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Shifting Power Relations in Sustainability Transitions: A Multi-actor Perspective

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ABSTRACT *This paper contributes to understanding transition politics by conceptualizing (shifting) power relations between actors in sustainability transitions. The authors introduce a Multi-actor Perspective as a heuristic framework for specifying (shifting) power relations between different categories of actors at different levels of aggregation. First, an overview is provided of how power and empowerment have been treated in transition research, and remaining questions are identified on who exercises power and who is empowered by and with whom. It is argued that theoretical frameworks and empirical analyses in transition studies lack precision when it comes to distinguishing between different types and levels of actors. In response, a Multi-actor Perspective (MaP) is developed, which distinguishes among four sectors (state, market, community, third sector), and between actors at different levels of aggregation: (1) sectors, (2) organizational actors, and (3) individual actors. The paper moves on to specify how the MaP contributes to understanding transition politics specifically in conceptualizing shifting power relations. Throughout the paper, empirical illustrations are used regarding public debates on welfare state reform, civil society and ‘Big Society’, as well as more specific empirical examples of community energy initiatives.*

KEY WORDS: Multi-actor Perspective, sustainability transitions, power, empowerment

1. Introduction

Understanding the politics of sustainability transitions requires an understanding of *who* are the actors involved in sustainability transitions, and how the power relations between those actors are changing. This paper aims to conceptualize (shifting) power relations between actors in sustainability transitions. By doing so, it contributes to the interdisciplinary field of research on ‘sustainability transitions’; long-term processes of transformative change towards more sustainable societies (Grin, Rotmans, & Schot, 2010; Markard, Raven, & Truffer, 2012). Tran-

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sitions are understood as ‘involving a broad range of actors’ and as involving ‘shifts in power’ (Rotmans & Loorbach, 2010). It is argued that ‘the transition to a sustainable society is but one possible outcome of changes in “the institutional rectangle” of the realms of market, government, science and technology, and civil society and their mutual alignment’ (Grin, Rotmans, & Schot, 2011, pp. 79–80). Given this inherent ‘multi-actor’ nature of transitions, it is fundamentally important to understand the specifics of multi-actor power relations in transitions—yet, to date, the field lacks a structured understanding of actors.

Transition research consists of a number of different perspectives, including socio-technical innovation (Geels & Schot, 2007; Smith & Raven, 2012); innovation systems (Hekkert, Suurs, Negro, Kuhlmann, & Smits, 2007; Wieczorek & Hekkert, 2012); transition management (Loorbach, 2010; Rotmans, Kemp, & Van Asselt, 2001); and reflexive governance (Grin, 2010; Smith, Voß, & Grin, 2010; Voß, Kemp, & Bauknecht, 2006). There has been an increasing number of critical discussions regarding issues of power, politics and agency (Hendriks, 2009; Meadowcroft, 2009; Shove & Walker, 2007, 2008; Smith & Stirling, 2010). These critiques have led to a series of theoretical and empirical studies into power, politics and discourse in transitions (e.g. Avelino, 2011; Geels, 2014; Grin, 2010; Hoffman, 2013; Kern, 2011; Paredis, 2013; Voß et al. 2006, 2009). Meanwhile, there has been an increasing attention for the role of civil society, grassroots initiatives and community-led innovations in studies on transitions towards sustainability (Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012; Seyfang & Smith, 2007; Smith, 2012).

So far, these different strands of transition research have developed relatively in parallel and have not been integrated, leaving open several questions on how civil society exercises power in transitions and how this relates to, and differs from, the way in which other actors exercise power in transitions. This relates to the earlier mentioned lack of a systematic understanding of actors involved in the ‘distributed agency’ in transition processes (Grin et al., 2011, p. 232). To date, most contributions are troubled by conceptual ambiguity—do they refer to specific individuals or individual organizations, to more generalized categories of actors or to roles of actors? Addressing this knowledge gap, we build on initial work focusing on actors in transition studies (e.g. Brown, Farelly, & Loorbach, 2013; Farla, Markard, Raven, & Coenen, 2012).

The research question underlying this paper is as follows: how can we conceptualize *who are the different actors exercising power in transition, and what are the (shifting) power relations between them?* Next to the importance of analysing and understanding power shifts as requirements for transitions, this is also a crucial question in the context of transition politics and transition governance, which includes a focus on actors and their deliberation (e.g. Frantzeskaki, Loorbach, & Meadowcraft, 2012; Loorbach, 2010). As such, a systematic understanding of actors and the (shifting) power relations between them is relevant both for the theoretical understanding of transition politics, as well as for the application of transition governance.

This is a conceptual and explorative paper which proposes a heuristic that serves to analyse and discuss the shifting power relations between different types of actors. This heuristic has been developed based on a literature review, which has focused on (1) transition studies, in particular regarding the role of agency and power in transition, and (2) Third Sector research, including debates on welfare state reform and the role of civil society. Throughout the paper, we use two empirical domains for illustrating our argumentation. First,

the concept of the 'Big Society' introduced in the UK as an empirical illustration of a welfare state reform which aims to ensure public welfare, while reducing public expenditure by looking at non-state actors to provide for public services. Characterized as an attempt to 'square this circle' (Smith, 2010, p. 832), the concept has received many critiques (e.g. Civil Exchange, 2015; Jordan, 2012; Kisby, 2010; Ransome, 2011). Furthermore, we use empirical examples on community energy (Avelino et al., 2014; Avelino, Frantzeskaki, & Bosman, 2013; Frantzeskaki, Avelino, & Loorbach, 2013) to illustrate the Multi-actor Perspective (MaP). The phenomena of community energy initiatives clearly display shifting power relations and contestations between state, market, community and Third Sector, in the context of an empirical domain that has received elaborate attention in the field of transition studies (e.g. Hargreaves, Hielscher, Seyfang, & Smith, 2013; Verbong & Loorbach, 2012).

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of how actors, power and empowerment have been treated in transition research, and identifies remaining questions on *who* exercises power and *who* is empowered by and with *whom*. Section 3 proposes a MaP which distinguishes among three levels of actors (sectors, groups/organizations, individual roles). Section 4 specifies how the MaP relates to power and empowerment, specifically in terms of a typology of (shifting) power relations. In conclusion, we synthesize the main lessons for the study of transition politics, and identify challenges for future research.

2. Actors, Power Relations and Empowerment in Sustainability Transitions and the Need for a Multi-actor Perspective

In this section, we argue that the current actor understanding in transition research has at least two conceptual weaknesses. Firstly, the (problematic) tendency to use the category of 'civil society' to stand for everything that is not market nor government, and secondly a certain vagueness in the reference to actors and their level of aggregation. We also critically examine the current literature on power and empowerment in transition studies with regard to its actor understanding.

Current contributions in transition studies mostly use the common distinction between 'market', 'state' and 'civil society' (cf. Durrant, 2014; Walzer, 1998). Under the broad category of 'civil society', both formal entities such as trade unions, or informal entities such as families, get generalized for civil society as a whole, which leads to an underestimation or overestimation of the relative power of these sectors vis-à-vis state and market. Other common distinctions are the 'triple helix' that distinguishes between state, market and science, or the 'quadruple helix' that adds the category of 'civil society' (cf. Farla et al., 2012; Grin et al., 2011; Pesch, 2014).

To date, most contributions in transition studies which refer to actors are troubled by conceptual ambiguity—do they refer to specific individuals or individual organizations, to more generalized categories of actors or to roles of actors? We see actors from varied backgrounds and from multiple levels of structuration (i.e. niche or regime actors; Geels, 2011) engaged in numerous activities at different structuration levels (Jørgensen, 2012). There is a certain focus on the accomplishments and capacities of individual actors to act as levers for transitions, be they 'policy-makers', 'experts', 'consumers', or 'firm owners' (cf. Farla et al., 2012). These can be acting as 'frontrunners', who are 'agents with

the capacity to generate dissipative structures and operate within these deviant structures' (Rotmans and Loorbach, 2010, p. 144), as 'champions' and/or 'policy entrepreneurs' (Brown et al. 2013, p. 703) or 'intermediaries' (Hargreaves et al., 2013). Farla et al. (2012) caution against this focus on the individual and point to the fact that there is never only one (type of) actor involved in transitions. Nevertheless, the authors are inconsistent in their reference to actors at different levels of aggregation, for instance, when they distinguish between types of organizations and individuals as follows: 'Actors include different types of organizations such as firms, public authorities (policy-makers), associations (industry as well as social movements) and research institutes. Apart from organizations, individuals show up as actors in transition processes—as 'independent' players or as members of an organization (e.g. firm owners, employees)' (Farla et al., 2012, p. 994–995). There is some confusion regarding levels of aggregations, for example, the suggestion that 'policy-makers' and 'social movements' are at the same level. This unclarity also holds for the innovation system literature, which clearly distinguishes between actors and roles, but does not distinguish between different levels of actors, as it lists 'government' and 'civil society' at the same level as 'companies' or 'consultants' (Wieczorek & Hekkert, 2012, p. 77).

We also see this lack of clarity in actor categorizations in the way in which transition literature treats issues of power and empowerment. In response to the lack of attention to power and politics (as outlined in the introduction), a number of authors have explicitly theorized the role of power in transitions (cf. Avelino, 2011; Geels, 2014; Grin, 2010; Hoffman, 2013). Already before that, power had always been referred to implicitly in transition terminology, in particular in the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP). As one of the most central concepts in transition studies, interpretations and applications of the MLP have evolved and altered over the years (cf. De Haan & Rotmans, 2011; Geels, 2011; Rip & Kemp, 1998; Smith & Raven, 2012). Generally speaking, the MLP distinguishes among three levels of functional aggregation: (1) the landscape (exogenous macro-trends), (2) regimes (dominant institutions and practices), and (3) niches (places of innovative practices). Although specific definitions of the 'regime' differ, an essential characterization lies in its dominant position and its reproduction of dominant structures in the societal system under study. As such, the regime is—by definition—associated with 'power', 'dominance' and 'vested interests'. There are, however, also more explicit treatments of power in transition studies, which we now turn to discuss: (1) the socio-technical perspective on power, (2) the transition governance perspective on power, (3) a horizontal Power-in-Transition framework, and (4) transition perspectives on empowerment.

In the *socio-technical perspective* on transitions, power is primarily associated with regulative rules underlying socio-technical regimes, and the 'power struggles' between incumbent socio-technical regimes and upcoming niches. In their article on 'the typology of socio-technical transition pathways', Geels and Schot (2007, p. 415) distinguish four 'foundational paradigms' that conceptualize agency in different ways. Power is positioned as one specific 'foundational paradigm' that revolves around actors and social groups with 'conflicting goals and interests', and that views change as the outcome of 'conflicts, power struggles, contestations, lobbying, coalition building, and bargaining' by and between these actors and social groups. In a more recent account of how power can be incorporated in the MLP, Geels (2014) has expanded the power of regimes in terms of neo-Gramscian political economy notions on hegemonic power and

regime ‘resistance’ (Hess, 2013). Therein, the focus lies on the power of incumbent industries and policy-makers. Geels (2014, p. 09) argues that even though ‘social movement organizations, citizens, labour unions and other groups also try to shape public discourses’, it is the coalition of ‘policymakers’ and incumbent ‘firms’ that is most powerful (Geels, 2014, p. 29). Here, it is unclear what is being compared. Do we compare the power of ‘labour unions’ to the power of ‘the coalition of policy-makers and firms’? Or do we compare the power of the entire Third Sector (labour unions + NGOs + science) to the overall power of the market and the state? Choosing one or the other makes a significant difference in terms of power attribution. Especially when comparing actor categories in terms of how much power they exercise, it is crucial to be specific in the categorization of actors and the level of aggregation. Here, it is also important to be aware that various (underlying) actor categories reproduce existing power imbalances and reproduce dominant logics. A specific example is the construction of individuals mainly as ‘consumers’ or ‘users’, which implicitly is a reproduction of the dominant market logic and draining these same individuals from their power/agency in acting as, for example, voters, activists, researchers and so on.

We argue that it is necessary to question the tendency in transition studies to equate power or ‘regime dynamics’ to particular actors (i.e. industry/ policy-makers) at the cost of others (i.e. citizens or civil society). Even if it makes sense to do so as an empirical observation in a particular socio-technical system at a certain point in time (e.g. the current energy system), our analytical frameworks of power and actor dynamics need to allow for the possibility of *shifting* power dynamics, especially when transitions are conceptualized as shifts in power. This is particularly relevant in a context in which there seems to be an increasing role for civil society and grassroots innovation in sustainability transitions research.

In the *governance perspective* on transitions, Grin (2010) discusses transition governance in terms of agents’ capacity of ‘acting otherwise’ (Grin, 2010, in reference to Giddens), triggering institutional transformation by ‘smartly playing into power dynamics at various layers’ (Grin, 2010, in reference to Healey), and the properties an agent must possess ‘to feel that she is able to resist’ (Grin, 2010, in reference to Stones). Moreover, Grin links the MLP to an existing multi-levelled power framework offered by Arts and Van Tatenhove (2004, based on Clegg, 1989), arguing that the three levels of power distinguished by those authors—relational, dispositional and structural—correspond to the three levels in transition dynamics (niche, regime, landscape):

At the level of innovative practices [i.e. niche-level, F.A.], the focus is on relational power, which has to do with differences in competences and ability to draw on the regime between agents level. The regime embodies dispositional power, embodied in rules, resources, actor configurations and dominant images of the issues involved. This, in Bourdieuan language, “positions” agents at the level of experiments. These agents, in more Giddensian terms, may “draw on” these elements. Finally, at the landscape level we find structural power in the form of (Bourdieu) symbolic, social and economic capital or (Giddens) orders of signification, legitimization and domination. (Grin, 2010: 282–283)

Grin’s governance perspective on transitions ‘opens up’ the regime concept by addressing the issue of agency in relation to structures. The multi-levelled

power framework offered by Arts & Van Tatenhove and Clegg, includes an inherently vertical typology of power, in which different types of power correspond with different levels of aggregation (agents, structures, systems). This relates nicely to the MLP, which is also based on a vertical distinction between levels of functional aggregation. However, we argue that besides such a vertical typology of power, we also need a horizontal understanding which allows to analyse *who* exercises relational power, and also, how the dispositional power embodied in actor configurations is configured across *different actors*.

In earlier work, we have proposed such a ‘horizontal’ understanding of power in transition, as part of a Power-in-Transition framework (Avelino, 2011; Avelino & Rotmans, 2009). One of the main arguments therein is the distinction among three different types of power relations between actors: (1) A has power over B, (2) A has *more/less* power than B to do *x*, and 3) A and B have a *different kind of power*. This third type of power relation tends to be forgotten in discussions about power. Taking this into account has implications for discussing the role of different actors. Rather than only discussing which actors have more or less power, or who has power over whom, the question also becomes *how different actors exercise different kinds of power at different points in time in different roles*. Even though this ‘horizontal’ and ‘qualitative’ typology allows for a distinction between actors as exercising different types of power, this typology still does not include a clear actor typology. Also the empirical power analyses based on this typology so far lack precision when it comes to the distinction between different types and different levels of actors such as, for example, government, business, NGOs, citizens and scientists. In Section 4, we specify how actor categories in power-in-transition analyses can be made more explicit, making use of the MAP that we introduce in Section 3.

One more explicit notion of power in transition studies is that of *empowerment*. In the broadest sense of the word, empowerment refers to the process of gaining power. There is a diversity of understandings of empowerment in transition studies, ranging from empowerment as a systemic transition pattern (De Haan & Rotmans, 2011) and functional property of niches (Smith & Raven, 2012) to empowerment at the level of individual or group capacities (Avelino, 2009, 2011). For this paper, we focus on the conceptualization of (dis)empowerment as a process by which *actors* gain or lose a sense of intrinsic motivation grounded in insights from organizational psychology (Avelino, 2009, 2011 in reference to Thomas & Velthouse, 1990—see more in Section 4). Even though this understanding of empowerment has brought the individual actor level into our debates of power in transition, it ironically still lacks an understanding of *different kinds of individual actors*. The way in which ‘the individual’ is ‘intrinsically motivated’, ‘empowered’ or ‘disempowered’, tends to get generalized, without sensitivity for different actors, roles, and contexts. By introducing the MAP in the next section, we aim to specify the roles and contexts of different actors, and then in Section 4, we specify what this implies for power and (dis)empowerment dynamics in transition.

3. Introducing a Multi-actor Perspective

In this section, we develop a MaP for transition studies which allows to analyse shifting power relations and (dis)empowerment processes in transitions. We do so in two steps: first, we outline the basis for MaP and outline its added value

with regard to other existing actor perspectives; second, we refine the MaP by distinguishing between actors at different levels of aggregation. Our working definition for ‘actor’ is a social entity, that is, a person or organization, or a collective of persons and organizations, which is able to act (cf. Hermans, 2010). As outlined by others (Brown et al., 2013; Farla et al., 2012), drawing on work by institutional scholarship can be useful for analysing actors in transition studies. To develop the MaP, we have based ourselves on insights from Third Sector literature, more specifically the ‘Welfare Mix’ model by Evers and Laville (2004, p. 17) and Pestoff (1992, p. 25) (see Figure 1).

Based on this Welfare Mix Model, the MaP distinguishes among four actor categories along the following three axes, namely (1) informal—formal, (2) for profit—non-profit and (3) public—private. The *state* is characterized as non-profit, formal and public; the *market* as also formal, but private and for-profit; and the *community* as private, informal and non-profit. Finally, the *Third Sector* is conceptualized as an intermediary sector *in between* the three others. It includes the ‘non-profit sector’ that is formalized and private, but also many intermediary, organizations that cross the boundaries between profit and non-profit, private and public, formal and informal. As such, the Third Sector includes phenomena such as social entrepreneurship, ‘not-for-profit’ social enterprises, and cooperative organizations (Birch & Whittam, 2008). The Third Sector is not simplistically characterized as a residual category; rather, it is viewed as ‘lying within a triangular ‘tension field’, the cornerstones of which are the state, the market, and the informal sector’ (Fyfe, 2005, p. 538). With our focus on power and transition politics, we acknowledge that these sectors are not fixed entities; rather, the boundaries between the sectors are contested, blurring, shifting and permeable.

The contestation of sector boundaries, and the intermediary nature of the Third Sector, can be illustrated by community energy initiatives, which oscillate between the institutional logics of non-profit organizations, the for-profit

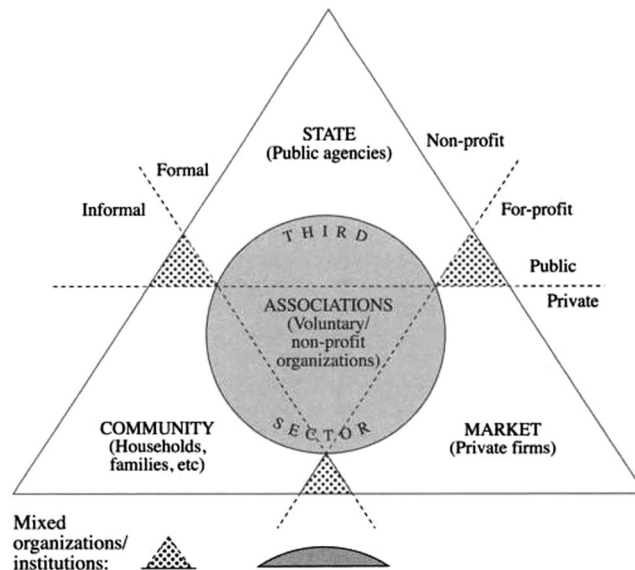


Figure 1. The Welfare Mix. Source: Evers and Laville (2004, p. 17), adapted from and Pestoff (1992, p. 25).

market, and informal communities. The legal status of community energy initiatives tends to differ per country and initiative, and often there is a tension between the formal legal status, on the one hand, and the goals, principles and practices, on the other hand. As described by a board member of a community energy initiative in the Netherlands:

Our goal is to provide reliable and sustainable energy for our members, our main goal is not to make profit. We fall in between profit and non-profit, that can be quite difficult: we have to explain and explain it all the time. Many people and government officials do not understand it. (Interview board member of community energy initiative, Avelino et al., 2013)

Next to distinguishing among the four sectors, we propose to also distinguish between actors at different levels of aggregation. The MaP distinguishes between actors at three levels: (1) sectors, (2) individual actors (e.g. entrepreneur, consumer, policy-maker) and (3) organizational actors (e.g. organizations, groups).

We argue that the MaP is addressing at least the two conceptual weaknesses of the current actor understanding in transition research as outlined earlier. Firstly, it addresses the tendency to use the category of ‘civil society’ to stand for everything that is not market nor government. Secondly, it allows to distinguish between actors at different levels of aggregation—addressing the current vagueness and unclarity in the reference to actors. In the following, we will outline this argumentation in more detail.

What makes the Welfare Mix (Figure 1) apt as a basis for a MaP in transition studies is that it acknowledges four different sectors and their logics. This distinction allows for analysing shifting power relations in transitions more accurately. The MaP allows for an important differentiation between ‘Third Sector’ and ‘community’, both aspects usually subsumed in the category of civil society. In debates about the ‘Big Society’, this is one of the key critiques, as proponents of the concept tend to conflate (civil) society and community notwithstanding their rather different levels and scales of activity which leads to a scale mismatch of problems and possible solutions (Kisby, 2010; Ransome, 2011). A differentiation between Third Sector and community allows us to understand and analyse (shifting) power relations and struggles between formal and informal entities. Moreover, it allows to comprehend the kind of power of the Third Sector (towards state and market) as a significantly different one from that of informal community. As such, it allows for a more adequate estimation of the relative power of these sectors vis-à-vis state and market. In addressing the ‘triple helix’ conceptualizations often used in transition studies (Section 2), we argue that science—although a relevant sector with its own institutional logic—can be seen as a ‘sub-sector’ of the Third Sector, that is, an intermediary sub-sector between state, market and community, crossing the boundaries between private and public, for-profit and non-profit. We view science as being at a less general level than the Third Sector; science is of a more specific and specialized nature, similar to ‘education’, ‘media’ or ‘care’. The institutional logics and boundaries of these specific sectors are not inherent to them, unlike the sectors distinguished in the MaP (which do have inherent institutional boundaries in terms of formal vs. informal, public vs. private, for-profit vs. non-profit).

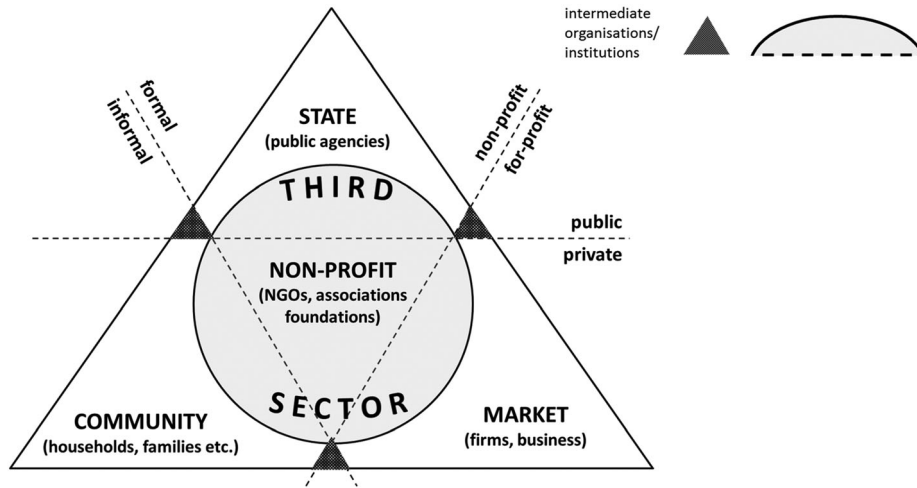


Figure 2. MAP: level of sectors.

Source: adopted from Evers and Laville (2004, p. 17).

The distinction between actors at different levels of aggregation proposed by the MaP serves to clarify distinctions and levels of aggregations in actor categorizations. At the level of sectors, the distinction is based on general characteristics and 'logic' of a sector (i.e. formal vs. informal, for-profit vs. non-profit, public vs. private) (see Figure 2). In both scientific and public discourses, sectors and other collectives are often referred to as 'actors', in the sense of being viewed as entities that hold agency. For instance, there are discussions about how 'the government' assumes responsibilities (ROB, 2012), and about 'how local governments fill their facilitative role' (Bakker, Denters, Oude Vrielink, & Klok, 2012, p. 395). While the intentionality and strategic agency of such broad entities can be questioned, it cannot be denied that there is discursive framing of sectors 'as actors' in many public debates. The MaP serves to emphasize that even though sectors in themselves can and often are framed as 'actors', they can also be seen as specific 'institutional contexts' or 'discursive fields' (Pesch, 2015) in which more specific collective or individual actors (see Figures 3 and 4) operate and with which they interact. As such, the MaP adapts and extends the Welfare Mix model by specifying different levels of actor aggregation and unpacking the broad categories of general sectors.

Moreover, sectors can also be viewed as sites of struggle and/or cooperation between different individual actors (e.g. the state as interaction between politicians, voters and policy-makers, the market as interaction between consumers and producers). In each sector, individual actors tend to be constructed in a different manner following the specific sector logic, ranging from 'resident' or 'neighbour' to 'citizen' or 'consumer'. This is what we refer to as *roles* of individual actors. One single individual can be referred to through different roles in different sector logics, for example, a policy-maker is also a neighbour, consumer and possible a volunteer in his free time (see Figure 3).

In this understanding, individual actors are both performing and using social roles (Callero, 1994). These roles are understood as 'social constructions that are widely recognized as legitimate and normal features of the social world'



Figure 3. MAP: level of individual actors.

(Collier & Callero, 2005, p. 47). Typically, these roles are ‘ideal-type’ images which are shared in specific sociocultural contexts and are assumed to be real and acted upon. Mostly, they are seen to be related to a set of agreed-upon activities, rights and responsibilities that are part of a particular sector logic and as such reproduce the logic. However, roles can also be viewed as resources, which are used by individuals to access cultural, social or material resources, and as such, a role can be a ‘vehicle for agency’ (Callero, 1994, p. 230). Our focus on *transition politics* acknowledges that there is a continuous negotiation of roles as a site of power, struggle and contestation (see Section 4).

Besides focusing on individual actors, we also distinguish the level of organizational actors such as organizations, social entities, groups, or networks. Also, these may operate in different sector logics simultaneously, for example, an energy cooperative can combine the logic of the market, the Third Sector and the community within its organizational fabric (see Figure 4).

The purpose of the MaP is to explore (1) how individuals, groups and organizations act and relate within different sector logics, (2) which sector logics tend to

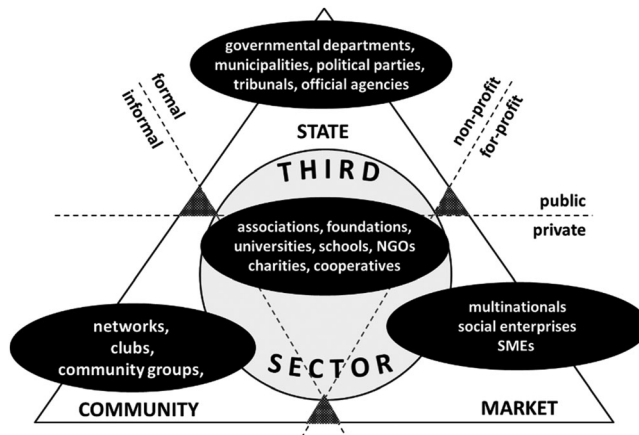


Figure 4. MAP: level of organizations.

be 'dominant' in the actions and discourses of specific organizations, groups and individuals, and (3) how the power relations between and within the sectors, organizational and individual roles shift over time. We discuss this more in depth in the next section.

4. Multi-actor Perspective as (Shifting) Power Relations and (Dis)Empowerment Challenges

So far, we introduced the implicit and explicit power perspectives in transition research (Section 2) and we introduced the MaP in terms of its different levels of actor categorizations (Section 3). We now turn to the question how these relate to one another, and more specifically, we extend the MaP in terms of conceptualizing power relations and (dis)empowerment processes *between* actors. This is particularly relevant for understanding the politics of sustainability transitions. Sustainability transitions are not only about socio-*technical* transformation but also about socio-*political* change, such as a transition from a hegemonic formalized economy to a more informal social economy, or a transition from centralized governance structures to more civil self-organization. For instance, in the energy transition, it is not only about a socio-technical transition from fossil-based fuels to renewable energy, but it is also a socio-political transition from centralized for-profit energy companies, to decentralized, not-for-profit community-based and/or Third Sector-based energy cooperatives (Avelino et al., 2014; Frantzeskaki et al., 2013; Walker, Devine-Wright, Hunter, High, & Evans, 2010). There is an increasing attention for such political and social dimensions of transitions, particularly in adjacent fields of research on service innovation and social innovation (e.g. Franz, Hochgerner, & Howaldt, 2012; Moulaert, 2013). The MaP as a heuristic framework helps to specify, explicate and discuss such socio-political transition dynamics in terms of shifting actor roles and relations. In this section, we specify how the MaP helps to do this.

4.1. *Shifting Power Relations Between Sectors*

A sharper understanding of (shifting) power relations between actors is necessary to specify the implicit assumptions on power relations that underlie frameworks in transition research, in particular, the MLP, (see Section 2). Strictly speaking, the MLP does not predefine which type of sectors or actors are situated in 'niches' or 'regimes'. However, there is a tendency in empirical analyses and in management applications, to equate the regime with 'government and large corporations', while associating niches with 'small entrepreneurs and/or civil society' (see for instance Geels, 2014, Section 2). This is partly a result of the inherent conceptual premise in the MLP that regimes have 'more power' than niches (Avelino, 2011) and partly a result of the empirical focus on government-dominated sectors such as energy, mobility and water. The MaP helps to specify and question such underlying assumptions, and also to systematically and explicitly analyse the complex diversity of the (ascribed/constructed) roles of different sectors and actors in multi-level transition dynamics. The MaP aims to complement empirical MLP-analyses in the following two ways: first, to explicate the internal power dynamics in terms of the MLP *within each* of the four sectors of the MaP and second, to characterize the levels of the MLP, especially 'the regime', in more actor- and sector-specific terms. For instance, the dominance of the current

fossil-based energy regime is not only reproduced through large corporations or government departments, but also by the collective exercise of individuals in different roles, for example, as consumers and voters.

In much of the transitions literature, so far, civil society is mostly characterized in terms of 'grassroots innovation' and/or 'niche-activities' (e.g. Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012). The MaP helps us to see civil society beyond such niche-focus, as it also acknowledges the Third Sector as 'a different articulation of the social into economic life by often-powerful socioeconomic organisations and not only the petty underscaled or undercapitalised local initiatives of moaning communities' (Moulaert and Ailenei, 2005, pp. 2043–2044/36). While explicitly acknowledging the significant contribution of grassroots community activism, it is also important to recognize that the Third Sector encompasses more than that, including—in fact—rather powerful regime structures such as, for example, labour unions, large cooperatives and religious networks.

In the MaP, we can conceptualize each of the four sectors (state, market, community, Third Sector) as in itself harbouring internal power dynamics between 'niches' and 'regimes'. For instance, in the state sector, the regime refers to the dominant cultures, structures and practices that are utilized to fulfil the state function (e.g. centralization, institutionalization, short-term political cycles, formal democracy and bureaucracy). The state sector, however, also includes innovative practices and new pockets of culture and structure that deviate from this 'regime'. The same applies to the community (e.g. at different points in time dominated by religion or individualism), the market and the Third Sector. When making an MLP analysis, the challenge then becomes to move beyond a simplistic association of, for example, 'the state' with 'the regime', but rather, to search for regime elements as well as niche elements in each and every sector, including the state. Therein, it is important to remember that 'the state' does refer not only to government departments or politicians, but also to the individual behaviour of 'citizens' and 'voters', and how they collectively help shape 'the state'. The power relations between governments and citizens, politicians and voters, national and local departments, are all part of the niche-regime dynamics within 'the state' sector. The same applies to 'the market'—this does not only consist of corporations and entrepreneurs, but also of consumers and clients, who shape the market 'demand'. As such, each sector in itself harbours power interactions between top-down and bottom-up dynamics, niches and regimes, organizational and individual roles. In a way, such understanding is already an inherent part of the MLP, given its background in theories of evolutionary economics and structuration (Geels, 2005; Rip & Kemp, 1998). The MaP helps to remind and specify this multi-layered understanding of innovation dynamics when referring to actor categories.

Furthermore, MaP serves to analyse power relations *between* different sectors. The reason why the 'regime' is often associated with the state and the market is not an arbitrary one. We can argue that in modern western societies, during the past decades of welfare state development combined with neo-liberal privatizations, our societies have been dominated by a two-sector state-market logic and the influence of the Third Sector has been underestimated:

For much of our recent history, social and political discourse has been dominated by a 'two-sector model' that acknowledged the existence of only two social spheres outside of the family unit—the market and the state, or business and government. (Salomon, 2010)

Thus, it is not surprising that many more specific socio-technical regimes in separate domains (e.g. energy, health, food, transport, etc.) also seem to be dominated by state-market logic, more so than by community or Third Sector logic (see Figure 5). In the past decades, western societies have been characterized by a welfare state that has increasingly outsourced services to the market, resulting in a wide variety of ‘public private partnerships’ and widespread ‘neo-liberal’ discourses in which state bureaucratic logic and/or economic market logic is increasingly applied to all dimensions of life and society.

Interestingly, however, we currently observe a renewed interest in Third Sector arrangements as ‘a way out of the stalemate that has resulted from a decade and more of management-driven public sector “reforms”’ (Scott-Cato, 2010, p. 337), viewed as providing an alternative to privatization, combining the efficiency of private firms with the social commitment of public services, and democratizing the relationship between owners, consumers and workers (Laville, 2003 ; Ridley-Duff, 2009). We also observe a new surge of ‘community-based’ initiatives, and that the state is increasingly calling upon ‘the community’ to take over public services. This is especially apparent in discussions on welfare state reform such as the ‘Big Society’—as part of which governments are reorganizing their responsibilities and tasks vis-à-vis their citizens (Jordan, 2012; Scott, 2010; Tonkens, Grootgegoed, & Duyvendank, 2013). This then raises a bewildering amount of challenges and questions on how, when and why ‘the community’ is supposed to take over in a world where state- and market-logics have prevailed for decades. If we reflect on the power relations, as illustrated in Figure 5, a ‘retreat’ by the (welfare) state in order to make space for the community, implies a risk that the market logic takes over (rather than the community logic) (Swyngedouw, 2005). According to the Civil Exchange (2015), this is precisely what happened in Britain where large companies rather than the local or voluntary sector benefit most from public service contracts. What we also see in this debate is a formalization of what is meant by community (Ransome, 2011), which by definition should be informal but once specified is referred to as social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups—that is, formalized Third

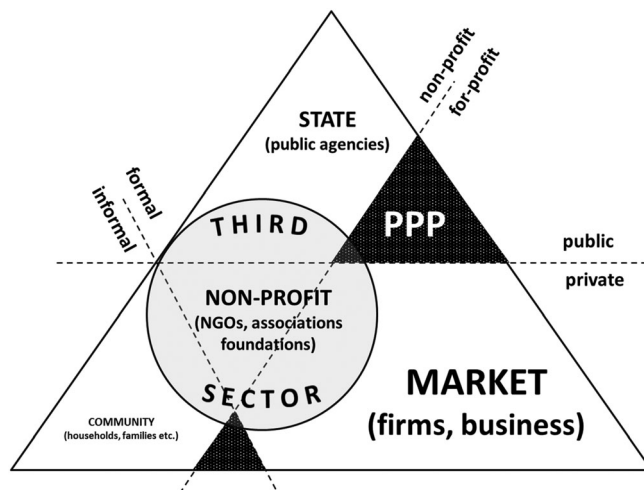


Figure 5. Dominance of state-market sectors and public–private partnerships (PPS) in Western Society.

Sector entities. This is one way in which the formal logic of the market and state continue to prevail, despite of original intentions to increase the role of the informal community.

4.2. *Elaborating a Typology of Shifting Power Relations Between Actors*

So far, we have mostly discussed the relations between sectors in terms of which sector has ‘more’ or ‘less’ power—as visualized in Figure 5. However, we argue that there are much more complex power dynamics to consider, namely the different kinds of power that are exercised by different actors, and the different types of interdependencies and interactions between those different types of power exercise. Here, we come back to the literature review of power understanding in transition research, as discussed in Section 2.

In order to analyse shifting power relations, we propose to make use of the ‘horizontal’ typology of power relations (Avelino, 2011; see also Avelino & Rotmans, 2009, 2011), which distinguishes among three different types of power relations between actors: (1) A has power *over* B, (2) A has *more/less* power than B to do x, and (3) A and B have a *different* kind of power. These different relations of power may coincide, but one does not necessarily follow from the other. If A exercise ‘more power’ in comparison to B, it does not necessarily mean that A has power ‘over’ B. And vice versa: if A has power ‘over’ B, it does not automatically follow that A has ‘more’ power than B in absolute terms. Moreover, each of these types of power relations can have various manifestations, ranging from mutual dependence, one-sided dependence and independence, to cooperation, competition and coexistence (see overview in Table 1).

Exercising different types of power is partly a matter of mobilizing different types of resources (human, mental, monetary, artefactual or natural resources); for example, some actors may exercise economic power, while other may exercise ideological or geo-political power. Moreover, we distinguish between *reinforcive power* (to reinforce existing institutions), *innovative power* (to develop new

Table 1. Typology of power relations

Type of relation	Manifestation of power relations		
<i>Power ‘over’</i>	Mutual dependence A depends on B but B also depends on A => A and B have power over each other	One-sided dependence A depends on B but B does not depend on A => B has power over A	Independence A and B do not depend on each other => A and B have no power over each other
<i>‘More/less’ power to</i>	Cooperation A exercises more power than B, but A and B have similar, collective goals	Competition A exercises more power than B, while A and B have mutually exclusive goals =>	Co-existence A exercises more power than B, A and B have independent co-existent goals
<i>‘Different’ power to</i>	Synergy A’s and B’s different power exercises enable and support one another	Antagonism A’s and B’s different power exercises restrict, resist or disrupt one another	Neutrality A’s and B’s different power exercises do not (significantly) affect one another

Source: Avelino (2011).

resources) and *transformative power* (to develop new institutions) (Avelino, 2011). There is a qualitative difference between these different types of power exercise, which also means that the concept of regimes having ‘more’ power than niches can be questioned. While regime-actors may exercise more ‘reinforcive power’, niche-actors may exercise more innovative and transformative power.

Using this typology implies that the earlier mentioned discussion about the shifting power relations between, for example, the state and the market, is not just a matter of asking which sector has more or less power, but also about analysing (new) levels of dependencies between one and the other (power *over*), and about reconsidering (new) task divisions between sectors regarding the different types of power they exercise (different power *to*). This is particularly relevant in the context of sustainability transitions, as it relates to the question of *who is responsible* for investing in long-term sustainability matters, who can afford to engage in risk-taking transformative activities, and who is made dependent on whom in the process. Political debates about sustainability transitions often revolve around such issues of responsibility and dependency.

Besides the application of the power typology to reflect on the shifting power relations *between* sectors, it can also be used for analysing the shifting power relations *within* those sectors between individual and collective actor roles. For instance, the power relations between poor and rich (community), between national and local departments (state), between employers and employees (market), between benefactors and beneficiaries (Third Sector) (see Figure 6). Understanding the politics of sustainability transitions is for a large part a matter of understanding the implications of sustainability discourses and transformation processes for such micro-level power relations.

For instance, if welfare states indeed retreat and increasingly leave care issues to ‘the community’, this has implications for gender relations; some have argued that, for example, ‘informal care’ largely ends up on the shoulders of women more than men (Tonkens & de Wilde, 2013). Or, if a ‘transition to sustainability energy’ mainly relies on the increase of ‘community energy’, this could have implications for the power relations between different socio-economic classes in terms of differ-

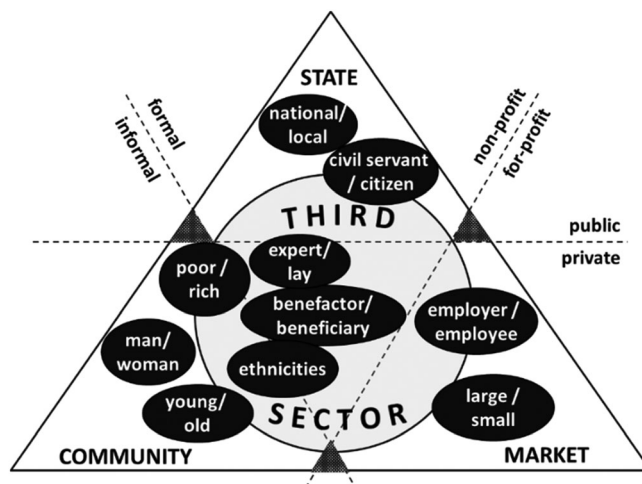


Figure 6. Power relations and hierarchies between individual actors roles within the different sectors.

ent levels of inclusion/exclusion vis-à-vis community initiatives (cf. Uitermark, 2012).

4.3. *Processes of (Dis)Empowerment*

Studying shifting power relations is also a matter of studying (dis)empowerment dynamics. Based on notions of ‘self-efficacy’, organization psychology has conceptualized (dis)empowerment as the process by which individuals gain and/or lose intrinsic motivation to engage in certain activities (e.g. activities to contribute to a sustainability transitions). Thomas and Velthouse (1990) argue that the extent to which individuals are intrinsically motivated to engage in an activity depends on the extent to which they have a sense of impact, competence, meaning and choice regarding that activity. In previous work, we have related these insights to our understanding of power dynamics in sustainability transitions, and to processes of transition management (Avelino, 2009, 2011).

Critical perspectives on empowerment emphasize that attempts to empower others may have the paradoxical effect of disempowering them through the creation of a new dependency relation (e.g. Hardy & Leiba-O’Sullivan, 1998). The MaP makes us question which actors (try to) empower which other actors, and what are the resulting (dis)empowerment dynamics. In public discourses, there is an idea of ‘the state’ and especially those in the role of ‘policy-makers’, having/wanting to ‘empower’ ‘the community’. Despite many good intentions, such empowerment attempts might have unintended and ironic counter-effects, in the sense that policies that are designed to ‘empower’ people, in themselves require people to already be ‘empowered’, in terms of being able enough to implement the new policy design. While public policies attempt ‘to get people to do things that they might not otherwise do’ or to ‘enable people to do things that they might not have done otherwise’, it often occurs that these people ‘lack incentives or capacity to take the actions needed’ or ‘disagree with the values implicit in the means or ends’ (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, pp. 513–514). Moreover, there might be tensions between the different roles that are played by actors at different levels. For instance, several energy laws are made—in part—to protect consumers from for-profit energy companies. However, when those very laws impede the subsistence of community energy initiatives that are owned by consumers, they can ironically disempower the very actors that they originally intended to protect and empower. As a member of a community-owned energy initiative described a Dutch energy law:

[This law] ‘is a bureaucracy that aims to protect consumers; but we as local energy companies are the victims. The irony is that we ARE the consumer . . . we want to do it ourselves, but the government says ‘that is not allowed, because we decide what the logic should be’ (. . .) We get stuck in a bureaucratic mill that does not allow us to take our own responsibility’. (Interview board member of community energy initiative, Avelino et al., 2013)

Such (dis)empowerment paradoxes and ironies can be reflected upon by more carefully considering how and under which conditions people feel (dis)empowered. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) operationalize empowerment in terms of ‘intrinsic motivation’ and argue that the extent to which individuals are intrinsically motivated to engage in an activity depends on the extent to which they

have a sense of impact, competence, meaning and choice regarding that activity. The MaP helps to (re)consider how individuals are 'intrinsically motivated', 'empowered' or 'disempowered', depending on their individual roles and contexts. One can argue that one's sense of impact, competence, meaning and choice is different in one's role as consumer than it is in one's role as voter, activist or family member. This has serious implications for (dis)empowerment processes. If policy-makers want to 'empower' the 'community' to be more 'pro-active' or 'participatory', it does matter whether they approach the individuals in that community as, for example, 'consumers', 'voters', 'tax-payers' and/or 'family members'. Playing into the intrinsic motivation of one specific role may hamper the intrinsic motivation of another role. Roles may also be used to empower oneself, namely by assuming a specific role an individual gains access to certain material, cultural or social resources.

5. Conclusions and Challenges for Future Research

This paper has set out to answer the following research question: how can we conceptualize *who* are the different actors exercising power in transition, and what are the (shifting) power relations between them? So far, theoretical frameworks and empirical analyses of power in transitions lack precision when it comes to distinguishing between different types and levels of actors. To fill this knowledge gap, we propose a MaP as a heuristic framework for specifying different categories of actors at different levels of aggregation. The MaP, which expands the Welfare Mix model in Third Sector studies, distinguishes among four sectors: (1) state, (2) market, (3) community and (4) third sector), and between actors at different levels of aggregation: (a) sectors, (b) organizational actors, and (c) individual actors. While sectors themselves can be viewed as 'actors', they can also be seen as specific 'institutional contexts' or 'discursive fields' in which organizational or individual actors operate and with which they interact. These sectors are not fixed entities: rather, the boundaries are contested, blurring, shifting and permeable, and they provide sites of struggle and cooperation between different actors.

The MaP contributes to the field of transition studies by specifying and nuancing simplified associations of 'regime' and 'niche' actors as brought forth by the MLP, by systematically and explicitly analysing the complex diversity of roles of different actors at different levels of aggregation. In doing so, the MaP serves to explore the *political implications* of sustainability transitions, in terms of shifting power relations between and within sectors, organizations and individual actors. We propose a power typology to analyse different kinds of power that are exercised by different actors at diverse levels, and the multiple forms of inter-dependencies and interactions between these actors. This typology implies that shifting power relations between, for example, state, market and community, are not just a matter of asking who has *more or less* power, but also about analysing the *different* types of power they exercise and how subsequent inter-dependencies change over time.

The development of a more elaborated actor perspective is especially timely. Such a perspective provides us with a conceptual language to critically analyse developments in the current context of reforms of state–society relationships and their meaning for sustainability transitions. It points to the underestimation of the community and the Third Sector in modern Western societies, during the past decades of Welfare-state development combined with neo-liberal privatiza-

tions, in which our societies have been dominated by a two-sector state-market logic. A MaP approach to the renewed interest in ‘empowering’ and ‘involving’ ‘the community’, stresses how empowerment differs depending on different sector logics and different actor roles. This serves to increase the understanding of the politics of sustainability transitions, with a focus on the political implications of transition processes on the (dis)empowerment of multiple actors.

In addition to its conceptual contribution to transition research, the MaP has a capacity-building and educational potential as an interactive tool to facilitate learning processes on multi-actor interactions in sustainability transitions. First tests have been conducted in the context of executive transition education for professionals, including in-company trainings, workshops, and master classes (Avelino & Wittmayer, 2014). A challenge for future research is to evaluate those experiences and to further develop the applicability of the MaP as a transdisciplinary facilitation tool. A related challenge concerns the elaboration of the MaP in relation to transition governance. Transition governance includes a focus on actor strategies for influencing sustainability transitions towards a desirable direction (Frantzeskaki et al, 2012; Grin et al., 2010; Loorbach, 2010). As such, assessing who are the different actors exercising power, and what are the (shifting) power relations between them, is relevant not only for the theoretical understanding of transition politics but also for the transdisciplinary research on transition governance. Besides a conceptual tool for *understanding* transition governance processes, we see the MaP as having practical value for the *application* of transition management (Loorbach & Rotmans, 2010). For instance, the MaP can be used as a mapping tool for identifying actor constellations in specific societal systems, and as a management tool to select and involve stakeholders in the formation of temporary transition networks. Testing this hypothesis is one of the various exciting avenues for future research.

Overall, the MAP contributes to the necessary critical debate on power, politics and agency in sustainability transition research—a stream of research that is showing the sustainability transitions research field a constructive mirror. As a field that is engaging explicitly with normative research towards sustainability, as illustrated by endeavours for transformative sciences in Germany (WBGU, 2011) or programs such as Future Earth by the ICSU (O’Riordan & Le Quere, 2013), a critical reflection on its own shortcomings is necessary. By proposing to more explicitly specify who the actors in transition processes are, and how we can distinguish them, we provide a heuristic framework for both analysis and action.

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