# 02 / From interpretation to transformative action: critical pragmatism through transdisciplinary action research

**Topic :** LABS

**Chair :** Joshua Cohen (Delft University of Technology)

**Second Chair :** Tamara Metze (Delft University of Technology)

**Third Chair :** Nanke Verloo (University of Amsterdam)

## GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

### Thematic focus

Climate change, democratic backsliding, growing inequality and Generative AI engender turbulence for our societies and institutions. These developments beg the question of what importance there still is for critical interpretivist scholarship, apart from exposing and making sense of power imbalances that may be amplified.

Inspired by pragmatism (Dewey, 1927), the policy sciences of democracy (Lasswell, 1951) have a legacy of engaging with decision-making on real-world problems. In the past decades, the policy sciences have made an argumentative turn by unpacking the power relations and discourses that are at play in policymaking (Van Hulst et al., 2025). Since a decade, we have also observed a resurging interest in critical pragmatism, where critical theory is combined with engagement with practice (Forester, 2013; Avelino & Grin, 2017; Metze 2020; Verloo, 2026). Scholars working within this stream are moving from pure critical interpretation to transformative action (Wagenaar, 2011; Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels, 2025). The promise is that approaches such as transdisciplinary research (Regeer, Klaassen & Broerse, 2024) and action research (Bartels & Wittmayer, 2018; Bartels, Greenwood & Wittmayer, 2020) support researchers and practitioners to translate criticism into action and work on transformative system change.

However, these approaches are not without challenges. Collaboration between scholars of different disciplines and between scholars and practitioners can be notoriously difficult (Keestra and Verloo, 2020). Moreover, transdisciplinary and action research often suffer from power imbalances, ethical challenges and a lack of fit with and impact on existing institutions (Wittmayer, Bartels & Larrea, 2021; Cohen, 2022; Cohen, 2024; Wittmayer et al., 2024; Loorbach & Wittmayer, 2025; Van Hulst, Holstead & Metze, 2026). These challenges require reflective practice and learning between different approaches.

### Aim of the session, kinds of participants and key questions

In this lab session we aim to provide an open space for participants who have been working with, or are interested in learning from, critical pragmatism and transdisciplinary and/or action research approaches. With them we hope to explore the potential value, promises and pitfalls of the combination of transdisciplinary action research for critical pragmatist scholarship. To further practice, we want to learn from concrete cases to answer the following key questions:

*Conceptual questions*

- What is *critical* in critical pragmatism?;
- What is *trans* in transdisciplinary research?;
- What is *action* in action research?;
- What is *transformative* in transformative change?;
- How can we further connect *transdisciplinarity* with *action research* (TAR)?;

*Practical questions*

- What *methodological* approaches do researchers use to set up TAR?;
- What *processes/repertoires* do teams need to conduct TAR in practice?;
- How do we conduct TAR in *settings* where power imbalances are historically high?;
- How do we leverage TAR to *support* bottom-up movements?;
- How can we engage in *ethical* TAR while working from *within* the academic system?;

We are also open to other conceptual/practical questions that participants find relevant.

# CALL FOR PAPERS

**Format**

We intend this to be an interactive lab session where we build on a selection of concrete cases taken from the experiences of the participants and panel conveners to provide an answer to the above questions. For this we have come up with the following basic set-up of the session:

- Introduction of the lab theme and the potential questions;
- Possibility for participants to present and select cases of projects;
- Reflective guided group work around concrete cases to answer above questions;
- Collective analysis of the inputs and co-formulating a first programmatic call to action.

**Expected outputs**

- We intend to co-develop a *programmatic publication* with a call to action and an exposition on ways in which critical pragmatist scholars can organize a process for TAR that contributes to transformative action and change;
- If interest arises during the session, we may explore possibilities for further outputs such as a *special issue* ;

We are also open to other outputs that participants deem relevant.

**Sources**

Avelino, F., & Grin, J. (2017). Beyond deconstruction. a reconstructive perspective on sustainability transition governance. Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions, 22, 15-25. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2016.07.003

Bartels, K., & Wittmayer, J. (2019). Action research in policy analysis. Routledge.

Cohen, J. B. (2022). Institutionalizing public engagement in research and innovation: Toward the construction of institutional entrepreneurial collectives. Science and Public Policy, 49(5), 673-685. https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scac018

Cohen, J. B., Loeber, A. M., Marschalek, I., Bernstein, M. J., Blok, V., Tabarés, R.,

Gianni, R. & Griessler, E. (2024). From experimentation to structural change: fostering institutional entrepreneurship for public engagement in research and innovation. Science and Public Policy, 51(2), 324-336. https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scad065

Dewey, J. (1927). The public and its problems. Allan Swallow.
Forester, J. (2013). On the theory and practice of critical pragmatism: Deliberative practice and creative negotiations. Planning theory, 12(1), 5-22. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095212448750

Greenwood, D. J., Ravn, J. E., & Bartels, K. P. (2025). A Call to Action Research: Confronting the Social and Environmental Sustainability Crises. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Keestra, M., & Verloo, N. (2020). Too many cities in the city?: Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary city research methods and the challenge of integration. In N. Verloo & L. Bertolini (Eds.), Seeing the City: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Study of the Urban (pp. 226–242). Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1b741xh.18

Lasswell, H. D. (1951). The Policy Orientation. In D. Lerner, & H.D. Lasswell (Eds.), The Policy Sciences: Recent Developments in Scope and Method (pp. 3-15). Stanford University Press.

Loorbach, D., Wittmayer, J.M. (2025) Transformative Tensions in the Ivory Tower. Learning from DRIFTs Institutional Journey Within Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands. Minerva. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11024-025-09607-w

Metze, T. (2020). Een kritisch-pragmatische bestuurskunde. Bestuurskunde (29) 1, pp.33-39. https://www.boomportaal.nl/doi/10.5553/Bk/092733872020029001004

Metze, T. A., Coma-Cros, N., Ingram, V. J., de Roo, N., Schwarz, A. F., Starke, J. R., Student, J.R., Wierda, J.J., & Wertheim-Heck, S. C. (2026). The politics of transdisciplinary research: coping with power in puzzling for sustainability governance. Earth System Governance, 28, 100333. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2026.100333

Regeer, B. J., Klaassen, P., & Broerse, J. E. (Eds.). (2024). Transdisciplinarity for transformation:

responding to societal challenges through multi-actor, reflexive practices. Springer Nature.

Van Hulst, M., Metze, T., Dewulf, A., De Vries, J., Van Bommel, S., & Van Ostaijen, M. (2025). Discourse, framing and narrative: three ways of doing critical, interpretive policy analysis. Critical policy studies, 19(1), 74-96. https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2024.2326936

Van Hulst, M., Holstead, K., & Metze, T. (2026). Conceptualizing transdisciplinarity: How do visuals mean?. Environmental Science & Policy, 104253 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2025.104253

Verloo, N., Rinaudo-Velandia, M., & Tascón, J. (2026). Toward experiential socio-spatial justice: Rethinking redistributive, procedural, and epistemic approaches through Bogotá's Fenicia Triangle. Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space, https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X261427243

Wagenaar, H. (2011). Meaning in action: Interpretation and dialogue in policy analysis. Routledge.

Wittmayer, J., Bartels, K., & Larrea, M. (2021). Introduction: Action Research, Policy and Politics. Special Issue of the International Journal of Action Research. IJAR–International Journal of Action Research, 17(1), 3-4. https://doi.org/10.3224/ijar.v17i1.01

Wittmayer, J.M., Huang, Y.-S., Bogner, K., Boyle, E., Hölscher, K., von Wirth, T., Boumans, T., Garst, J., Hendlin, Y.H., Lavanga, M., Loorbach, D., Mungekar, N., Tshangela, M., Vandekerckhove, P., Vasques, A. (2024) Neither right nor wrong? Ethics of collaboration in transformative research for sustainable futures. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications 11, 677. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03178-z