An actor-relational approach on new forms of collaboration between research, practice, service users and education

Ilse Julkunen

Helsinki University, Department of social research, social work

Background and purpose:
Much attention has focused on the disconnection between research, practice, and policies, especially the limited use of research findings by practitioners and policy makers who fail to see how research can contribute to the development of practices and policies. In welfare policies and social work it is not only a question of studying how things have evolved or how they work but also how they can be improved and under what conditions in order to ensure improvements that can also impact the space, the affected actors and their networks. By involving the relational complexities within practice and by strengthening the relational and organizational linkage between research and practice the relevance of research may transcend the process of generalizing and disseminating research findings.

Methods:
The study draws on the works of Luuk Boelens and his actor-relational approach (ARA) based on a relational understanding of space and derived from an intensive interchange between practice and theory building up the knowledge base in planning where different actors, as well as the civil community, are integrated into a research design. In this analysis, the theoretical approach developed by Boelens is used to analyze two cases of knowledge development in welfare services. The focus is on the relational elements in terms of how issues are identified, problematized, interpreted, and anchored within a research process. The two selected cases represent university based research that focus on reinforcing the use of knowledge as the basis for practical application. They were selected to illustrate and scrutinize the importance of identifying focal actors involved in the issue, the importance of negotiations between different levels of actors throughout the research process and the democratic anchoring of the thematic issue.

Results:
The outline of the actor relational approach will be presented, including a typology of the two cases of how problems and focal actors are identified and how they are anchored in the knowledge development process. The analysis show that more attention is needed to identify potential conflicts between the different actors involved in knowledge development. Dialogues and negotiations between different actors throughout the process enhance knowledge building and changes at the individual and organizational level. Reflexive analysis and deliberation about