

Key Concepts in Processes of Sustainability Transformation

REFLEXIVITY

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DEFINITION

Practice of individual or collective self-observation aimed at becoming aware of patterns of thought, behaviour and underlying belief systems that drive these. The aim of engaging in a reflexive process is often to become more aware of the underlying patterns driving behaviour and thoughts, in order to make these a conscious choice rather than an automatic response –thus increasing personal or group agency.

CONTEXT

Reflexivity has been extensively theorised within the sociology of knowledge, anthropology, psychology and education. In the field of epistemology, scholars have used reflexivity as a concept to help articulate the process of knowledge creation, as well as to theorise the relationship between researcher and researched. Successive definitions of reflexivity within different periods and disciplines thus provide an insight to how our perspective of knowledge has evolved.

Giddens (1991) explored the capacity for self-reflexivity and therefore emancipation from cultural conditioning as marking the shift between modernity and post-modernity. Bourdieu's reflexive sociology (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), considers that in order to have access to social reality, one must become explicitly aware of one's position within society and culture. In the field of transformative learning theory, we can identify different schools of thought by the focus that authors play on individual or collective reflexivity. For Freire (1970), reflexivity is realised as a group process of critical inquiry, which is realised through "cultural circles". Freire defines reflexivity as "Praxis", in which action and reflection are unified through a dialectical relationship. In contrast, Mezirow's theory of transformation (1981) studied the role of the individual as the agent of reflexive process, by examining his/her meaning structures. For this, he introduced the concepts of critical reflection on assumptions (CRA) and critical self-reflection (CRSA), where the individual has to critically assess his/her unexamined meaning structures and how they have been constructed (Mezirow 1998). He also introduced

three types of reflexivity (on content, process, and premises) with only the latter having deep transformative power (Kitchenham 2008). Reflexivity is also an integral part of transdisciplinary research practice (Jahn et al. 2012). This calls for a critical research approach, that also investigates the research approach itself, because "[a] scientific practice that fails to question itself does not, properly speaking, know what it does" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 236).

RELEVANCE

Reflexivity plays a major role in transformation processes, as the concept helps us to articulate how individuals and collectives engage in processes of change. As discussed above, this process is closely linked to theories of transformative learning, and further incorporation of these for understanding sustainability transformations offers exciting prospects. One of these avenues is the re-configuration of the role of the researcher, particularly in inter- and transdisciplinary settings. Wittmayer and Schäpke (2014) for instance, differentiate between a reflective researcher based on a positivist ontology, in which the researcher positions his- or herself as outside the object of study; and a reflexive researcher, based on a critical-post-normal ontology in which the researcher sees his- or herself as part of the object of study.

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