its own article or book, we can only offer a short exploration here.

We first turn to a fundamental and epistemological dilemma of how to methodologically grasp communication, and how to be aware of the consequences of our choices in this regard.

Dilemma 1: grasping communication

Some years ago, we conducted a media content analysis of the newspaper articles and opinion pieces on livestock farming in Swedish newspapers. We found that farming was previously depicted positively because of their contribution to biodiversity, but now presented negatively because of methane emissions, and that farmers contested this latter depiction. Our findings were relevant and interesting but left much unexplored: What did the writers of these texts think and aim for? How did people outside the written press react? How did the change in representation affect identity, motivation, communication and meta-communication? In short, what broader communication processes were these texts elements of? And, what communication did we not account for?

The vignette above shows how we only created a partial picture of communication about farming in relation to the environment and illustrates the dilemma of grasping communication. Communication is the situated process of social interaction whereby people intersubjectively interpret themselves, the communication situation, and the world surrounding them, through verbal and nonverbal symbols (e.g. gestures, language and artifacts) (Cox & Pezzullo, 2016; Hansen, 2015). Through our methods, we can never grasp this complex and nuanced understanding of communication. Our methods, even when combined, necessarily only give a partial and snapshot insight into the communication situations we study, and our nuanced understanding of communication often remains confined to theory sections.

To illustrate, we present four methods, their foci and their blind spots. A first example is methods that focus on documents, such as the study above (Hallgren, Bergeå, & Källström, 2018; Hallgren, Bergeå, & Nordström Källström, 2020). Such methods can highlight how phenomena are discursively constructed in society and can assist in understanding which actions, identity constructions and power relations are facilitated and (re)produced by these texts (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). But, important communicative questions about how the text came into being (Noy, 2015) and how it is read and used by different actors are difficult to explore through documents. Another example is methods that highlight pre- and post-intervention attitudes and emotions (Jacobson et al., 2019). While these are good at assessing changes in attitudes and emotions, they cannot shed light on the communication procedure and the change processes themselves. Yet another example is conversation analysis. While they enable us to better understand the sequence organization in social interaction and the procedures for interaction (Hallgren et al., 2018), they leave individuals' identity, intentionality, institutional context, power relations and grand discourses unexplored. A final example is methods focusing on communication in and through everyday practices (Westberg & Waldenström, 2017), which highlight patterns of human action, and the interrelated role of the discursive and the material in the reproduction of everyday life. These methods do not, for example, provide tools for looking at individuals' emotions, attitudes and intentions.

In short, all these methods highlight only a part of communication processes, necessarily leaving the rest of communication unexplored. This partial understanding of communication cannot be fixed by multi-method approaches. Such approaches are valuable, and we have argued for them elsewhere (Joosse & Marshall, 2020) but cannot solve this dilemma because each method has a specific perspective and methodological entrance and they cannot just be pasted on one another.

This epistemological dilemma has practical consequences. During recent decades, we have increasingly been asked to do research to improve communication in change-processes, and have felt the external expectation to come up with rather simple recommendations, e.g. focusing on the framing of messages or improving facilitation techniques in dialogue processes. Yet, communication for change is so much more complex. Therefore, we need to remind ourselves about which parts of our understanding of communication we are highlighting, what is left unexplored, and how these factors might influence our results and recommendations. This is a reminder for individual scholars, and for the EC field as a whole.

As communication scholars, we study people's meaning-making and represent these people and their realities in our research. The next dilemma discusses some of the challenges associated with this.

Dilemma 2: representing others

I was working with a gender equality project at my university in Sweden. I conducted many interviews and focus groups with students and teachers. Based on these, my project group and I drafted measures to "improve" the situation. Later it occurred to me that, by choosing and inviting the participants for the project, I had already decided on who was marginalized and discriminated against. Moreover, by presenting the measures at the end of the project I seemed to act as the spokesperson for these groups. No one had asked me to speak on their behalf, but it somehow seemed logical in my role as leader of this project.

As change-oriented and critical social scientists one of our aims is to uncover and challenge inequalities and oppression (Weiss & Wodak, 2003). In projects such as described in the vignette, our objective is to identify and challenge unequal possibilities to decision making and voice with regard to imagined futures, based on gender, race, age, sexuality (see, e.g. Westberg & Powell, 2015). When performing studies like this, we describe, label and categorize individuals and groups. Inevitably, this results in partial representations of others, as we cannot see nor understand all dimensions of a situation and the people who participate in these situations But, importantly, we also risk to subjectify (i.e. to ascribe, sometimes essentialist, characteristics, visions and ideas to others) the very same groups and individuals (Powell & Arora-Jonsson, 2015; Spivak, 1988), thereby placing them in a position that they maybe cannot control or did not wish for.

Representing others is a key dilemma for critical, change-oriented and engaged EC scholarship for several related reasons. First, because in this research the aim is often to include a plurality of voices and perspectives on contested environmental issues (Milstein & Kroløkke, 2012). This is an important aim, as conscious and unconscious exclusion of voices and experiences is common (Powell, Kløcker Larsen, De Bruin, Powell, & Elrick-Barr, 2017). Such exclusion is often based on gender, socio-economic class, lack of verbality (e.g. infants, animals, nature), race and combinations thereof (Ahmed, 1998). In short, the exclusion is the result of power relations that are deeply embedded in society and not always easily recognized. A second reason is the interpretative prerogative that we as researchers have: we often speak from a privileged academic position that we do not always acknowledge. Indeed, speaking on behalf of marginal voices (Senecah, 2004; Walker & Senecah, 2011) puts an EC researcher in a precarious position as knowledge broker, a position that is neither objective nor value free but always embedded in relations of power (Hekman, 2010).

Therefore, we need to pay attention to ethical questions about the implications – for individuals, for society and for ourselves as researchers – of our representation (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008). We

need to question ourselves time and again about what right we have to speak on behalf of others, and what it means if we take on this position.

In recent years, EC scholars have increasingly highlighted this dilemma. Studies discuss the dilemma in relation to non-human animals and nature (Eckersley, 1999), and insist that representation of others should avoid emphasizing difference and victimization and invite challenges to representations produced by EC researchers (Von Essen & Allen, 2017). Powell and Arora-Jonsson (2015) highlight that when we aim to give voice, we also risk silencing perspectives and experiences that do not fit the categorizations and process of our research. Discursive colonization, i.e. the reproduction of the interests of the powerful through certain forms of knowledge and scholarship (Mohanty, 1984), also remains a risk when EC scholars challenge flawed representations. Indeed, any representation of, and mediation on behalf of, others risks subjectification and exclusion in processes of knowledge production.

One way to address this dilemma is to involve people through collaborative research[1] or action research. Such involvement presupposes relations of trust and engagement. The next dilemma discusses the risks and responsibilities that come with these approaches.

Dilemma 3: involving people in research

It didn't seem like the research participant was asking for much, just a ride to a child's medical appointment, and I was going that direction anyway. Over the following weeks, I gave her other rides since they were on my way and we began to tell each other about our personal lives. It seemed like harmless chit chat and I felt it was building a solid foundation for my research. However, she began winking at me during meetings I was observing, and during one ride, told me who had sliced the tires of a state agency car and wrote a threatening note. Another time, she laughed and said she was going to use the research product with my name on it to file a claim against her neighbor.

Engaged research entails a move from "research on" to "research with" individuals and groups, with the goal of improving, e.g. distressed, vulnerable, or marginalized situations. Such research can be high stakes and have profound consequences for the participants. To avoid causing inadvertent harm to participants, standard ethical principles of qualitative research guide us to construct and respect boundaries in cultural, economic, social, religious, political and other research contexts (Khanlouab & Peter, 2005). However, such principles are so general that we have found that they cannot sufficiently prepare us for navigating the ethical complexities of the practice of collaborative research.

In our collaborative research, we meet many such complexities, and diverging expectations is one of them. The endorsement and active involvement of participants is core to collaborative work. We spend considerable time and effort in engaging participants in research projects – especially in cases in which participants are suspicious of research and researchers – and making projects relevant for both them and us. However, in our enthusiasm for the project and our wish to engage participants, it is sometimes difficult to keep our own and participants' expectations realistic. Participants also sometimes express their hope for, or condition their participation to, particular research outcomes. We have come to understand that it is crucial to continuously work with the expectations of the research team and the participants. This means that we need to clarify for ourselves what our research expectations are, as well as discuss, clarify and revisit expectations together with research participants.

As the research unfolds we encounter another ethical issue: when interactions with participants increase, relationships develop and interdependencies become inevitable (Andersson & Westholm, 2019). While trusting relationships are important in this kind of research, we have found that professional relationships may easily evolve into friendships in which the participants, or we, may reveal personal details or make confessions, or ask for financial, emotional, or practical support – as in the vignette. Relationships can blur and evolve into unhealthy dependencies, and it is sometimes very difficult to evaluate when and how that exactly happened and, importantly, how to return to a more appropriate situation.

Finally, when we leave the project and the field, we can also encounter ethically demanding situations. There can be a sense of abandonment, guilt, or depression felt by everyone, including ourselves (Michailova et al., 2014). Especially when the project participants felt disappointed with the outcomes, the question arises whether there are possibilities for continued work from our side. Can we just disappear and go back to our academic everyday life, or do we also have responsibility for the situation beyond the duration of the project?

Such ethical questions may have answers varying from situation to situation, but are important to pose. Environmental and natural resource management situations may have profound, long term consequences for individuals, communities and nature. While important for all research, such situations clarify all the more the need to deconstruct, clarify, and critically analyze our research expectations and relationships.

Collaborative processes (for research or not) typically have ambitious goals about the creation of "better" (more relevant, applicable and democratic) knowledge by jointly exploring and learning about complex problems. Collaborative realities, however, often fall short of these ambitions and we next discuss the dilemma of co-production of knowledge.

Dilemma 4: co-producing knowledge

Recently, we participated in a state-commissioned initiative for developing forms for collaboration and co-production between our university and actors in the agricultural sector. While all participants engaged enthusiastically in the initiative, several shortcomings became apparent as the process unfolded. For example, "co-production" was assumed to "just happen" and was never deliberately facilitated, leading to parallel rather than shared forms of knowledge-creation. Moreover, once the group had formulated something of a joint report, a different, hierarchical and bureaucratic logic pushed most ambitions and ideas for future development aside. In the end no real change or outcome could be traced in any of the organizations, except for the "product" itself, a report delivered to the organizations' management with impacts unknown.

Co-producing knowledge for sustainable transformation sits at the heart of collaborative approaches and is becoming increasingly demanded and popular in policy and academic circles (Lang et al., 2012; Pohl et al., 2010). Here we understand co-producing knowledge as a specific mode of research where non-academic actors are actively involved in the different stages of knowledge creation (Voorberg, Bekkers, & Tummers, 2015). Collaborative processes are widely believed to create knowledge that is more applicable, and socially relevant and legitimate (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1994). As such, co-production offers a possible entry into dealing with complex environmental issues (Hansen & Cox, 2015) while also fulfilling other values, such as democratization and inclusion (Filipe, Renedo, & Marston, 2017; Pohl et al., 2010). Though we are optimistic for this research approach, its implementation requires continuous attention.

An important promise of co-produced knowledge is that it can be transformative and applicable after and outside of the co-productive process. However, as in the vignette, this kind of knowledge transfer is seldom sufficiently supported or planned for, and instead knowledge and learning are assumed to just "trickle up and out" in the participating organizations. As such, the transformative potential of co-production is seldom met (Polk, 2015).

We have tried to better understand the challenges of transferring co-produced knowledge. A basic problem is represented in the words themselves. "Co-produced knowledge" implies a neat package of insights. In our experience, this does not accurately depict what co-productive processes result in. We understand learning as a social activity and reject the idea of knowledge as something neutral and abstract that individuals create in their heads and can use when needed (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Instead, knowledge and meaning are co-created by individuals who, as members of social practices, make sense of what they do and why. Therefore, the meaning and knowing that is created in collaborative practices does not always make sense outside that specific practice (Westberg & Polk, 2016). "Transferability" is therefore problematic in this context. As co-productive processes do not

produce a package of knowledge to be transferred to other practices, it might be better to use the word "translatability". Such a word also implies that extra work is needed to translate, and make knowledge from one practice useful for other practices. Just like in the vignette, there is otherwise a risk that the process results in disappointment and business as usual.

When we study collaborative processes, we also see what does not work. As researchers it is also our role to be critical of processes that we endorse on a basic democratic level. Finding a balance between critique and engagement is sometimes difficult in practice, as we will explore next.

Dilemma 5: engaging critically

Some years ago, we studied a participatory process with local authorities, businesses, interest organizations, and NGO's about public access to nature. The study was commissioned by a national authority. This authority also hosted the process, while an independent consultant facilitated the process and the meetings. Our task was to provide feedback on the communication process, in order to help improve the practice and procedures for future participatory processes by the authority. In our final report we critically examined the process and presented our recommendations. Based on our report the authority decided to put the planning of participatory processes on hold, because of a lack of capacity to support such initiatives. This was not at all the effect we had in mind, and we were unhappy that our research formed the motivation for this decision.

The vignette above illustrates how we cannot always control how our research will be used, and forms a showcase of the dilemma of engaging critically. At our division, we work in several inter- and transdisciplinary projects, to help identify and develop knowledge at the interface of research, advisory services and practitioners (see SLU, 2018; Hellquist & Westin, 2019). Initiatives such as these are commonly based on ideals of democracy and inclusivity, and challenge top-down decision-making. As such, these initiatives have the potential to enable profound changes for society and the environment. However, they can also have adverse outcomes, and be used in manipulative ways to maintain existing unequal power relations or pursue unjust and unsustainable outcomes (as already put forward by Arnstein, 1969).

As researchers we ask critical questions about the political nature of participatory ideals, e.g. what do the different participants mean by a democratic or collaborative process, and whose understanding counts? In our experience, such questions can be uncomfortable to pose. Collaboration and democracy carry positive connotations, and they can therefore function as floating signifiers, i.e. unchallenged terms without exact definition (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). But, below the surface of these seemingly unpolitical and positive terms, we have found that misunderstanding and uneven power relations lurk. Therefore, paradoxically, in order to support and advance participatory initiatives, we need to deconstruct concepts such as democracy and collaboration, challenging their meaning in context through research.

Such a critical approach does not always land well with those involved in participatory processes. Participants can become mistrustful and afraid that we are out to question or assess their individual effort. Or, as in the vignette above, policy makers and civil servants may interpret or use our critical stance as a motivation for abandoning communicative and participatory initiatives when research highlights shortcomings in prerequisites, capacities or actions of the participatory initiative. This is quite opposite to our intentions, and, if our critical stance undermines the development of participatory initiatives, it is tempting for us as EC researchers to refrain from critically examining initiatives altogether. However, that would carry the risk of legitimizing ineffective or manipulative initiatives under the false label of participation, hampering the understanding of such initiatives, and – in the long run – decreasing the opportunity for social change towards a just and sustainable society. To support ideas of collaboration, while keeping a critical outlook, calls for discussions with the other participants about what collaboration actually means, and in what way critical perspectives, discussions and reflections can be part of collaboration.

The next dilemma takes us deeper into the consequences that follow from the often overly optimistic or naive connotations of "collaboration", in particular in relation to "conflict". These connotations may lead us and others to strive for harmonious collaboration. Such harmony may, however, hide conflictual ideas, experiences and hopes, and decrease the democratic potential of the communicative processes, as we present next.

Dilemma 6: relating to conflict

We were asked to design and facilitate a workshop for a contested government initiative to improve collaboration between mining corporations and Sámi reindeer herding communities. Our earlier research had critically analyzed the pitfalls of collaborative processes for Sámi communities and we were well aware that protest or court cases are often more effective in enforcing indigenous peoples' rights. But, when we prepared the workshop, based on a critical perspective, our faith and optimism in our ability to make progress through collaboration grew, and we got everybody on board. But four years later, our report, submitted to the ministry, has been buried in political inaction. We can't help thinking about what would have happened if the Sámi had opted out, and chosen a path of contestation instead?

The vignette illustrates how a desire for and belief in collaboration may undermine the constructive and democratic side of conflict and contestation. We define conflict to "occur when two or more persons or groups manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives" (Kriesberg & Dayton, 2017, p. 2). This definition seems simple enough. The difficulty, however, lies in the next step: how do we perceive the role of such conflicts in society? We often intuitively label collaboration and conflict as mutually exclusive phenomena, and conflict as a "problem" or a "failure" to be "solved" by collaboration (Poncelet, 2001). Consequently, we easily focus on reducing or getting rid of the conflict altogether. But, what is it that we lose when trying to end conflict?

Scholarship in, e.g. political science and feminist theory emphasizes contestation and conflict as important vehicles for democratic deliberations and change (Mouffe, 2005; Young, 2001). From our critical perspective, we agree that conflicts are not a problem per se, but a healthy symptom of a problem requiring attention. As such, understanding conflict primarily as destructive is problematic. First, it undermines pluralism as a basis for democracy. Second, it risks delegitimizing activism, protests and resistance as important forms of democratic participation (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012; Peterson, Bergeå, Feldpausch-Parker, & Raitio, 2016) that are particularly important for disadvantaged groups facing structural inequalities, as with indigenous peoples' rights described in the vignette. So, what we lose is a wider understanding of democratic forms of engagement for social change.

Agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 2005) offers a helpful theoretical starting point to rethink and redesign the role of conflict and contestation in democratic participation. Based on agonism, scholars have started investigating not only how alternative forms of democratic participation, such as activism, can feed into collaborative processes, but also how we can study processes from an agonistic perspective (e.g. Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010; Pløger, 2004). While important steps are being made, working agonistic ideas systematically into analytical frameworks and the practice of process design and facilitation is hard (Larsen & Raitio, 2019; Larsen, Raitio, Stinnerbom, & Wik-Karlsson, 2017).

In our experience, putting agonism into practice generates some tensions. A first tension originates from the celebrated image of collaboration as an effective, consensual and democratic tool for working with environmental conflict (e.g. Daniels & Walker, 2001). On the one hand, we are tempted to draw on this image in order to convince societal actors to engage in dialogues on contested issues. On the other hand, this image of collaboration hampers our work, because it generates expectations of frictionless collaborative work (see dilemma "engaging critically"). Working with societal partners with such expectations can push us towards avoiding conflict around complex issues of structural injustice and genuinely contradictory interests. It can also tempt us to use collaborative approaches when this is inappropriate from a critical, agonistic perspective, as may have been the case in the vignette. A second tension for integrating agonism in our research practice is that the approach is rather new, and therefore competence and knowledge are underdeveloped.

It is clear that we need to put much work into systematically developing agonistic research methodology during the coming years. This also means that we as researchers need to develop a readiness to recognize conflict and give it the space needed in the processes we are involved in. We believe that being transparent and explicit about how we relate to conflict in our research design forms an important step in the process.

5. Translating the dilemmas to the everyday of research

In this section, we offer a set of questions that could help in considering these dilemmas in the context and reality of other research projects (Table 1). First, we formulated questions for each of the dilemmas, then we removed overlaps and grouped the questions under four emerging themes. These are questions that are relevant throughout the research. They are not exhaustive but instead give an idea of the kind of questions we deem relevant.

Table 1. Questions to help translate the dilemmas to the everyday reality of research projects.

Reflecting on myself and my role in research
What is my role as a researcher in this project? Am I being reflexive about my role, to myself and to others?
What could a critical approach mean in this project? What implications might it have for the research process, and the aims?
What could an engaged and change-oriented approach mean in this project? How could I do it? What implications might it have for the process, and the aims?
What are possible tensions between a critical, an engaged, and a change-oriented approach in my research project?
Designing the research
Who will be involved in the project? Why, when and how? Are there relevant actors who will not be involved? Why? Will there be implications?
What are the power relationships and dependencies that could develop in the project? How might these influence the design and the process?
If work reveals that collaborative approaches are not the most appropriate methodological approach, what alternative approach will I consider for the research?
When inviting actors to a collaborative process, how can I highlight the importance of protest and contestation as a legitimate part of this?
Shedding light on the expectations
What are my expectations of the project? What are the expectations of others? How can expectations be made clear?
What assumptions (goals, values, concepts) underlie the project? How can they be made visible?
Evaluating the outcomes
What aspects of communication do I highlight in my research? What is left unsaid or unexplored?
Whom do I represent in and through my research? What values and norms are reproduced through these representations? Who benefits from them? Who loses?
How will I present the results to – or together with – the participants in the project?
How can research results be shared and applied outside an academic environment in order to contribute to positive societal change?
How will I handle divergences/ disappointments with the research results and products?
Can the research results contribute to positive societal change? Can they be used in negative ways?

6. Doing critical, engaged and change-oriented scholarship

In this era of multiple and competing socio-environmental crises, the role of, and demand for, research as a societal force for change has increased (e.g. Fridays for Future movement). EC can play an important role here, in understanding, critically analyzing and facilitating transformations to more sustainable and just societies. Such a role demands that we rethink EC scholarship, and several scholars have called for the further development of what we would term a critical, engaged and change-oriented EC scholarship. We endorse these calls, but have found that discussions on methodological implications have so far been largely missing in the EC journal.

An important part of critical, engaged and change-oriented scholarship, is to reflexively investigate our own research practice (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). It is here that this paper contributes.

To this end, we have suggested six dilemmas as reflexive devices to think through what such scholarship can mean in our research practice, and a set of questions to help translate the dilemmas to the specificities and contingencies of research projects.

The lists of dilemmas and questions are neither exhaustive, nor applicable to all EC research. There is still much to explore, for example from what position we are critical (of what and what is our role?), engaged (for and with whom?) and change oriented (what and whose imagined futures do we aim to support?). We are interested in developing this discussion in the EC-field together with other researchers. As methodological sections in research articles are commonly short and focused on motivating and legitimizing the research, it is usually the frontstage only that features in journals. We believe that our common methodological development is well served by discussing struggles, failures and unintended consequences. Therefore, we hope our article invites and encourages others to share the backstage of their EC scholarship.

Note

1. Collaborative processes here refer to change processes in which a variety of actors are invited to be an active part. There is a range of related terms, such as participation and deliberation, and here we use collaborative processes as an umbrella term for them all.

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