8 Lipstick on a pig?

Appreciative inquiry in a context of austerity

Alison Gardner

'Austerity' policies pursued by the UK government since 2010 are driving extensive public service redesign and integration (Crewe, 2016; Hastings *et al*., 2015). One consequence has been a re-appraisal of the opportunities for research collaboration between local authorities and universities. This has been motivated partly by local authorities seeking alternative sources of intelligence and analysis to inform policymaking, following reductions in funding for 'back office' staff and consultancy. At the same time, research councils and universities have sought fresh ways to demonstrate 'impact' on policy and practice, driven in part by the government policy and the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (Allen *et al*., 2014; Ní Mhurchú *et al*., 2017).

In this context, action research is sometimes perceived as a relational tool for building cross-sectoral engagement, delivering mutual benefits for researchers and research subjects. Relational approaches help to establish shared values to underpin collaborative research, including commitment and engagement, mutual trust, reflexivity, mutuality, egalitarianism, empathy, and an ethic of care (Kezar, 2003: 400). From a methodological perspective relational action research can also create collaborative and communicative space, building the conceptual understanding of connections between stakeholders and systems, and blurring distinctions between research subject and object (Touboulic and Walker, 2015: 312), enabling research findings to inform practice in a rapid and iterative cycle.

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However, proponents of action research argue that, in addition to relational elements, action research should provide a critical challenge which can facilitate the 'flourishing' of communities, address imbalances in power relations, and stimulate reflection and transformative change (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008; Gaya Wicks *et al*., 2008). A similar impetus comes from the increasing influence of 'phronetic' social science (Flyvbjerg, 2001), based on 'practical reasoning' and 'practice-wisdom', which

suggests that engaged research should deal with questions of the 'good life' (what we ought to do) and 'help people in ongoing political struggle question the relationships of knowledge and power and thereby work to produce change' (Schram, 2012: 19).

This transformative agenda presents tensions with relational aspects of action research, placing high demands upon action researchers to act as critical change agents, conveying 'truth' to wielders of hegemonic power, whilst also maintaining a dialogical engaged research relationship. Balancing these roles can be challenging: Bartels and Wittmayer comment that action researchers often walk a 'tight-rope' in seeking to create 'actionable' knowledge that is 'critical of the status quo in policy practice and academic research and is simultaneously used to act upon the problem(s) at hand and to advance academic debate' (2014: 399). They also argue in the introduction to this volume that action researchers must inevitably engage with these diverging elements in order to create dynamic research which can influence social and policy problems.

Yet although Bartels and Wittmayer's introduction refers to action research settings as 'concrete', the case of austerity incorporates a 'realpolitik' of diminishing resources and institutional flux which must itself be negotiated as the action research unfolds. This means that notions of what is 'critical', what is 'relational', and what constitutes 'change' and 'transformation' are likely to be fluid rather than fixed, contested rather than consensual. Resources to achieve change may also ebb and flow over time. What, then, are the implications of conducting research which aims to be simultaneously critical, relational, and transformative in this evolving context, and how might researchers manage these tensions?

This chapter explores these questions with reference to action research undertaken as part of a doctoral study into how English local public services were responding to austerity (Gardner, 2016). The research aimed to reconcile a critical investigation into responses to public spending cuts with a collaborative ethos that was sensitive to the particular strains and challenges of working in an organisation under sustained financial pressure. To facilitate this, the action research was informed by principles of 'appreciative inquiry', a technique which moves the focus of inquiry away from the action research emphasis on problem-solving to exploration of the 'life giving properties' of social systems (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Bushe, 2012: 9).

Appreciative inquiry is sometimes associated with the 'unconditionally positive question' (Ludema *et al*., 2001), and might therefore be seen as a curious methodology to inform a study of spending cuts, risking an accusation of positive bias, metaphorically putting 'lipstick' on the unappealing 'pig' of austerity.[1] However, this chapter shows that appreciative inquiry can help in making critical and relational research aims complementary, and holding them in productive, rather than negative tension; although the ability to negotiate transformation also rests upon the 'boundary spanning' role of the researcher, and the constraints of structural and institutional power.

The starting point: institutional dynamics and a collaborative research design process

The starting point for this research lay in a pre-existing research relationship between two senior academic staff in the schools of Politics and Sociology at the University of Nottingham and a local authority policy team. A previous short-term collaboration had explored neighbourhood-level effects of austerity in two electoral wards. Following this initial contact, the University sought funding for a collaborative PhD studentship which could extend and deepen the inquiry. The Labour-led council was in the midst of substantial spending reductions, implementing a cash-terms reduction in 'revenue spending power' of 22 per cent between 2010 and 2015,[2] which necessitated finding savings of more than £100 million over five years, in the context of an annual revenue budget of £273 million in 2010. The locality was also relatively severely affected by central government cuts, as it bore a historic legacy of poverty and deprivation placing it amongst the top 20 most deprived local authority areas in the country, and cuts impacted disproportionately on areas with higher levels of deprivation (Audit Commission, 2013: 23). Unemployment in the local area had risen sharply, due in part to a high reliance on public sector employers in the local economy.

The research brief set a broad intention of considering "how public services are being re-designed to respond to a changing financial landscape', incorporating an action research approach as a means to 'generate significant findings alongside evidence and learning that is useful to those seeking to address public service challenges on the ground" (University of Nottingham, 2012). It encompassed the ideal of mutual co-

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operation described at the start of this chapter, using the term "action research" as shorthand to signify an ethos of transparency, collaboration and shared aspiration. However, no attention was given at this stage of the project to identifying or managing potential tensions in the research.

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One particularly pertinent issue was the conflicting status of the local authority as both a 'victim' of austerity and a mechanism by which austerity-related cuts were enacted and furthered. Janet Newman has captured this tension, highlighting that local government is characterised by "landscapes of antagonism" whereby local governments are not simply either agents of – or resisters to – neoliberalism, but instead ambiguously positioned, "constituted by and constitutive of the spaces of neoliberalisation", in a setting which is traversed by multiple political projects (Newman, 2013: 12–13). Thus, the local authority was in one sense engaged in a struggle against the power wielded by government, but also simultaneously left with few choices other than to displace the effects of austerity onto citizens and partners. This conflicted position was not fully acknowledged at the start of the research, but subsequently sat at the root of tensions which became significant in relation to the critical and transformational contribution of the work.

A PhD studentship, principally funded by the university but including a 7 per cent contribution from the council (totalling £1000 per year), was conceived as a cost-effective way for the local authority to monitor the effects of austerity, whilst providing an opportunity for the university to contribute positively to the community, and demonstrate research 'impact'. After a shortlisting and interview process involving both the university and the council, I took on the studentship, returning to an organisation where I had worked as a local government officer almost a decade earlier. My decision to undertake the PhD came at the close of a 15-year career in local government policy and consultancy, having accepted voluntary redundancy offered in response to the spending cuts. Concerns about the effects of the spending cuts were a motivating factor for my studies.

The research began with a series of informal conversations over a period of three months with council officials and partners, to identify key research themes. These iterative conversations shaped the research focus and questions, which were

subsequently agreed with academic and council stakeholders. The main question centred on how English local authorities appeared, at least on the surface, to be 'coping' with spending cuts (Hastings *et al*., 2013) despite experiencing reductions to central funding of around one-third between 2010 and 2015 (NAO, 2013). The challenge of this "austerity puzzle" (Gardner and Lowndes, 2016) was to open the 'black box' that lay between financial cuts and impacts upon services; acknowledging the felt and material impacts of the cuts, but also examining what factors were combining to mitigate those effects. The study focused principally on institutions of public service delivery rather than outcomes for populations, as – at the point when the study was initiated – there was a time-lag in the emergence of population-level effects.

Appreciative inquiry was included within the research design as a means to illuminate the "austerity puzzle", and as a contribution to improving organisational resilience. Appreciative inquiry originated within the action research movement, drawing on social-constructionist arguments that 'through our assumptions and choice of method we largely create the world we later discover' (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987: 129). A key tenet of appreciative inquiry is that the questions researchers ask can have a dynamic impact on the system they are trying to understand, arguing that "people invent and create their organisations and communities through conversation about who they are (identity) and what they desire (ideals)" (Ludema and Fry, 2008: 291). The inquiry and the specific questions framed therefore become part of an "engine of change" (Bushe 2012: 9), helping to achieve positive outcomes for research subjects alongside actionable knowledge for researchers. In UK public policy settings, appreciative techniques have been closely associated with asset-based theory, which advocates focusing on social and community assets (rather than deficits, such as spending cuts or deprivation) in formulating public policy interventions (see for example Foot and Hopkins, 2010; Rowett and Wooding, 2014; The Health Foundation, 2015).

From an appreciative perspective, there was an inherent risk to the research subjects participating in this study, in that dwelling on austerity might create a 'deficit'-centred vision of the future which could impact negatively on both individuals and the wider organisation. By contrast, through incorporating an appreciative approach, it was

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theoretically possible to shape the process so that it would deliver positive benefits for research subjects. This idea had ethical and relational attractions for work inside an organisation that was already experiencing considerable stress.

One common critique of appreciative inquiry is that early iterations required a relentless focus on optimism which might become a barrier to adopting a critical perspective. In the late 1990s appreciative inquiry became very strongly associated with the four and five 'D' models (see Bushe 2011 and 2012 for a history of development.) A very brief summary is included in Box 8.1 below:

Commented [RD8]: Please provide full reference: Bushe, G.R. (2011) Appreciative inquiry: Theory and critique. In Boje, D., Burnes, B. and Hassard, J. (eds.) *The Routledge Companion To Organizational Change* (pp. 87-103).Oxford, UK: Routledge.

Box 8.1<en>Appreciative Inquiry: the 5 Ds

Define: agreeing a positive focus for the inquiry.
Discover: drawing out positive experiences and gifts – the best of what is – including common themes about 'what works' and what can be built upon.
Dream: what might be? Creating a shared vision of the future, presented in a series of 'provocative propositions' that have to be affirmative, challenging, innovative and based on real experiences.
Design: exploring how the ideal vision can be created.
Deliver: planning sustainable actions to deliver the dream.

However, recent methodological developments have seen a more nuanced emphasis on 'generative' inquiry rather than positivity, and a greater willingness to explore the learning potential inherent in the 'light and shadow' encountered within practice (Bushe, 2012; Johnson, 2013). In particular Johnson (2013) shows that by acknowledging challenging or difficult situations it is possible to incorporate emotions and contexts that would not be necessarily seen as 'positive' and draw strength and inspiration from re-framing them as stories of identity, resilience, and recovery. This flexibility can help with acknowledging critical perspectives, improving the technique's applicability to organisations under stress.

In the context of relational research into challenging and politically sensitive situations (such as governance under conditions of austerity) appreciative inquiry

therefore provided a means to negotiate potential tensions arising from critical and relational elements of inquiry, whilst generating positive outcomes for the research subject. It moved away from the 'problem-solving' orientation of action-research towards identifying systemic sources of organisational strength and resilience which can promote 'flourishing' (Bushe, 2012). The intention was that this orientation could assist with building trust and acceptance for research findings, mitigate negative impacts arising from the research process, and potentially provide new inspiration to address the challenges of austerity.

The research design, based on a single exploratory and embedded case study, was shaped and agreed in conversation with project sponsors, with support given by the council for accessing key sources of information. The project had academic goals (answering core research questions concerning the austerity puzzle) and practical outputs, including fieldwork reports and presentations. Methods of data collection included document review, interviews, and collaborative workshops with frontline staff and participant observation. The research strategy incorporated generative principles rather than the full 5 Ds method, as it was felt that a mechanistic application of the model might negate the experiences of austerity experienced by research participants. In practice this meant encouraging interviewees and workshop participants to reflect on positive, as well as negative changes under austerity, together with examples of resilience, innovation and success. Whilst interviews and workshops acknowledged areas of work that had ceased or deteriorated, they also looked for strengths and aspirations.

Tensions in roles and relationships, and the benefits of appreciative inquiry

Despite the lack of focus on potential tensions in the research brief, there was from the inception of the project an implicit challenge to hold together critical and relational perspectives. Relationally, it helped that I was in a strong position to understand austerity, having directly experienced its effects. I was also familiar with the history of the organisation and fluent in local acronyms, comfortably part of the 'epistemic community' of local government officers. Practically, for the purposes of the research,

I was embedded with the council's policy team, provided with access to IT facilities, email and telephone, a staff pass and access to meeting rooms.

In one sense this 'insider status' was an advantage for an action research, facilitating research access, and enabling informed conversations. However, I also found that as the research unfolded there were expectations from academic and local authority sponsors for me to take a 'monological' approach as an external observer, rather than the dialogical approach implied by the action research strategy. This highlighted my position on the boundary of two organisations: not fully embedded in my local authority setting, but equally, (as a PhD student) not yet established as an authoritative and independent academic voice.

Huzzard, Ahlberg and Eckman (2010) suggest that it is important to actively recognise and manage the boundary role of the researcher. They draw a distinction between researchers acting as a neutral, passive "boundary object" (an object which lives in multiple social worlds, with different identities in each) and an alternative conception of the researcher as active boundary subject, mediating across professional and organisational perspectives to actively construct collaboration (p. 293), and "shape alternative interpretations of reality" (p. 307). They also emphasise that the boundary subject's role is inherently political and connected to power relations between the researcher and the other participants (p. 310).

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With this in mind, I found myself identifying more with the role of 'boundary object' than 'boundary subject', attempting to fulfil divergent roles and identities, but finding limited opportunity to construct collaboration. At that time, many posts across the organisation which had been connected with policy and research were being deleted, with considerable staff 'churn'. As one middle manager put it, there were "loads of redundancies, lots of people have gone, lots of change, lots of reorganisation…everything is in flux pretty much the whole time" (Interview Middle Manager, 2014). In this context I sometimes felt that I should provide an 'extra pair of hands' to complement the shrinking policy team where I was embedded (although as the practitioner reflection shows, this was my interpretation of the circumstances, rather than an explicit expectation). However, the pressures and timescales of the PhD meant that I could not participate directly in the work of the policy unit, limiting engagement

in their day-to-day work to occasional contributions to requests for information, or presenting research in development for critique and feedback.

I was also conscious of being consulted on matters connected with the University as a whole, acting in an (unsought, and inadequately fulfilled) role as an unofficial ambassador for the University. There were sometimes awkward conversations, in the first year, as mutual expectations of obligations were explored and moderated – for instance how much time should I spend on site? How much access to facilities such as photocopying was acceptable? In terms of power relationships, I was treated on a par with other policy officers, but also seen as external to the organisational hierarchy of managers, senior managers, and councillors, with whom access had to be carefully negotiated. Thus, although the theory of relational research implied a blurring of the lines between researcher and research object, in practice the context and dynamics of the situation meant that separation and difference was frequently evoked. I was balanced uncomfortably on an organisational borderline, and my role sometimes seemed to be more about producing different types of knowledge for consumption or application within specific institutional constraints (which were either academic and practice related) rather than co-creating critical inquiry.

The appreciative basis of the project provided some initial benefits to deal with this separation, helping to build collaboration, allowing deeper exploration of emergent research themes, and strengthening the validity of the research. For example, appreciative questions offered a way of building trust with individual interviewees and workshop participants by eliciting positive stories of creativity and hope. In a workshop session for frontline staff, combining appreciative exercises with more traditional critical perspectives, there was a notable change in energy and engagement, between the 'shadow' focused parts of the session, focusing on challenges and concerns faced by teams; and more 'positive' parts of the session, which explored questions such as 'what do you believe is the single most important thing that positively influences this area?' and 'tell a story of how you involved others in bringing about real and sustainable change. When was it? What were the practical actions? What qualities helped you to respond?' Observations about organisational strengths were also well-received as part

of an initial fieldwork report, for their value in assisting the council with balancing the challenges it faced.

Although these benefits were mainly relational, the process of building a stronger relationship also enhanced the capacity for criticality, as effective and transparent communications meant that the research could explore critical issues in greater depth. For example, the initial document review and participant observation uncovered evidence about the impacts of a new council commissioning system on the local voluntary and community sector, which had not been anticipated at the research design stage. These issues were subsequently pursued in further detail, with the agreement of project sponsors. Furthermore, although it may appear counter-intuitive to suggest that an appreciative perspective increased critical awareness, it arguably offered a mechanism to offset my own potential negative bias concerning impacts of austerity. A conscious emphasis on drawing out positive stories emerging from the stress of austerity acted as a counter-balance to my own innate negativity about the effects of the spending cuts.

Appreciative inquiry also helped in addressing the specific research challenge of the austerity puzzle (understanding how services were maintained despite the cuts) by enabling the research to acknowledge the local problems created by austerity, whilst enhancing understanding of how they were being mitigated. This helped to close the gap in literature between critical academic perspectives (which tended to focus on historic service provision, and concentrate on what was being lost) (for instance Davies and Pill, 2012; Davies, 2016; Levitas, 2012) and more practical practitioner perspectives evident on the ground, which focused on pragmatic approaches to moving forward with available resources (e.g. Lyall and Bua, 2015).

Finally, a strong relationship between the researcher and research sponsors was essential to the critical analysis and validation of research findings, which were checked for resonance, both through informal 'feedback' conversations with project sponsors and formal presentations to team members and managers. Following Lather's (2003) principles for establishing validity in qualitative research, this helped to create 'face' validity for fieldwork reports, although maintaining dialogue became more challenging

in relation to the production of academic research products, as busy practitioners had limited time for engagement with academic debate.

However, there were also tensions, compromise, and limitations within this research strategy, particularly in relation to its ability to claim the 'catalytic validity' that arises from transformational impact, and it is to this challenge that the chapter now turns.

Negotiating the 'landscape of antagonism': encounters with structures, cultures and practices in a local authority under austerity

The central dilemma as the study unfolded, lay in responding critically and relationally to two different viewpoints of the local authority which emerged from the research, consistent with Newman's concept of 'landscapes of antagonism' (Newman, 2013). On one hand the local authority was structurally a 'victim' of austerity itself, having been subject to a disproportionately high level of spending cuts which were driving bitter compromise in long-established political ideals, as well as increased workloads and growing levels of staff stress. One elected member spoke of frustration in being unable to prevent welfare reforms and seeing diminishing opportunities to protect the poorest: "there's charging as well, categories of social care that are sliding away from us, that hurts. Also help for the homeless, the loss of 'Supporting People [a homelessness prevention fund]" (Interview Elected Member, 2014). At the same time, the authority was not powerless, and there was a cultural undercurrent of overt and covert resistance in some quarters: epitomised in the repeated statement 'the whole city isn't just lying down and taking it' (Interview Housing Manager, 2014; Middle Manager, 2014). Wherever possible in line with its political aims and ideals, the Council was deploying multiple measures to mitigate the impact of cuts: "people think local government has these edicts they have to work to, but if they are not locally appropriate you can find a way around them. It's a huge misconception, we have more power than people believe" (Interview Council Director 1, 2014). Yet on the other hand, it was clear that the local authority was also implicated in implementing austerity, through the transmission of

spending cuts and supporting practices which impacted upon citizens and other service delivery partners. The clearest example of this was in relation to the aforementioned revised funding system for the voluntary and community sector, which had replaced the preceding grant-based regime with a competitive bid-based system. Although the council had little choice under English law over balancing its budget, some officers and members saw the pressure of austerity as a positive opportunity to embed neoliberal practices such as contracting and commercialisation. One Director described the promise of additional income from commercialised services as a 'Trojan horse', to engage councillors in 'sensible' discussion:

> I think we need to move towards having a greater focus on commissioning, enabling the role of the business sector and voluntary sector. We need to be less about direct delivery (and I don't mean this in any political ideology sense, it's just reality) and thinking more about early intervention so that we change – lessen – future demand.
>
> (Interview Council Director 2, 2014)

Thus, the 'landscape of antagonism' was reflected in the contrasting ways that individuals exercised their agency across fissures in ideology which had been opened and deepened under the stress of austerity. (Further discussion of the differing agential responses to institutional change under austerity in this case can be found in Gardner 2017). There was not a single hegemonic structure and set of power relations governing responses to austerity, so much as a multitude of actors attempting to implement differing ideological and practical responses, with certain tactics becoming more politically palatable as spending cuts accumulated over time.

This meant that although the adoption of the appreciative inquiry approach had assisted with establishing relationships, there were competing and shifting interpretations of what would actually constitute 'organisational flourishing'. Essentially this point was politically contested, and any critical messages were likely to fall on one side or another of an ideological conflict, creating a dilemma for the researcher on what constituted transformative change, given the differing perspectives of interviewees. There was also a debate on how best to balance inquiry into generative,

strength-related topics with the need to highlight points of internal conflict. Was the priority to protect organisational systems (and core action research relationships) by softening critical messages; or to provide an external challenge to the organisation, producing conclusions which might be unpalatable to some but potentially carried greater insight?

These tensions impacted both on the operationalisation of the research and the presentation and communication of results. From a practical perspective, there was a tension between serving the requirements of a time-poor workforce and gathering the data required for critical reflection. For example, when planning the two collaborative workshops with multi-agency teams described earlier, it became apparent that research participants were more interested in the applicability of the workshop for organisational development purposes (in this case, informing future team and neighbourhood planning) than the need to understand from a critical perspective how local partnerships were experiencing and responding to austerity. Team leaders decided that they could spare, at maximum, 90 minutes, which acted as a constraint on critical discussion, preventing exploration of some experiences of austerity raised by participants. Although the workshops produced material which was useful and relevant to organisational planning, the teams involved would also have needed to reflect further on findings in order to integrate them into future strategies, which limited the impact of the exercise (one might link this problem to Argyris and Schön's (1996) conception of single versus double-loop learning). Therefore, there was some limitation in the 'actionable' knowledge created for both relational and critical research aims.

Interviews were more successful in eliciting critical information, albeit because they were sometimes instrumentalised by research respondents as a means of engaging in their own negotiation of power-play (see Henderson and Bynner's chapter for a discussion of 'benign instrumentalisation'). Sometimes respondents appeared to be using the research as a means to convey messages which would be difficult to communicate face-to-face, reflecting the reality of power dynamics between the council and partners. One senior partner who was frequently in public conflict with council leadership took the opportunity to emphasise his respect for the leader of the council, whilst also promoting radical transformative change. Meanwhile a policy officer from

a housing organisation that had struggled under the new voluntary sector grant regime was positive about her direct connection with the council, but keen to send a message that communications had suffered: in her terms "something is not quite working" (Interview Council Partner, 2014). In bearing these messages, the research became a valuable medium for communicating the "unsaid", but this instrumentalisation also highlighted the extent to which the research and researcher were incorporated within institutional power-play.

There was also critical reflection from within the council, partly due to the high level of staff churn in the organisation, prompted by the extensive re-organisation following the spending cuts. Senior managers who were either recent ex-employees, or about to move on, were generous in both their time and personal opinions, and open about policy successes and failures (perhaps more than they would have been had they been remaining with their employer). In these cases, the interview process was often used by participants as a final means of delivering personal impact, by recording frank accounts of their experience. In some ways this strengthened the critical messages of the research, but again reflected a wide range of consciously and unconsciously-held ideological perspectives.

Whilst a number of strong critical themes started to emerge, the task of interpreting and conveying these messages was made more complex by the rapid staff churn. By the time fieldwork was completed, the three layers of management that had originally co-designed and sponsored the project had all moved on. Despite the steps I had taken to collaboratively establish the project focus, and validate early findings (through conversations with the original project sponsors) there was some challenge to the focus of the research when findings were presented. This came principally from two senior managers who had not originally been involved in designing and sponsoring the research, but had formulated some of the institutional processes critiqued in interviews. These individuals were understandably keen to justify their position and contest certain findings and recommendations. Although no attempt was made to amend the conclusions in the final report and subsequent thesis, it is possible that communication and discussion of the most challenging conclusions was limited by this point of contention.

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No thanks, because it is talking about the lack of impact on the argument I made in the subsequent PhD thesis, not this chapter.

The local authority was also overtly politically led, with relatively stable policy agendas that had in many cases been developed over a long period of time. Whilst it was clear that there were a range of different views emerging (even within the Council's cabinet) on specific policy questions, critical viewpoints from officers were unlikely to sway political opinion in the short term (one director even went as far as to describe certain policy proposals as 'career limiting' red lines which could not be crossed) (Interview Council Director 2, 2014). Furthermore, the council was also subject to wider forces for ongoing change, such as the inception of devolution policies. These demanding new agendas, coupled with the imperatives of the budget cycle, clamoured for the scarce attention of policy professionals and further detracted from attempts at organisational review and reflection.

Reflexivity, impact and change

Given the conflicting discourses and pressures within the council's 'landscape of antagonism', it is perhaps understandable that the ideal of the research as a catalyst for transformation was only realised in modest ways. These included the appreciation interviewees showed for the opportunity to reflect on recent history, as well as their hopes and fears for the future. A key manager insisted that findings were important, and ensured they were conveyed to senior officials, even when she anticipated that some messages would be difficult for the individuals concerned to hear. But overall, rather than providing a decisive critical intervention, the main achievement of the research was to hold up a mirror to demonstrate where and how policies were shifting, subtly highlighting how this was – or was not – in line with the council's previous policies and democratically mandated agenda.

The challenges with achieving acceptance for research findings also highlighted the institutional and political constraints of the boundary role, as identified by Huzzard, Ahlberg, and Ekman (2010). I was institutionally situated by externality to the council hierarchy, and my status as a doctoral student. Access and opportunities to influence key stakeholders could be denied by gatekeepers. For example, although one important stakeholder had agreed in principle to be interviewed to help test the findings, seven appointments were cancelled, sometimes at very short notice, and eventually the

research was completed without that interview. As a student there was a felt need on my part to build credibility, and the ambiguous position of being neither the 'insider' nor a 'fully-fledged' academic perhaps impacted on my confidence to engage key stakeholders. I was increasingly aware of my boundary position as sponsors from the council left the organisation. Rather than the active role of boundary subject, then, shaping inter-organisational relations (Huzzard *et al*., 2010) my role was more akin to that of a boundary object: being neutral, recognised by both academics and practitioners, but part of a much wider landscape of conflict and interaction, which sometimes shaped the way I was perceived by either side.

Conclusions

The research question at the start of this chapter questioned the implications of conducting research which aims to be simultaneously critical, relational, and transformative in a fluid context such as austerity, and how researchers might manage resulting tensions.

This case study shows that there is no sharp division between critical and relational aims, finding that attention to relational issues could also enhance critical objectives. However, consensus on what is deemed 'critical' 'relational' and 'transformative' may not be present in large institutions under financial pressure, and the ability to pursue these goals in parallel can also vary according to the researcher's position and circumstances.

From a relational perspective the combination of action research and appreciative inquiry assisted with establishing principles for collaboration, built trust and energy for engagement, and helped in closing a gap between critical perspectives and practice, by encouraging reflection on the 'survive and thrive' factors that were coming to the fore as spending cuts impacted the organisation. In turn, the practice of building relational strength helped to elicit constructive critical reflection, assisted with validating messages arising from the research (in some cases) and offset potential negatives. Appreciative inquiry, in summary, was much more than 'lipstick' for the 'pig' of austerity. It helped to make critical and relational research aims objectives complementary, holding them in productive, rather than negative tension.

However, this research was not transformative, at least in relation to the institutional setting where it took place, and probably the starting point for this research meant that the study was never destined to deliver that goal. The genesis of the research within the large and complex institutional context of the local authority, without enduring sponsorship to provide 'sanction and sanctuary' for the work (see Henderson and Bynner's chapter), and amidst conflicting ideological undercurrents, meant that it was always going to be challenging to have critical viewpoints accepted and acted upon.

One recommendation for future practice might be that researcher and host organisation reflect at the outset on the role and position of the researcher, including the tensions which might emerge through the action research process and expectations around the degree of critical challenge raised by the research. Perhaps we as action researchers need to emphasise that in complex and contested settings, the contribution we bring from a dialogical perspective is not necessarily to be a critical purveyor of truth, able to judge what is (and is not) to be challenged, but to present our findings clearly situated in the context of the myriad influences shaping their production and communication. In doing this, we should particularly reflect upon different potential interpretations of 'transformation' within the institutional setting. This conversation may need to be repeated at several points in the research journey in order to ensure that opportunities for learning are maximised.

We also need to consider the role of the researcher working across organisational boundaries and the degree of transformational influence one might expect to exercise in a highly institutionalised context already subject to strong (and contending) forces seeking to direct the paths of change. In a political context, in particular, we frequently deal with 'landscapes of antagonism', where the 'correct' goals for the exercise of power are themselves unclear and contested. As researchers we offer one perspective among many, akin to what Schdaimah and Stahl call a 'polyphony of voices'. Within this polyphony some discord needs to be expected, and engaging with that conflict – rather than just seeking to mitigate it – can enhance collaborative practice (Schdaimah and Stahl, 2012: 124). However, the extent of that conflict engagement, and its eventual impact will be dictated by issues of power and position. Unless specifically briefed and

Commented [RD11]: Please provide full reference Schdaimah, C and Stahl R. (2012) 'Power and conflict in collaborative research' in Flyvbjerg B, Landman T, and Schram S (eds), *Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 15–26.

empowered to deliver change, we are perhaps more realistic to offer our research within the spirit of 'reflective thought aimed at action' (Schram, 2012: 19).

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Notes

1 'Lipstick on a pig' is a colloquial term implying that a particular topic or subject has been artificially enhanced in a way that is unconvincing. The phrase caused controversy in the US presidential campaign of 2008 when Barack Obama used it in a speech to criticise the policies of Republican rivals (the 'pig' was taken as an oblique reference to republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin).

2 Revenue spending power represents UK Government's assessment of funding available to each local authority to spend on core services. It rests on a contested formula, but is recognised by the National Audit Office as the most reliable means for wider financial comparison (NAO, 2014b, 24)

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