

## The double bind of social innovation

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### Urban Studies

DOI:

[10.1177/0042098016682935](https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098016682935)

Published: 01/12/2017

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

*Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):*

Bartels, K. (2017). The double bind of social innovation: Relational dynamics of change and resistance in neighbourhood governance. *Urban Studies*, 54(16), 3789-3805.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098016682935>

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**The double bind of social innovation: Relational dynamics of change and resistance in neighbourhood governance**

Journal:	<i>Urban Studies</i>
Manuscript ID	CUS-225-16-03.R2
Manuscript Type:	Article
<b>Discipline: Please select a keyword from the following list that best describes the discipline used in your paper.:	Public Administration
World Region: Please select the region(s) that best reflect the focus of your paper. Names of individual countries, cities & economic groupings should appear in the title where appropriate.:	Western Europe, North America
Major Topic: Please identify up to two topics that best identify the subject of your article.:	Neighbourhood, Governance
Please supply a further 5 relevant keywords in the fields below.:	social innovation, relationality, practice, urban governance, communication

## The double bind of social innovation: Relational dynamics of change and resistance in neighbourhood governance

### Abstract

While current discourse promotes social innovation as a normative good, in practice it is highly contested by institutionalised ways of thinking, acting and organising. Concurrently stimulating and resisting innovation creates a 'double bind' of conflicting communicative signals that weaken capacities for joint sense making and sustainable change. I develop a meta-theoretical framework that explains what is involved in these relational dynamics of change and resistance, how these can be assessed and improved, and why the double bind both necessitates and inhibits substantive change. Analysing relational dynamics in a case of neighbourhood governance in Amsterdam, I argue that social innovators should be prepared to constructively confront rationalistic evaluation, defensiveness, and experiential detachment while institutional actors should welcome fundamental relational transformations of hierarchical and competitive dynamics institutionalised in urban governance.

**Keywords:** social innovation; neighbourhood governance; relationality; practice; communication

## Introduction

Amidst massive budget cuts and austerity policies, we are witnessing a fundamental transition in discourse on the affordability of, and responsibility for public well-being. Most notably, the British coalition government advocated a *Big Society* in which citizens “don’t always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities” (Cameron, 2010). Social innovation is depicted as a “normative good” (Osborne and Brown, 2011) for meeting societal needs and transforming Western governance systems. Over the past years, an abundance of initiatives already emerged, mainly in urban settings, generating new services and practices which are more effective, inclusive and empowering than institutionalised ways of working (Evers et al., 2014; Moulaert et al., 2013; Drewe et al., 2008; Nicholls et al., 2015).

However, this mainstreaming of the social dimension of innovation is usually not accompanied by recognition of the ways in which it is constantly contested, challenged and resisted in practice. For a variety of reasons, institutionalised ways of thinking, acting and organising not only prove difficult to change but actively impede social innovation (Cels et al., 2012; Evers et al., 2014; Moulaert et al., 2007). Building on earlier analyses of this double sided nature of social innovation (e.g., Swyngedouw, 2005), I propose that social innovation faces a *double bind* (Bateson et al., 1956) of being concurrently encouraged and discouraged to do things differently. As these conflicting communicative signals weaken capacities for joint sense making and sustainable change, the question arises how the resultant relational dynamics of change and resistance are and should be navigated.

Following calls for a meta-theoretical framework to analyse relational dynamics (Jessop et al., 2013), I identify three dimensions of relationships in social, democratic and public sector innovation (negotiating multiple meanings, confronting hegemonic institutions, and embedding in multi-scalar systems) and elaborate three evaluative criteria for assessing and improving these (dynamic becoming, relationality and holism). Based on relational process ontology (Follett, 1919, 1924, 1934; Stout and Love, 2015), I argue that relational dynamics become more productive when stakeholders seek to integrate differences through inclusive, emergent and appreciative processes of co-creating rather than imposing dominant views or sustaining fixed positions through (counter-)hegemonic practices of hierarchy and competition. I then analyse the relational dynamics of neighbourhood governance in Amsterdam (the Netherlands) based on action research conducted with *Neighbourhood Practice Teams* (Buurt Praktijk Teams – BPTs). BPTs successfully enabled residents to

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3 transform their neighbourhoods by “doing what’s necessary”, but, despite much appraisal,  
4 support and conducive policy discourse, continue to face fundamental resistances to their  
5 innovation. Analysing narratives of rationalistic evaluation, defensiveness and experiential  
6 detachment, I reveal how the double bind of social innovation can be productively confronted  
7 through integrative dynamics but also necessitates fundamental relational transformations of  
8 hierarchical and competitive dynamics institutionalised in urban governance.  
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### 13 14 15 **The double bind of social innovation**

16 Over the past two decades, social innovation has gradually become appropriated and  
17 mainstreamed in policy discourse as a key tool for governance reform (Jessop et al., 2013:  
18 116-121). As policies started to recognise the social dimension of innovation, it was  
19 especially adopted in urban governance to foster integrated area development and combat  
20 social exclusion in local spaces and public welfare (Moulaert et al., 2005). It aims, alongside  
21 *public sector innovation* (Osborne and Brown, 2011), to satisfy unmet social needs and  
22 generate better service provision (product dimension) while, similar to *democratic innovation*  
23 (Smith, 2009), also striving to enhance capacities and resources for participation and  
24 inclusion in decision-making (empowerment dimension). A distinctive trait of *social*  
25 *innovation* is to achieve these aims by transforming social relationships (process dimension);  
26 connecting “societal wellbeing and progress with the shape and organization of society –  
27 relations of power, solidarity and affect between individuals and social groups” (Moulaert et  
28 al., 2013: 2). However, such substantive transformations are often absent as neo-liberal  
29 discourse promotes more reductive forms of social innovation instrumental to its welfare state  
30 reform agenda (Moulaert et al., 2007; Massey and Johnston-Miller, 2014; Swyngedouw,  
31 2005).  
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43 Since the financial and economic crisis, a fundamental shift occurred in discourse on  
44 the affordability of, and responsibility for public welfare. Traditional welfare state  
45 arrangements are retrenched in favour of greater individual responsibility, private and  
46 voluntary service provision and community self-organisation (Hurenkamp et al., 2012;  
47 Verhoeven and Tonkens, 2013). As governments carry out austerity policies due to expensive  
48 bank bailouts, soaring sovereign debts, unprecedented economic recession and rocketing  
49 unemployment, policies promote a ‘neoliberal roll-back governmentality’ (Peck and Tickell,  
50 2002) that nudges social entrepreneurs, exemplary practitioners and communities toward  
51 social innovation. As Cels et al. (2012: 220) put it, there is now “an unprecedented need to  
52 see how service levels can be maintained with less money ... [and] how to be more effective,  
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3 efficient, and equitable.” Social innovation has become “crucial to the core business of  
4 governments[,] ... a last hope to deal with widening fiscal gaps”. Hence, social innovation is  
5 depicted as a *normative good* (Osborne and Brown, 2011) throughout the Western world  
6 (Murray et al., 2010; Evers et al., 2014; Massey and Johnston-Miller, 2014; Moulaert et al.,  
7 2013; Nicholls et al., 2015).

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11 One could interpret this discursive shift as welcome recognition for the potential of  
12 social innovation and much needed widening of conditions conducive to substantive change.  
13 Indeed, there is a rich collection of new services and grass-roots initiatives, the majority of  
14 which emerge in cities as problems with social exclusion and deprivation as well as potentials  
15 for greater connectivity and empowerment are most tangible and pressing in urban fabrics  
16 (Moulaert et al., 2013; Evers et al., 2014; Cels et al., 2012; Moulaert et al., 2005; Moulaert et  
17 al., 2007; Drewe et al., 2008; Nicholls et al., 2015). For example, Evers et al. (2014)  
18 showcase 77 innovations from 20 European cities, including citizen initiatives providing  
19 assistance to immigrants and public agency and voluntary sector-driven projects of social  
20 housing teams for vulnerable groups. These innovations fundamentally challenge  
21 conventional responsibilities for local well-being engrained in social relationships and urban  
22 governance institutions.

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31 However, systemic transformations of social relationships and urban governance  
32 institutions are hardly achieved (Cels et al., 2012; Evers et al., 2014; Mendes et al., 2012;  
33 Moulaert et al., 2013; Moulaert et al., 2005; Moulaert et al., 2007). All too often, (local)  
34 governments do not provide conditions conducive for innovations to emerge, thrive and have  
35 a sustainable impact. Existing power relations, institutional configurations and historical  
36 trajectories not only prove difficult to change but also actively inhibit innovation. As  
37 innovations are always disruptive of what is there, their nature, value and outcomes are  
38 inevitably contested. A common finding is that social innovators, besides concentrating on  
39 the people, issues and solutions they care about, also need to devote a lot of time and energy  
40 to transforming urban governance systems. Therefore, “one of the enduring questions ...  
41 concerns the relationship between the socially innovative actions ‘on the ground’ and the  
42 broader institutional and policy environment in which such actions happen” (MacCallum,  
43 2013: 343).

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53 Several studies already highlighted the double-sided nature of social innovation.  
54 Swyngedouw (2005) explored the contradictory tendencies involved in the technologies and  
55 tactics of governance-beyond-the-state. While on the one hand it creates opportunities for  
56 democratic, inclusive and transformative grass-roots initiatives to emerge and influence  
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3 governance systems, on the other hand technocratic and authoritarian governing practices  
4 often instrumentalise, depoliticise and disempower innovations (Pradel et al., 2013; Novy and  
5 Hammer, 2007; De Wilde, 2015). Wagenaar and Specht (2010: 20-21) call this a “double  
6 participation paradox”: officials invite citizens to participate in governance but then create all  
7 kinds of barriers and resistances which both greatly frustrate new initiatives and inhibit the  
8 reforms they set out to achieve. Hence, social innovators are encouraged to develop new  
9 ways of thinking, acting and organising but are constantly contested, challenged and resisted  
10 while doing so.

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16 This article suggests that these conflicting pressures to both transform and conform to  
17 existing institutions generate a *double bind*. Commonly known as a situation in which  
18 contradictory demands make it impossible to avoid unfavourable results, ‘double bind’ is a  
19 term developed in psychotherapy to explain how schizophrenia can result from systemic  
20 exposure to situations and relationships which produce conflicting communicative signals  
21 (Bateson et al., 1956; Bateson et al., 1963). A double bind not only triggers defensive  
22 responses in the absence of an unambiguous notion of the right thing to do, but more  
23 fundamentally debilitates meta-communicative capacities to interpret what others mean,  
24 express intentions and break through habitual patterns. Thus, social innovations are in more  
25 than a challenging or paradoxical situation: they are damned if they give in to institutional  
26 pressures (which means legitimising and sustaining the formal institutional order at the  
27 expense of their innovation) and damned if they do not (which means challenging existing  
28 institutions and underlying worldviews at the expense of institutional actors’ willingness to  
29 accept their innovation). Their communicative practices are inevitably fraught with  
30 ambiguity, defensiveness, and misunderstanding, putting great strain on their ability to  
31 transform social relationships and governance institutions.

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43 As this double bind seems insurmountable, we need to look into how it is practically  
44 enacted and can be meaningfully navigated (González and Healey, 2005; see also Wagenaar,  
45 2014b). Rather than sanguine descriptions of transformative successes or critical analyses of  
46 contingent complexities, this requires a meta-theoretical framework that focuses on the  
47 relationships through which social innovations are enacted (Jessop et al., 2013) and clarifies  
48 evaluative criteria for assessing and improving their dynamics of change and resistance.  
49 While some argue that a scarcity in research inhibits such systematic definition and  
50 assessment (Massey and Johnston-Miller, 2014), the next section constructs a meta-  
51 theoretical framework by building on the burgeoning literatures of social, democratic and  
52 public sector innovation.

### Relational dynamics of change and resistance

Jessop et al. (2013) propose to understand social innovation through an *ontology of social transformation*, “an ontological perspective premised on the social, spatio-temporal, and substantive contingency of social relations and on the correlative human capacities for social transformation” (112). This meta-theoretical approach is supported by calls to conceptualise and examine the relational dynamics through which social innovation takes shape (González and Healey, 2005; Forester, 2014; Hillier, 2013). In line with practice theory (Wenger, 1998; Cook and Wagenaar, 2012; Nicolini, 2012), the idea is to move toward more interactive and dynamic analyses of micro-practices enacted in-between stakeholders implicated in complex situations and embedded in dense webs of contingent interconnections. It is important to note this involves both an empirical focus on relationships (as enacted in specific practices) and a normative evaluation of relational dynamics (the quality of interpersonal processes). That is, the same activities can be conducted in fundamentally different ways depending on the underlying characteristics of their interpersonal dynamics (Stout, 2012).

Relational process ontology (Follett, 1919, 1924, 1934; Stout and Staton, 2011; Stout, 2012; Stout and Love, 2015) helps to clarify evaluative criteria for relational dynamics based on its ontological principles of dynamic becoming, holism, relationality and co-creation. In brief, relational process ontology sees the world in terms of the innate social bonds between people and the dynamic interplay of all interrelated elements in their environment. By assuming that “reality is in the relating, in the activity-between” (Follett, 1924: 54), we can evaluate social innovation in terms of the specific interpersonal practices that foster or inhibit the quality of its ongoing reciprocal interaction. Adopting these philosophical assumptions can guide us toward more productive relationships and transformative change—much in contrast to the instrumental relationships and marginal change fostered by the static, atomistic, and dualistic principles of the neo-liberal paradigm (Jessop et al., 2013).

To explain the resultant meta-theoretical framework, I will discuss three practices of social innovation—negotiating multiple meanings, confronting hegemonic institutions and embedding in multi-scalar systems—that constitute the dimensions of an empirical focus on its relationships. I will elaborate each of these with relational process ontology principles to clarify the evaluative criteria for assessing and improving relational dynamics of change and resistance.

First, social innovation is characterised by a multiplicity of forms, conflicting meanings and discursive and institutional contexts populated by multiple stakeholders. The literatures on public sector and democratic innovation problematise wrongful images, naïve



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3 assumptions and teleological expectations by revealing many contingent factors, complex  
4 dynamics and unanticipated consequences (Osborne and Brown, 2011; Osborne and Brown,  
5 2005; Osborne and Brown, 2013; Borins, 2001; Bekkers, 2008; Hoppe, 2011; Wagenaar,  
6 2014a; Smith, 2009). Notwithstanding great potential and successful cases, there are usually  
7 strong discrepancies between transformative ambitions and hoped for effects on the one hand  
8 and actual capacities, commitment and change on the other. Innovations can take many  
9 forms, follow different pathways and are strongly context-dependent. Moreover, it is difficult  
10 to get to grips with innovation, both conceptually (Osborne & Brown (2005) e.g. identify 23  
11 definitions) and practically (Bartels (2015) e.g. lists 36 relevant factors). Hence, what social  
12 innovation is and how it works out is articulated, negotiated and contested in-between those  
13 involved.

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21 The ontological principle of dynamic becoming clarifies that social innovation is not a  
22 static and objective thing but a continually evolving process of activities, interpretations and  
23 tensions. Social innovation is never one thing to everyone and will not lead to a single, final  
24 product. While we may be able to discern certain changes and outcomes (*innovation*), these  
25 are only moments in an ongoing developmental process (*innovating*). It “is always unfolding  
26 in a process of becoming” (Stout and Love, 2015: 26) that involves both potentialities and  
27 resistances. This view leads us away from a teleological mapping of factors that either foster  
28 or inhibit innovation toward tracing how all activities, interpretations and tensions bring each  
29 other dynamically into being through “circular response”:

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38 response is always to a relation, the relation between the response and that to which  
39 the response is being made ... My response is not to a crystallized product of the past,  
40 static for the moment of meeting; while I am behaving, the environment is changing  
41 because of my behaving, and my behavior is a response to the new situation which I,  
42 in part, have created (Follett, 1924: 63-64).

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44 In other words, dynamic becoming means that social innovations are constantly shape-  
45 shifting and evolving. Therefore, its relational dynamics should foster recognition of  
46 differences and facilitate new emergent understandings rather than impose static views or  
47 sustain fixed positions (Follett, 2003).

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50 Second, social innovation is enacted in the face of hegemonic institutions and power  
51 relationships. A key lesson of the social and democratic innovation literatures is that  
52 structural power inequalities foster cosmetic reforms and inhibit learning and innovation  
53 (Stout, 2010; Blakeley, 2010; Fuller and Geddes, 2008; Davies, 2009; Headlam and Rowe,  
54 2014; Rowe and Ashworth, 2010; Cels et al., 2012; Forester, 1999; Moulaert et al., 2007;

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3 Novy and Hammer, 2007). The control-oriented, fragmented and power-preserving  
4 institutional organisation of governance systems is often ill-suited, or sometimes even  
5 outright hostile to the informal, emergent and subversive practices through which innovations  
6 emerge and thrive. Public agencies and officials tend to engage in rigid, conservative or  
7 defensive behaviour as they perceive it as a threat to current funding, jobs and status;  
8 disqualification of their good intentions, hard work and accomplishments; or something futile  
9 and temporary with unclear procedures, outcomes and accountability. Moreover, policy  
10 discourse can co-opt innovations into a new moral order of self-government, individual  
11 responsibility and apolitical engagement. So, social innovations have to accommodate  
12 (González and Healey, 2005) or overcome (Novy and Hammer, 2007) institutional  
13 constraints and hegemonic contestations that subtly prioritise institutionalised interests,  
14 routines and power relationships.  
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23 The ontological principle of relationality implies that we do not treat social innovation  
24 as a superior alternative to hegemonic institutions (Stout and Love, 2015; Stout and Staton,  
25 2011; Staniševski, 2011). Favouring counter-hegemony equally means dominating rather  
26 than transforming interpersonal dynamics. Instead, we should focus on confrontations  
27 between social innovation and hegemonic institutions by assessing how both coexist and  
28 clash in practice and in which ways diverse stakeholders navigate their competing values,  
29 logics and demands in the pursuit of, or in resistance to actual changes and potential futures  
30 (Pradel et al., 2013). While they may constitute mutually exclusive modes of thinking, acting  
31 and organising (see Blaug, 2002), they are also mutually implicated. Creative, informal and  
32 subversive practices and a well-functioning system of public decision making and service  
33 provision both form necessary conditions for effective and democratic governance.  
34 Sustainable relationships and transformative change will not follow from discrediting either a  
35 priori. The principle of relationality prescribes relational dynamics in which confrontations  
36 with difference are not met by domination of one over the other but turned into an  
37 opportunity for creative integrating (Follett, 2003).  
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48 Third, social innovation is a multi-scalar phenomenon as local initiatives are spatio-  
49 temporally embedded in multi-level governance systems. Social innovation research into  
50 regional, urban and neighbourhood development stresses its context-dependency and, more  
51 specifically, how it is bound up with territorial arrangements that structure agreements,  
52 cultures and power relationships (Moulaert et al., 2007; Moulaert et al., 2005; Pradel et al.,  
53 2013; González and Healey, 2005). Social innovations often address structural political-  
54 economic problems and discourses as these manifest themselves in a particular territory. The  
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3 territorial context forms an institutional assemblage of opportunities and constraints bound up  
4 with multiple arenas and actors, dispersed competencies and intricate urban fabrics. To foster  
5 sustainable change, social innovators need a strategy and capacity for transforming this  
6 context as well as scaling-up and institutionally embedding their initiatives. Thus, what  
7 happens with a social innovation takes shape through multiple connections and interactions  
8 across geographical scales.  
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13       Ontologically, holism denotes that social innovation is part of a larger, all-inclusive  
14 whole. Its “situation” is brought into being by mutually influencing factors and is connected  
15 with other situations through multi-scalar networks into the “total situation” (Stout and Love,  
16 2015). Multi-level governance systems and global political-economic structures thus do not  
17 form an external context that can be addressed or ignored at will; they relationally constitute  
18 the total situation that dynamically shapes and is shaped by an innovation. Social innovation  
19 does not stand alone and will not amount to much unless it is seen in terms of the relational  
20 interplay of wider forces it is engaged in. Holism thus denotes that relational dynamics  
21 should constantly widen the total situation by enabling ever-increasing inclusion of people,  
22 factors, and reflections. This requires studying “whole and parts in their active and  
23 *continuous* relation to each other” (Follett, 1924: 102; emphasis in original) and discovering  
24 what is the best thing to do in the situation at hand—something Follett (2004) calls “the law  
25 of the situation”.  
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29       Altogether, due to its dynamic, relational and holistic nature, social innovations are  
30 always evolving through processes of co-creating (Stout and Love, 2015; Bartels, 2015;  
31 Follett, 1934, 2003; Follett, 1919). Stakeholders are constantly relating to one another and  
32 their environment through circular response and reciprocal influence in unfolding situations.  
33 Individual and social progress follow from “integrating” differences into a new, qualitatively  
34 better whole that is neither finalised nor totalising but creates something that everyone finds  
35 better than before. While this inevitably generates new differences necessitating new  
36 integratings, fostering *integrative dynamics* is more productive than sustaining risk-averse  
37 routines, formal rules and rationalistic accountability procedures (*hierarchical dynamics*) or  
38 prioritising organisational survival, status and power (*competitive dynamics*) over what the  
39 situation requires. In other words, the quality of the relational dynamics of social innovation  
40 can be assessed and improved by evaluating whether interpersonal processes are  
41 characterised by integration (unifying differences and ‘power-with’), hierarchy (domination  
42 and ‘power-over’) or competition (fixed positions and compromise).  
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3 The next section analyses the relational dynamics of change and resistance in a case  
4 that exemplifies the double bind of social innovation. After outlining its context, I present  
5 three narratives that each focus on one of the three aforementioned relational dimensions. An  
6 evaluation of their relational dynamics clarifies how the double bind both necessitates and  
7 inhibits transformative change.  
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### 11 12 13 **Innovative neighbourhood governance in Amsterdam**

14 Policy discourse in the Netherlands has embraced social innovation as a normative good.  
15 After an array of studies, experiments and reports commissioned by the Committee Public  
16 Sector Innovation (2006-2013), in the annual royal address of 2013, the Dutch government  
17 advocated a transition from “the classical welfare state” to “a participation society” in which  
18 “everyone who can is asked to take responsibility for his or her own life and environment”  
19 (Troonrede, 2013, 1). Its discourse of “affordability”, “tailor-made services”, and “more  
20 independent and assertive” citizens heeded an ongoing stream of calls for community self-  
21 organisation (see Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2013: 9-11) but also legitimised severe  
22 budget cuts and a massive decentralisation of responsibilities for youth care, employment and  
23 permanent health care. Although the welfare state was supposed to be reformed “to support  
24 civic oomph and suppress bureaucratic resistances” (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken,  
25 2013, 3), hierarchy and competition were simultaneously spurred: citizens were  
26 paternalistically called upon to volunteer, the mantra of “doing more with less” was imposed  
27 on local governments, and local public services were put in a struggle over regulation,  
28 resources and responsibilities (Hurenkamp et al., 2012; Verhoeven and Tonkens, 2013).  
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40 While there is much debate about the scope and desirability of the acclaimed  
41 transition to a new type of public domain, it is undeniable that many social innovations have  
42 emerged in informal care, communities and local governance (Hilhorst and Van der Lans,  
43 2013; see e.g., Beunderman et al., 2012). These include hundreds of community trust and  
44 social enterprises taking over public buildings and services, a widespread turn to  
45 neighbourhood-based team-working and family group conferencing in social care, and  
46 countless citizen initiatives aimed at improving physical, social and ecological living  
47 conditions. Facilitating these requires a turn to what Dutch academics and advisory boards  
48 have coined ‘government participation’ (see Van der Steen et al., 2014): whereas citizens  
49 used to be invited to participate in policy processes, now public professionals have to find  
50 ways to facilitate and adapt to what citizens do and need. The underlying assumption is that  
51 citizens have a lot of energy and capacities for creating a “do it yourself democracy” and a  
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3 “vibrant society” but are held back by bureaucratic structures and regulations, a desire for  
4 top-down control and accountability and an inability to share public powers and resources  
5 (Beunderman et al., 2012; Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2013, 2015; WRR, 2012;  
6 RMO, 2013).  
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10 In light of this discourse, the Municipality of Amsterdam adopted a city-wide policy  
11 of “area-focused working” to stimulate public agencies in prioritising the dynamics, problems  
12 and strengths of local areas over policy guidelines, organisational procedures and  
13 professional routines (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2013). One successful example of this is the  
14 *Neighbourhood Practice Team* (Buurt Praktijk Team – BPT) in Amsterdam-West. In 2011,  
15 the first BPT (Columbusplein) was launched as an experimental, temporal investment in an  
16 area of multiple deprivation where over the course of ten years a group of troublesome  
17 youngsters had developed into a well-organised criminal network despite the collaborative  
18 efforts of fourteen public agencies. In two years, it managed to disband the group, enable  
19 residents to take charge again of public spaces, and branch out this transformative process to  
20 domestic problems, school performance, cleanliness, sports, poverty and business climate. It  
21 received much media attention and widespread political and organisational support as it was  
22 widely appraised as an unprecedented success and exemplary innovation in neighbourhood  
23 governance (see Stadsdeel West, 2013). This triggered the launch of BPTs in adjacent  
24 neighbourhoods (Landlust; Bosleeuw-Midden; Gibraltar) and throughout the city.  
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35 As a detailed analysis of the BPT approach and activities is provided elsewhere  
36 (Bartels, 2016a), here I will give a brief overview to explain what makes it a social  
37 innovation. A BPT consists of talented professionals mandated by their organisations to work  
38 *in* a neighbourhood and *with* residents to “do what’s necessary”. This seemingly elusive  
39 notion comprises a clear set of situated practices: creating a sense of urgency, being  
40 constantly present and approachable in the neighbourhood, listening to what residents are  
41 saying and have to offer, developing a shared focus, initiating activities to generate change in  
42 small steps, breaking through engrained patterns and continuing to go through all these steps  
43 iteratively. For example, by organising a ‘mommy and daddy in the playground day’, the first  
44 BPT got a lot of children and parents to use the square again rather than having it dominated  
45 by the group of troublesome youngsters. And with its ‘Fresh in Class’ initiative, team  
46 members strolled through the neighbourhood in the evenings to get children to go to bed  
47 earlier and no longer fall asleep in class or developing a habit of causing nuisance in the  
48 street. BPTs can thus be classified as social innovation: they develop in-depth understanding  
49 of the unmet needs and hidden dynamics of neighbourhoods, empower residents to change  
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3 things around, and transform relationships within and amongst public agencies and  
4 communities.  
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6 These innovative practices generated tensions with institutional actors who found it  
7 difficult to grasp, appreciate and accommodate what the BPTs were doing (Stadsdeel West,  
8 2013, 2014; Bartels, 2014). Therefore, my research project aimed to enable public  
9 professionals, residents and policy makers involved with BPTs to better understand how it  
10 works and navigate its dynamics of change and resistance. During four months of fieldwork, I  
11 actively participated in the daily practice of the BPTs to produce immediately usable insights,  
12 experiences and artefacts. Specifically, I carried out an evaluation of one BPT, co-organised a  
13 resident initiative in another area, and conducted an analysis of the needs of youngsters with a  
14 team of youth workers in a third neighbourhood. Drawing on a repertoire of ethnographic and  
15 action research methods (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Shdaimah et al., 2009;  
16 Greenwood and Levin, 1998), I was present in neighbourhoods and local offices every day,  
17 participated in countless meetings and activities, conducted 16 in-depth interviews, shadowed  
18 three team leaders, went on joint neighbourhood walks, wrote reports, and organised eight  
19 evaluation meetings and workshops (methods are reported in detail in Bartels, 2016b). Using  
20 stories I collected and episodes I experienced, I now present three highly representative  
21 narratives sourced from my field notes that illustrate how the double bind manifests itself in  
22 the relational dynamics of the BPTs.  
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### 36 *Relational and rationalistic evaluation*

37 BPTs face a double bind when negotiating multiple meanings of its innovative practices as  
38 they are evaluated and constantly forced to justify these in a rationalistic administrative  
39 system. Consider for instance how the BPT active in the area Bosleeuw-Midden is subtly but  
40 significantly contested during its evaluation.  
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46 Bosleeuw-Midden was not suffering from alarming problems but there were worrying  
47 signs about high levels of anti-social behaviour (especially amongst children) and lack  
48 of community engagement and connections. Therefore, the BPT did not, like the other  
49 teams, get a full political mandate but only two part-time allocated team leaders. After  
50 six months, the team is up for an intermediate evaluation. May-Britt, the BPTs policy  
51 coordinator, organises a world café-like meeting with the two team leaders, their  
52 administrative worker, myself, and their line manager. As the latter is a sceptic of the  
53 BPT approach, May-Britt thought it best to evaluate in a safe setting with a small  
54 group. In alternating pairs, we discuss three questions (Why did the team start? What  
55 has been done? What should we do next?). Although we fill the wall with flipchart  
56 sheets with detailed answers to these questions, our final conversation turns into a  
57 debate about the value of the BPT approach rather than the substantive achievements  
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3 and challenges of this particular team. The line manager subtly belittles the team's  
4 success in getting two Moroccan mothers to organise weekly activities for children  
5 and parents (an immense and transformative achievement in this particular area) and  
6 provocatively questions how long you really need a BPT before things can "go back  
7 to normal". Afterwards, the BPT leaders and May-Britt are dissatisfied and deeply  
8 upset about how the value of their work and approach was once again delegitimised  
9 and belittled. (Field notes 26 September 2013)  
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11 Notwithstanding attempts to accommodate the sceptical line manager, the evaluation ends up  
12 in a positional debate and frustration rather than productive deliberation and joint decisions.  
13 This unproductive dynamic also characterises evaluations of other BPTs as well as daily  
14 conversations with managers and colleagues with no direct involvement. Its dynamic  
15 (informal, improvised and situated) practices are not easily captured in static conventional  
16 planning and evaluation mechanisms. BPT members therefore constantly have to justify and  
17 defend what they do and why to actors keeping to a hierarchical administrative system and  
18 rationalistic worldview. May-Britt could recite numerous disconcerting examples of how her  
19 efforts to accommodate her line manager's need for instrumental evaluation were met with  
20 sceptical remarks playing down the value of her work and requests to provide fixed timelines,  
21 standard procedures and pre-determined results. This feels like stepping out of the trenches  
22 with a white flag and immediately getting shot down.  
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32 Facilitating relational evaluation in the face of such hierarchical dynamics generates a  
33 double bind for social innovators to promote yet not impose their self-assessments. BPTs try  
34 to foster integrative dynamics with institutional actors by jointly evaluating what they are  
35 doing differently, what difference this makes, and what institutional implications this has.  
36 They use participatory methods for appreciating the holistic, experiential and situated nature  
37 of their practices as well as nurturing constructive relationships with institutional actors.  
38 However, this gives the latter a platform to belittle and delegitimise BPTs and confirm the  
39 legitimacy of institutionalised ways of working, thinking and organising. The immense  
40 relational potential of connecting with "just" two mothers for transforming a neighbourhood  
41 is lost on, and easy prey for, someone used to specifying goals and activities in advance,  
42 measuring outputs in rational or quantifiable terms, and holding people accountable  
43 according to fixed procedures. More productive relational dynamics would therefore require  
44 substantive change in institutionalised language, methods, and expectations involved with  
45 evaluating.  
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57 *Empowerment and defensiveness*  
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3 BPTs also face a double bind when confronting hegemonic institutions as they enact  
4 innovative practices in interaction with public professionals inclined to uphold the status quo.  
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6 In the next story, the involvement of the BPT Landlust in an adversarial participatory  
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8 planning process empowers residents but triggers defensiveness amongst the professionals in  
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10 charge.

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12 Besides an alarming level of anti-social behaviour by a group of youngsters, another  
13 reason for the start of the BPT Landlust was a conflict between public professionals  
14 and a group of active residents about the renovation of the main square. While the  
15 professionals carefully prepare and enact a participatory planning process, at some  
16 point the residents express deep frustration about not being listened to or taken  
17 seriously. When they escalate this to the City District Board, the professionals are  
18 stunned about the residents' accusations and feel misunderstood and bypassed. Ron  
19 (the BPT team leader) learns from conversations with the residents that they want a  
20 broader view on the role of the square in the neighbourhood—including the buildings  
21 on and around it (community centre, elementary school, youth centre) and helping to  
22 holistically address the anti-social behaviour and related issues. This is beyond the  
23 mandate of the planners involved, who had been focusing on the details of different  
24 design options. After the Board broadens the mandate, the professionals set up a new  
25 process and appoint a different designer to better listen to the residents' demands. Ron  
26 keeps on mediating in the process to stimulate mutual understanding and better  
27 relationships, and eventually a new design is jointly agreed upon. The residents are  
28 very happy with this outcome and especially praise Ron for carefully listening to what  
29 they were asking for. However, both during and after the process, the planners loathe  
30 Ron's presence and attribute the positive dynamics and outcomes entirely to their  
31 broadened mandate and own interventions. (Field notes October 2013)  
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36 Even though the conflict is resolved and everybody is happy with the outcomes of the  
37 participatory process, it damages relationships with the public professionals in charge and  
38 generated defensiveness towards the BPT. Unlike the residents, the professionals do not feel  
39 empowered but betrayed by Ron as, in their eyes, he sided with residents who had actively  
40 resisted and aggressively criticised them. For years, they continue to depict him as an  
41 untrustworthy and incompetent colleague and the BPT as an unclear and useless approach.  
42 Such defensiveness also emerges in various other situations, with some colleagues bursting  
43 into tears during meetings or informally telling embittered and wrathful stories. BPTs are  
44 legitimised with the diagnosis that existing agencies are unable to resolve issues in an area.  
45 Public professionals can interpret this as criticism on their hard work, lack of recognition for  
46 their good intentions or imposition of a new, elusive practice, rather than an invitation to  
47 learn and change.  
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56 Empowering everyone in the face of such competitive dynamics creates a double bind  
57 for innovators to accommodate institutional actors without letting them dominate. Disrupting  
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3 the status quo and upsetting colleagues invested in it is a necessary evil for relationally  
4 confronting and creatively integrating differences but can also turn into counter-hegemony.  
5 BPTs try to cultivate integrative dynamics by facilitating professionals and residents in joint  
6 inquiry of their situation and interpersonal dynamics. Both in deliberative meetings and day-  
7 to-day interactions, they are encouraged to explore shared interests, pragmatic solutions and  
8 underlying patterns as well as recognise one another's capacities, constraints and feelings.  
9 However, institutional actors are inclined to dominate conversations with their professional  
10 views and emotional needs rather than integrating these with residents' views and needs. It is  
11 all too common for them to resort to defensiveness, emotional accusations and adversarial  
12 posturing when facing subversive residents rather than inquiring whether their less than kind  
13 attitude perhaps is an expression of frustration with the umpteenth unresponsive participatory  
14 project. More productive relational dynamics would involve substantive change in  
15 institutionalised emotions, demeanour and powers involved with empowering.  
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#### 26 *Experiential inclusion and detachment*

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28 Finally, BPTs face a double bind when embedding their innovation in multi-scalar systems as  
29 they try to include an increasing number of people who lack direct experience with their  
30 innovative practices. This story reveals how adopting the BPT approach in a team of youth  
31 workers generates resistances amongst all stakeholders.  
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36 When extra money becomes available to address the needs of youngsters in a  
37 deprived neighbourhood, stakeholders plan to do this according to the BPT approach.  
38 However, a six months long planning and coordination process unfolds which one  
39 public professional later calls a "snake pit". The City District introduces and then  
40 withdraws a policy document filled with abstract assumptions, hierarchical decisions  
41 and pre-structured solutions; two youth work agencies engage in competitive bidding  
42 despite many meetings to coordinate their efforts; and eventually take three months to  
43 draft a joint plan. When a team of youth workers finally starts, they initially resist the  
44 proposal the team leader and I make to have open-ended conversations (a key element  
45 of the BPT approach) because they find this "unclear", "already know what's going  
46 on" and believe "youngsters need structure". Eventually they reluctantly agree but for  
47 the first weeks report only bad experiences with the approach and produce little new  
48 insights. Also, the managers and executives of the agencies do not quite grasp why we  
49 need to use this approach, question whether its findings will not conflict with  
50 organisational interests, and struggle with their own role. This gradually changes  
51 because our shared experiences of going out on the street and listening to youngsters  
52 leads to a shared image of their needs, enthusiasm about the approach and a strong  
53 desire to keep on collaborating. But in the ensuing months new hierarchical decisions  
54 by the City District and interagency competition over who gets the lead risk that our  
55 hard-won findings and collaboration get lost. (Field notes November 2013-January  
56 2016)  
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4 Although the need to scale-up and embed the BPT approach is widely supported, it proves  
5 exceedingly difficult for all stakeholders to actually enact it in their daily practices. BPTs  
6 manage to successfully transform specific neighbourhoods, but struggle to embed their  
7 approach beyond that within the urban governance system. Policy makers, middle level  
8 managers and street level workers enact interrelated practices of hierarchical policy making,  
9 competition over funding and status, and engrained routines and knowledge. The unintended  
10 consequence that materialises is upholding the status quo and greatly delaying actual  
11 encounters with youngsters and experiences with their life world. Even though a productive  
12 process and outcomes eventually emerge, these do not transform engrained habits and  
13 institutions that detach stakeholders from opening up to the experiential lessons that the  
14 situation offers.  
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23           Increasing inclusion in the face of such hierarchical and competitive dynamics implies  
24 a double bind for innovators to engage institutional actors in experiences that invite but not  
25 enforce learning and change. BPTs try to promote integrative dynamics by enticing them to  
26 experience how it works, what its value is and what needs to be done in the situation at hand.  
27 This involves asking for their participation in figuring out what sort of support, training and  
28 organisational changes they would need to deal with the complex webs of institutions and  
29 habits they are entangled in. But while first-hand experiences trigger some to learn and  
30 change, institutionalised ways of thinking, acting and organising keep most of them at a  
31 (physical, mental, emotional and social) distance of the situation. Institutional actors tend to  
32 be unwilling to recognise the need for change, especially when lacking organisational and  
33 financial conditions (including job security) in which it is safe to experiment, make mistakes,  
34 admit problems, take a position of not knowing, and uncover interconnections. More  
35 productive relational dynamics would involve substantive change in institutionalised attitudes  
36 to, processes of, and conditions for experiential learning.  
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## 48 **Conclusion**

49 Policy discourse depicts social innovation as a normative good for urban governance reform  
50 in the context of massive austerity pressures to do more with less. However, in practice it is  
51 constantly contested, challenged and resisted by institutionalised ways of working. I argue  
52 that simultaneously stimulating and inhibiting social innovation creates a *double bind* of  
53 conflicting communicative signals that trigger defensive responses and weaken capacities for  
54 joint sense making and sustainable change. Assessing and improving relational dynamics of  
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3 change and resistance is therefore crucial for more productive and transformative social  
4 innovation. Analysing a case of innovative neighbourhood governance in Amsterdam, I  
5 specify meta-theoretical concepts and communicative practices that explain how the double  
6 bind both inhibits and necessitates substantive change of urban governance institutions.  
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10 An important contribution of this article is that it offers an empirically detailed and  
11 theoretically grounded study of the relational dynamics involved in social innovation. Instead  
12 of the often resorted to analytical strategies of sanguine appraisal or radical critique, it  
13 demonstrates how these interpersonal processes are enacted and what fosters and inhibits  
14 change. Responding to Jessop et al.'s (2013) call for a relational meta-theoretical framework,  
15 it provides a conceptual language for analysing relational dynamics and evaluating them.  
16 Moreover, building on recent work in this direction (e.g., Stout and Love, 2015; Bartels,  
17 2015) it shows that relational process ontology provides philosophical concepts and  
18 communicative practices that form a fruitful alternative to currently hegemonic neo-liberal  
19 governmentality. With the notion of the double bind, finally, it extends our understanding of  
20 the double-sided nature of social innovation (Swyngedouw, 2005) in terms of relational  
21 dynamics of resistance and change and associated capacities and reforms.  
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25 Besides the context-specificity of its single case study, however, a key limitation of  
26 this study lies in its limited evidence of and guidance for successful transformation. Future  
27 research should focus on identifying ways to better navigate and possibly overcome the  
28 double bind of social innovation. Studies of relational dynamics in other contexts,  
29 comparative analyses and monitoring of the impact of social innovation over time would be  
30 welcome. My meta-theoretical framework could be used to identify other resistances,  
31 dimensions, practices and ways to organise for more productive communication and  
32 sustainable change. Further understanding and transforming of public officials would also be  
33 imperative.  
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37 In a way, this article is a cautionary tale. If governments ask for social innovation,  
38 they need to be prepared to welcome substantive change—fundamental relational  
39 transformations of hierarchical and competitive dynamics that typically dominate (urban)  
40 governance. Rather than upholding seemingly conducive neo-liberal discourse that limits  
41 social innovation to marginal change, they need to fundamentally reform hegemonic  
42 institutions like rationalistic evaluation, defensive behaviour and experiential detachment. In  
43 turn, social innovators must be prepared to not only introduce new relational approaches and  
44 practices but also to transform resistances they run into. Besides focusing on better results  
45 (substantive change), they should improve interpersonal dynamics by meeting institutional  
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3 needs, helping everyone feel empowered, and asking for participation in figuring out what  
4 they would need to change (relational process change). As such, we can move away from  
5 either reproducing existing institutions or radically rejecting them toward enacting integrative  
6 dynamics that foster transformative change.  
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### 10 11 **Acknowledgements**

12 An earlier draft of this article was presented during a seminar at the Tilburg School of Politics  
13 and Public Administration. I thank the organisers and participants for their supportive  
14 comments. I am grateful to Imrat Verhoeven, three anonymous reviewers and the Editor for  
15 their perceptive and constructive comments. Finally, I am indebted to all research  
16 participants, especially to Martien van Rijn, May-Britt Jansen, Joep van Egmond, Ron de  
17 Groot and Enrico Kruidenhof for their extensive support.  
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