

Field-configuring events and action research: A case study from Sparta

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Abstract

FCE theory was developed within neo-institutional theory, the aim of which is to understand how institutions and organisations function and change. In this paper, we match this theory with another theoretical tradition: that of action research. We use this theoretical framework to analyse and reflect upon the SpARTathlo event in the Greek town of Sparta. We demonstrate how the framework enables both a more multifaceted and more comprehensive understanding of the event, and how this has practical implications for the improvement of such events.

Key words: field-configuring events, action research, innovation, regional development.

Eventos de configuración de campo e investigación-acción: Un estudio de caso de Esparta

Resumen

La teoría de eventos de configuración de campo (FCE, por sus siglas en inglés) fue desarrollada dentro de la teoría neo-institucional, cuyo objetivo es comprender cómo funcionan y cambian las instituciones y las organizaciones. En este artículo, comparamos esta teoría con otra tradición teórica: la de la investigación-acción. Utilizamos este marco teórico para analizar y reflexionar sobre el evento SpARTathlo en la ciudad griega de Esparta. Demostramos cómo el marco permite una comprensión más multifacética y más amplia del evento, y cómo esto tiene implicaciones prácticas para la mejora de tales eventos.

Palabras clave: Eventos de configuración de campo, investigación-acción, innovación, desarrollo regional

1. Introduction

During the last 10-15 years there has been a growing interest in the concept and theory of Field-Configuring Events (FCEs). FCEs are settings in which people from diverse organisations and with diverse purposes assemble either periodically or on a one-time basis, under some common agenda (Lampel and Meyer, 2008). According to FCE theory, such events have significant effects on the field in which they function as *temporary focus points*. During a FCE, relationships emerge, discussions are initiated, information is shared, project

ideas are proposed, etc, all of which continue to have effects even after the event, as participants follow up the various initiatives that were initiated during the event, or act upon the information that they got access to. In this sense, the FCE *configures* its corresponding field, i.e., gives it structure and form. Or, as a field is never static, but should rather be conceived as a complex and dynamic web of trajectories, we may say that the FCE gives structure and form to such dynamics, functioning as a temporary, dynamic hub to a multitude of emerging developmental trajectories. To introduce a simile, we could compare the FCE to a stone dropped in water, creating motion where it hits the water, but also concentric circles moving outwards in an increasing distance.

FCE theory was developed within the neo-institutional theory, the aim of which is to understand how institutions and organizations function and change. In this paper, we match this theory to another theoretical tradition: that of action research. The idea of a connection between the two traditions is based on the insight that they both address the phenomenon of *change* in social fields, albeit in a complementary way.

Action research is typically motivated by an endeavour to initiate change or to organise a change process, preferably in order to improve conditions for a group, an organisation or a community (Eikeland & Finsrud, 1995; McNiff, 2013). When action researchers and stakeholders join forces to initiate an action research project, thus, producing the *contextualised knowledge* that is typical of action research, this knowledge is not sought for merely, or even primarily, theoretical reasons; it is from the start dedicated to serve as the basis for the change process that the project aims to accomplish. As has already been stated, FCE theory aims to understand how institutions and organisations function and change. Both FCE theory and action research, thus, are oriented at change (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996).

Another commonality is the emphasis on events. In FCE theory this is the very centre of the theory. However, events also have a significant function in action research, for instance, in the form of dialogue conferences that are organised to collect and reflect on knowledge, make decisions, and design plans for common action (Ekman Philips & Huzzard, 2007; Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986). Our idea, thus, was that by matching FCE theory and action research, one could use FCE theory to achieve better and more insightful descriptions and analyses of how such conferences, and other events, function within action research, which in the next round could lay the ground for designing even more successful events. A central aspect of FCE theory, is that it is not insignificant how an event is organised. If, from the start, one takes into account that the purpose of the event is to promote an optimal, productive effect, not only *during* the event, but also *after* the event, in the field that the event configures, then one may design the event with this in mind, and thus be able to design more productive events.

In the present paper we will explore the productivity of this perspective by applying it on an event organised as part of an action research project located at the Greek town of Sparta. The aim of the participatory action research (PAR) project was to empower and mobilise local unemployed and underemployed citizens and related local actors, by jointly addressing un/under-employment as a collective problem. It sought to tackle the problem of un/under-employment through a bottom-up action for sustainable economic recovery and local development. As part of this project, an event was organised under the heading of “SpARTathlo – Routes of Taste, Trade and Art” (from now on SpARTathlo). SpARTathlo

was designed as an extension of or an addition to another event, that for many years has been taking place annually in Sparta: the ultra-distance foot race of Spartathlon that draws numerous visitors to the city. The idea behind SpARTathlo, was to create a new event, parallel to this sporting event, in order to strengthen the local economy.

The paper focuses on the following research questions.

- Is it possible to describe and analyse events organised as part of an action research product, like the SpARTathlo in Sparta, as an FCE?
- What insights does such an analysis produce, that may be useful?
- How can such insights help improve the design of future events of this sort within action research?

2. Theory

According to Lampel and Meyer FCEs are:

Settings in which people from diverse organisations and with diverse purposes assemble periodically, or on a one-time basis, to announce new products, develop industry standards, construct social networks, recognise accomplishments, share and interpret information, and transact business. FCEs are arenas in which networks are constructed, business cards are exchanged, reputations are advanced, deals are struck, news is shared, accomplishments are recognised, standards are set, and dominant designs are selected. FCEs can enhance, reorient, or even undermine existing technologies, industries, or markets; alternately, they can become crucibles from which new technologies, industries, and markets emerge. (Lampel and Meyer, 2008, p. 1026).

FCEs have six defining characteristics, which constitute an operational definition:

1. FCEs assemble in one location actors from diverse professional, organizational, and geographical backgrounds.
2. FCEs' duration is limited, normally running from a few hours to a few days.
3. FCEs provide unstructured opportunities for face-to-face social interaction.
4. FCEs include ceremonial and dramaturgical activities.
5. FCEs are occasions for information exchange and collective sense-making.
6. FCEs generate social and reputational resources that can be deployed elsewhere and for other purposes.

What sort of fields does an FCE address? As can be noted by the above definitional remarks, FCE theory seems to have more to say on the FCEs configuring a field, than the field being configured. In the FCE literature, we find numerous examples of what various authors have conceived as fields, such as the transnational climate policy field (Schüßler et al., 2013), the emerging field of HIV/AIDS treatment advocacy in Canada (Maguire et al., 2004), or the commercial music field associated with the annual Grammy ceremony of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS) (Anand and Watson, 2004). Still there seems to be a lack of a more general discussion of what defining marks "something" needs to have in order to count as a field, or how it is useful to employ the concept in the first place. To find a more general discussion of the field concept as such, thus, we need to go back to the neo institutional literature, or even the broader sociological literature, from which the field concept of the FCE literature emerged.

According to Martin (2003) the word “field” in sociology is used in three overlapping or interrelated senses. In the first, there is the purely topological sense emphasised by Lewin: the field is conceived as an analytic area of simplified dimensions in which we position persons or institutions. Second, there is the sense of a field as an organisation of forces. Third, there is the sense of the field as a field of contestation, a battlefield (Martin, 2003).

If we narrow the focus down to the neo institutional concept of organisational field (OF), several approaches have been suggested, as to how this concept may be defined. In a seminal paper from 1983, DiMaggio and Powell define the concept as follows:

By organisational field, we mean those organisations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognised area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organisations that produce similar services or products. The virtue of this unit of analysis is that it directs our attention not simply to competing firms [...], or to networks of organisations that actually interact [...] but to the totality of relevant actors. (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983)

The connection between the members of an OF, according to DiMaggio and Powell, may include, but are not restricted to, ‘actual interaction’. OF may also be more or less formalised. Moreover, they may have the form of contractual relationships, they may be embedded within existing organizations like professional associations or labour unions, or they may be emerging, still lacking clear structure or boundaries (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Finally, the OF needs to be recognised as an area of institutional life. The presence of actual connections is in itself not enough. They need to be perceived as constituting some kind of a whole.

Two potential challenges arise from this account of an OF: One arises from the seemingly prolific list of connection types that, according to the theory, may constitute a field. A second challenge arises when we look at the final definitional criterion above: How, for instance, do we decide what constitutes a recognized area of institutional life? What does the term ‘recognised’ mean, and who is to judge whether the criterion is satisfied?

Finally, we are faced with the challenge that most of the definitional criteria for an OF seem to have the form of gradual scales. According to DiMaggio and Powell, the ‘structuration’ of an OF consists, e.g., of ‘an increase in the extent of interaction among organisations in the field’, and ‘the development of a mutual awareness among participants in a set of organizations that they are involved in a common enterprise’ (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Here, the question arises: Is there a threshold level for when the level of interaction and mutual awareness is high enough to constitute a field, or is any level sufficient?

Instead of seeing this openness as a weakness, we side with those who see it as the strength of the OF concept.

First, it secures a unique generality to the concept, which makes it applicable in a wide range of social systems. This also gives the OF concept a unique heuristic value: It allows researchers to approach any landscape of actors standing in some relation to each other, and start exploring the structure without any preconceived idea regarding what this structure should be or how the actors should be connected. As a heuristic tool, it opens up for looking into emerging or established networks or agglomerations with a fresh eye without any preconceived notions limiting the investigations. This might be especially valuable for emerging agglomerations. At the same time, an OF cannot be *anything*. Where there is no interaction or mutual awareness, there is no OF. In the OF literature, several versions of this position are represented. For instance, the OF-concept is frequently used as a tool for analysing

emergent fields, or it is used to explore fields (both emergent and more established) with an unusual composition of actors. For instance, Powell et al. (2005) prefer to conceptualise 'biotechnology' as a field, rather than an industry or population, as it is, according to these authors, not a separate industrial sector with well-defined boundaries, but rather a collection of widely heterogeneous members. They conclude: 'Field captures the diversity of organisations more aptly than any other term' (Walter W. Powell et al., 2005). A similar point is made by Scott et al. (2000) who see the heuristic value of the OF-concept in its multidimensionality, incorporating in the field both organisation sets and organisation populations, in addition to critical 'vertical' relations, such as the relationship between headquarters and local establishments, or professional and governmental actors that establish the rules and norms governing practice [within the field] (Scott et al., 2000).

Davis and Marquis (2005) promote an interpretation of the OF-concept, focusing not so much on the organisations that may be seen as constituting a field, as on the individual members of these organisations, and therein they also see the value of the concept. They characterize modern organisations as 'dense spots in networks of contracts between sovereign individuals' (Davis and Marquis, 2005). Rather than studying these 'spots', they recommend 'taking the field as the relevant unit of analysis and remaining agnostic about whether it is composed of organisations, individuals, or other combinations of actors' (Davis and Marquis, 2005). They conclude with a hope that a general 'theory of fields' will eventually fill the space held by organisation theory (Davis and Marquis, 2005).

McAdam and Scott (2005) see the heuristic value of the OF-concept not only in that it opens up for an exploration of heterogeneous but related actors, but also for exploring them in their context. More than traditional network-research that studies contact points and frequency of contacts at network nodes (see e.g. Granovetter, 1983), field theory allows the researcher to also explore, for instance, the culture and norms of the field in which these nodes are embedded (see e.g. DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), or the institutional logic characterizing the field, i.e., the belief system and associated practices that predominate (Scott et al., 2000).

A central question in OF-theory, is how the field came into existence in the first place, and what may count as its structuring mechanisms. Again, several answers are suggested; from rules and norms set by states and professional systems (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), through collaborations (Phillips et al., 2000), through institutional entrepreneurs (Maguire et al., 2004), to conflicts and debates (Wooten and Hoffman, 2008, cf. also Schüßler et al., 2013). According to Martin (2003) fields arise whenever a set of individuals is striving after a similar goal. Gibbons (2004) sees OFs as including organisations that produce related outputs, use related resources, and rely on similar technologies (Gibbons, 2004). Scott (1994) states that the notion of field connotes the existence of a community of organisations that partake of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and forcefully with one another than with actors outside the field.

In a summary of the literature, Lampel and Meyer (2008) suggest that fields begin as agglomerations of individuals, groups, and organisations that meet sporadically at first, and then with increasing frequency. These contacts foster competitive and collaborative interactions, which, depending on the circumstances, can trigger field evolution. At the structural level, the field may then begin to acquire macro structural features that will reinforce field permanence. At the cognitive level, field members gain awareness of the field in its totality,

and acquire identity as field members. The two levels, the structural and cognitive, reinforce each other (cf. also Walter W. Powell et al., 2005 and, Meyer et al., 2005).

While early OF-theory had a main focus on mechanisms of isomorphism that make the members of a field more similar (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), later OF-theory has become more interested in how such fields change over time, thereby emphasizing their dynamics and character. In explaining field evolution, the concept of field configuring events (FCEs) has come to occupy a central position. According to Lampel and Meyer (2005), FCEs are ‘temporary social organisations, such as tradeshows, professional gatherings, technology contests, and business ceremonies that encapsulate and shape the development of professions, technologies, markets, and industries’ (cf. also Lampel and Meyer, 2008). FCEs are often initiated or organized by institutional entrepreneurs with an overt field-building agenda (Lampel and Meyer, 2008, Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006).

The FCE-concept brings at least two significant gains to the OF-literature. Firstly, it draws new light on the boundary problem associated with the OF-concept, by stating that the relation between FCE and field is recursive: FCEs are not only mechanisms of field configuration but also products of a field, shaped by field developments in a recursive process (Schüßler et al., 2013, Lampel and Meyer, 2008). FCEs, thus, are both the products and the drivers of field evolution: Under certain conditions the field gives rise to FCEs, but once they come into being, FCEs generate their own evolutionary pressures that further shape the field’s cognitive, normative, and/or social structures (Lampel and Meyer, 2008). This is also relevant for understanding who is recognised as belonging to the field, or not: One has to study the events; who is allowed to attend the FCEs, in which roles, and with what power to influence the processes involved.

The second gain of the FCE-concept is that it offers the researcher a way to understand the evolution of a field by exploring in detail the features of the FCE that ‘configures’ it, e.g., everything from its management or facilitation, rituals, and other major design dimensions, to the myriad of micro-meetings and micro-processes that take place in a FCE. Here, FCE theory also connects to another research tradition exploring the interface between the social/pragmatic and physical/aesthetical, see for instance Antal and Friedman (2017). The idea of recursivity between field and FCE also reminds us that we need to see the field not so much as a fixed structure, but as a continuous process, or a dialectical dynamism between OF, FCE, OF, and so on.

At the centre of our argument, thus, lies the idea that a field emerges when agents, who initially were only loosely connected, or not connected at all, gradually develop the awareness of being relevant to each other in a new way (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). This does not mean, necessarily, that they have a common goal, or engage in a common project, as in a traditional collaboration, even if this may also be the case. However, the field emerges when people within it start to think of their own goals and projects as partially overlapping with those of the others within the emerging field. And, it emerges when they develop an interest in what the others do, *because* their plans and action have a potential effect on their own life and activities.

Sparta as a field and SpARTathlo as a FCE

It is time to return to the case of Sparta and the SpARTathlo intervention. We will first describe the local context and the general PAR project within which the event was organised.

We then will proceed by discussing how using FCE theory to analyse and reflect on the case may produce new, productive insights.

The local context

When the project was initiated, Sparta and the surrounding region was already heavily affected by the global financial crisis, with employment deterioration and shrinking job opportunities. The total workforce in the Peloponnese region, where Sparta is situated, is 260.000 and the general employment rate is 62%. The employment rate for people between 55-64 years is 44,2% (Eurostat, 2015). The economic mix of the region includes mostly agriculture and tourism but small scale industrial activity has grown over the last years. Peloponnese's contribution to the national agricultural production is, however, significant. Main agricultural products are fruits (53% of national production), olive oil (65% of national production) and potatoes (11% of national production). The Peloponnese is also famous for its wine producing areas, such as Nemea and Mandinea.

Sparta is one of the main cities of the Peloponnese and the capital of the prefecture of Laconia. The town of Sparta has 35.259 inhabitants, and Laconia 89.600 inhabitants (census 2011). According to the 2011 census, the majority of the population in Laconia is engaged in the tertiary sector, the primary production sector follows, and last comes the secondary sector. Tourism is a significant source of income, as the modern town is built on the location of the ancient Sparta, which was a prominent city-state in ancient Greece. Sparta also lies close to other famous archeological sites, like Mystras, a World Heritage Site.

The analysis of the predominant production structure in Laconia and salaried employment for 2013-2015, demonstrates that entrepreneurship in Laconia has increased moderately behind the national average by 10.32% (ERGANI Information System, Hellenic Ministry of Labour and Social Security). On a national scale, entrepreneurship increased by 13.3% from 2013 to 2015. Nevertheless, although the number of salaried employees increased by 23,57%, ERGANI data show that hirings counteract lay-offs. Another element, important to understand the consequences of the crisis on the labour market landscape in Laconia, is that employers seem to prefer part-time and rotation workers over full time employees: the share of the latter in total hiring decreased from 64.4% in 2013 to 45.5% in 2016 (Tsampra, Gerats & Bimpas 2016).

The PAR project

The PAR project within which the SpARTathlo event was organised, was established in the framework of a research project which included three main work packages. The two first work packages aimed at investigating the problem of un/underemployment at the national, regional and local level, while the third work package involved a PAR component with the establishment of a PAR group in Sparta.

The aim of the PAR group was to empower the un/underemployed along with other relevant social actors/stakeholders in Sparta, and to transform and reconstruct views and

practices relevant to the problem of underutilisation of human resources associated with un/underemployment. The next step was to discuss and design collaborative actions addressing this problem. Last, but not least, a longer-term objective was to initiate a process that could serve as the basis for policy reforms and socio-economic development at a broader level.

Identification of local stakeholders to be involved in the PAR group

The identification of participants is among the first critical steps of the PAR process (McNiff 2013). As the project started, there was a previous relationship of trust and good cooperation between the main researcher in the project, and key local stakeholders, based on an earlier project. This was helpful for the task of the identification of the appropriate participants. By means of these pre-existing contacts, a first list of suggested members to the PAR group was set up. The selection was based on a search for participants that would be able to contribute to a meaningful discussion about the problem of un/underemployment at the local level, and with resources to generate and implement a collaborative action plan that could address the problem. More specifically, the main criteria employed for the identification and selection of suitable participants in the PAR group were:

- Their position in organizations/agencies relevant to the project and their capacity within these organisations to initiate change. This was not necessarily the directors of the organisations. What mattered was their degree of influence, formal or informal, within the organisation.
- Their willingness to contribute to the process and undertake the role of a co-researcher.
- For the un/underemployed participants of the group in particular, the main criterion was their willingness to actively contribute to the process. It should be added that although it was not considered as a criterion from the beginning, a gender perspective was included, as the two un/underemployed participants were also young women (under 40 years old) highly educated (master degree holders) with some working experience.

This initial stage of the project involved extensive dialogue between the researcher and the potential participants that had been identified, also drawing attention to the upcoming PAR process. Additionally, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with potential participants, in order to collect relevant information that would be useful in the design of the following process.

The members of the initial PAR group were as follows:

- Two representatives of the Sparta municipality (both were members of the municipal council, one of them was the mayor's adviser for agricultural development, the other was the president of the municipal committees for primary and secondary education with extensive experience in local development project planning).
- The president of the Federation of Professionals, Craftsmen and Merchants of Laconia (OEBEL)
- The president of the Chamber of Laconia,
- A representative of Greek Manpower Employment Organization (OAED)
- Representatives of the NGO Activate Now

- The CEO of a local company for community waste management with approximately 1.000 citizens shareholders (as this participation could also open a discussion about cyclical economy and the use of local resources for sustainable development)
- A representative of the local Directorate of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage
- Two young women, one expert in digital marketing and unemployed and another one with a degree in economics and underemployed.

Special reference should be made to *Activate Now*, a local NGO established by 9 young (under 35 years old) well educated (MAs and PhD) professionals from different fields (architecture, civil engineering, education, public lighting, digital marketing, etc.) Eight of the nine members of the organisation are women. The aim of the organisation is to contribute to local development through collaborative planning. The idea of SpARTathlo was proposed by Activate Now, which also led its implementation.

During the first meeting of the PAR group, participants were invited to reflect on the composition of the group, and to discuss whether there were other significant partners who should be invited into the process. The researcher contacted those suggested, and invited them to the next meetings.

In the second meeting, the group was thus enlarged with a farmer and president of a local co-operative of farmers, and the president of the local Workers Centre. The president of Laconia's Union of Hotels was invited to participate, but, although he expressed his interest, practical problems made it difficult for him to attend the meetings. However, the researcher had several discussions with him, and he was added to the mailing list of the PAR group. This proved to be a good strategy, as later he engaged himself in recruiting local hotels to the SpARTathlo event.

How the PAR group decided to organize the SpARTathlo event

Once the group was established, regular weekly meetings were convened, every time with a clear agenda. The first two meetings provided a space for participants to get to know each other better. Participants were also invited to prepare a brief presentation (no more than two pages) about their respective organisations, including three main sections:

- 1) Basic information about their organisation.
- 2) Actual and/or potential work of each organisation to generate new jobs. For the un/underemployed: how, in the past, they had sought suitable jobs.
- 3) Requests or ideas directed at the other members of the group, related to how *they* could collaborate in order to address un/underemployment better through concrete action.

Thus, the group discussed openly and self-critically actions/interventions already undertaken by their organisations, analysing their effectiveness or/and failures. As for the requests, only four out of the eleven members of the group were able to put forward specific requests.

In the third meeting, the group was also provided with systematic information about un/underemployment in the region, including the results of the first two work packages of the project. In the two following meetings, the members of the group then put forward ideas for collaborative projects and/or actions with the potential for stimulating local development, and for addressing the problem of un/underemployment.

Thus surfaced the idea to organise the SpARTathlo event. The background is as follows: Since 1984, a historic foot race has been organised, from Athens to Sparta (246km), following in the footsteps of the ancient messenger Fidioides, who ran to Sparta to announce the victory of the Athenians against the Persians in the Marathon battle in 490 B.C. John Foden, a British RAF Wing Commander and his colleagues revived the *Spartathlon race* in 1984, and since then it has taken place every year in late September. This so-called *ultramarathon* is organised by the International Spartathlon Association (I.S.A), a company established for this purpose. However, I.S.A is not located in Sparta, and neither the town of Sparta, nor its institutions and citizens, are formally involved in the event. Even the official awards ceremony takes place in Athens, not in Sparta. The only activity that has been organised by the municipality of Sparta during the event, is an evening of music and folk dance in the town's central square, after most of the athletes have ended the race.

The idea behind the SpARTathlo event was to use the existing sports event as an opportunity for organising also other activities in the city. The sports event was perceived by the PAR group as a territorial resource representing a competitive advantage for the town, with the potential to strengthen local economy and attract more tourists, if only the city could act on the opportunities that the ultramarathon offered.

More specifically, the objectives of SpARTathlo were defined as follows: Firstly, for the town, with its institutions and local market, to acquire ownership of an event closely connected to its historic past, and to capitalise on it. Secondly, to advertise and promote the city, with a special emphasis on the shops outside of the most central area of the city centre, and the less well known local products. Thirdly, to revive the local market in general, and increase the economic profit for the local shops and other commercial actors locally, during the three days of the Spartathlo sports event, by attracting more customers from the approximately 2.500 athletes and their companions visiting the city, as well as the local community.

Briefly on how SpARTathlo was organised, and how the event unfolded

The SpARTathlo event involved the establishment of a network of different locations around the town, including restaurants, shops, architect offices, art galleries and crafts shops, forming three routes: the routes of Taste, Trade and Art. An open invitation was distributed to potential participants, and 56 restaurants, shops, etc., responded positively. In the rest of this paper we will call them, for short, *the network*.

The members of this network were invited to develop "something special" related to the Spartathlon marathon. In response, several restaurants and cafes prepared special dishes and drinks named after the history of ancient Sparta, and/or they prepared food and drinks of special nutritional value for the athletes. Architects' offices prepared maps of the ancient town of Sparta, and displayed photos from archeological sites.

The three routes of Taste, Trade and Art were also visually represented by a special map, both available on paper and digitally. Special signs at the entrances of the shops, galleries, etc. with the logo of the action, and corresponding to the map's signs, were set up, and so was an art installation in the town center. Printed maps were distributed to the athletes and their companions before they came to Sparta, and maps were also available at selected spots during the event.

Additionally, a promotional marketing campaign was organised through social media and mass media. All of the 56 network locations were photographed, and short texts about their event-specific products/services were published. The facebook pages of the network members, and the blog of Activate Now were also used as information channels.

Outcomes

In what follows we present some of the outcomes of the event, based on the evaluation conducted after the event. More specifically, the main researcher in collaboration with the project implementation team from Activate Now designed a participatory evaluation process, involving the members of the network. A questionnaire was developed for this purpose and filled in through an extensive interview with them. The results were collected and analysed and a full evaluation report was drawn, according to the DAC evaluation criteria for projects, namely Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Impact and Sustainability (OECD, 1991). The report produced was discussed in two meetings: one with the members of the PAR group and another one with the members of the network and the members of the PAR group.

Overall, the action was found to have met its main objective which was to open innovative paths of social and economic development in the town based on its resources (territorial resources and highly skilled human resources) through the collaboration of local stakeholders.

The first intended result of the SpARTathlo intervention was the activation of the local community: this was achieved not only by the significant number of shop owners/craftsmen/artists who actively participated in the event, but also by the number of network members who created a new product or a new promotional action in the framework of SpARTathlo. 23 of the 43 members who took part in the evaluation, claimed they created new products.

Just as important, however, was the experience of participating in a joint, collective, action. When the members of the network were asked during the evaluation “did you feel that you participated in a collective action planning process for local development”, 67% answered that they felt they were involved “very much,” 12% stated “enough”, 7% answered “moderate”, 5% answered “a little” and 9% answered “no”. Following up on the negative responses demonstrated that the question surprised many participants, as they had not really reflected upon this dimension of the action. After explanations were provided, however, they changed their initial negative reaction and answered “very much” and “enough”.

The next expected result was the successful advertisement and promotion of the 56 members of the network, with an emphasis on the shops outside the most central area of the city centre, and the less well known local products. The event *to some extent* achieved this result. More specifically, to the relevant question the majority (58%) answered “very much” and “sufficiently”. In follow-up interviews most of the informants stated that there had been an increase of mobility on their facebook pages some days before and during the SpARTathlo, and they also received an increased number of “friend requests” with different than usual characteristics. A satisfied member of the network said she received “many likes and friend requests not only from regular citizens but also from colleagues and other professionals” and she was sure that “the event will yield more benefits in the near future.” Other professionals reported that a number of clients and acquaintances had informed them

that they had noticed relevant advertisements during the event, and thus gained new insight into their products and services. They also expressed admiration for inventiveness and creativity mobilised for the event.

On the other hand, 16% of those participating in the evaluation answered that they did not gain any benefits in terms of promotion of their shop/work. Taking a closer look at their cases, we found that they were somewhat different from the others. Three of them are not familiar with social media. Two of them were not satisfied with their photos and presentations, and another two mentioned errors in the map concerning their presentations.

Regarding growth in the customers base, the evaluation indicates that the goal was only moderately reached. Only 15% of the respondents stated that they observed a big/sufficient increase in the number of foreign customers in their shops, and about 18% reported an increase in local customers. A few members of the network said that several foreign customers appeared in their shops with the SpARTathlo maps in their hands. On the other hand, 75% of the professionals participating in the evaluation answered that there was no increase in foreign customers at all during the SpARTathlo event, and 50% said that they have not benefited at all in terms of local customers. Regarding the increase in local customers, a small percentage (about 7%) replied “do not know” because, as they explained, there was definitely an increase, but many factors may have contributed to this, not only the SpARTathlo event.

The evaluation of this specific aspect of the event should take into account that the increase in customers is perhaps best conceived as a longer-term goal that cannot be fully achieved through a three-day event. The evaluation suggests that SpARTathlo contributed *towards* this direction. Many network members expected that the promotion/advertising done through the event would continue to produce results for them also after the event, as a result of their enhanced visibility during the event. Equally important, the evaluation highlights the ways in which this longer-term objective can be achieved: One weakness found in the planning of the event is that the athletes are too tired to go around and explore the town directly after the marathon. Furthermore, the programme of the athletes and accompanying persons limits the free time spent in the town, at least this is how it has been until now, as most head quickly back to Athens for the final ceremony. Thus, a discussion was called for as to whether the athletes and their companions should be defined as the main target group of later events, if other groups should be targeted and advertisement should be adjusted accordingly, or whether the event itself should be designed in another way.

One of the ideas that emerged in this respect, involved the idea of Sparta becoming a sports tourist resort. Some members of the network, during the evaluation process, suggested concrete ideas about how this could be achieved. For example, two members suggested the organisation of a «half marathon road running event» (21km) organized by local stakeholders a couple of days before or after the ultramarathon itself. This race would then attract athletes and their companions from Greece and beyond.

Last but not least, for some stakeholders and people involved in this action, SpARTathlo highlighted the need of the town of Sparta for a coherent local development strategy including a well designed town branding process which could accommodate this kind of interventions. For others, it demonstrated the opposite: instead of such a “top down” process, one should rather go for more “bottom up” initiatives like SpARTathlo, with the potential to gradually lead to more collaborative social and economic change.

SpARTathlo as FCE

The point in introducing new concepts as analytic tools, is that they allow us to notice something in the object of study, that we perhaps would not have recognised without it. So, what does the concept of FCE contribute in analysing the SpARTathlo? We will use the six-point list of Lampel and Meyer as a starting point:

1. *FCEs assemble in one location actors from diverse professional, organizational, and geographical backgrounds.*

In our case, the SpARTathlo intervention assembled actors from diverse professional, organisational and geographical backgrounds. As mentioned above, there were 56 network members, along with the PAR group involved in the implementation of the event. The network members were mostly owners of restaurants, cafés and shops, art spaces and architect offices from Sparta. The network also included the owner of an organic farm and the president of a cooperative of farmers in a nearby village.

Last, but not the least, come the visitors and customers and others who used the maps or information produced specifically to the event, to discover the city of Sparta in a new way, facilitated by the event. We might even add the rest of the city, at least those who were somehow involved in the activities, as observers, dialogue partners or participants.

2. *FCEs' duration is limited, normally running from a few hours to a few days.*

SpARTathlo was a temporary social organisation, it lasted three days, from Friday the 30th of September to Sunday the 2nd of October 2016, that is, from the day the group of athletes started the race in Athens to the day they left the town of Sparta to return to Athens.

3. *FCEs provide unstructured opportunities for face-to-face social interaction.*

SpARTathlo met this condition, as it generated a unique opportunity for increased streams of communication and enhanced collaboration among those involved. For the network members and PAR members, a significant part of this interaction took place during the preparatory phase. Strictly spoken, this was not part of the event itself, however, as we will discuss below, it was intimately connected to it. The PAR group had three meetings focused on the discussion and preparation of the event. Additionally, they met with the project team, members of the Activate Now group and the members of the network in their shops, where they first informed them about the plan and started a collaboration in order to prepare the promotion material for each shop (slogan, brief description text, photos etc.) Additionally, separate meetings were organised with representatives of specific organizations of the PAR group according to their role. Furthermore, several independent experts were gathered around the main project team responding to the needs for specific expertise, namely an image consultant, a web designer, an expert in digital marketing and a group of photographers.

In addition came the interaction during the event itself, especially between the network members and the customers/visitors. As the aim of the event was, among other things, to increase the customer base of the network members, these interactions were obviously highly significant, as they defined the probability both for commercial transactions during the event, as well as in the future, and also as an incentive for visitors and customers to recommend certain locations to others.

4. *FCEs include ceremonial and dramaturgical activities.*

The FCE literature does not define precisely what may count as ceremonial and dramaturgical activities; however, under this heading we will, for this event, include the special menus, restructured windows, art installation, street events, etc., that were orchestrated to paint a creative, dynamic and attractive picture of the town. In addition, the map that was designed, and the corresponding signs distributed across town to tie the organized walks together may be seen as part of the dramaturgy of the event.

5. *FCEs are occasions for information exchange and collective sense-making.*

Due to the event, for the first time in the history of the Spartathlon race, this sports event was perceived by local institutions and an expanded group of people, as an opportunity for the promotion and branding of the town. But SpARTathlo went well beyond that, as an occasion for collective sense-making, as it provided the incentive to, and created the space for, a dialogue about how the town could acquire ownership over its past and present. It set the ground for an active exchange of ideas, where values and beliefs were also discussed. Articles in the local mass media and social media reflected this development, thereby further enhancing the sense-making process to the readers and the wider public. Questions like the following were posed: What are the key features of the town's identity? What are the concrete actions to be undertaken for this identity to be developed and the vision to be realised? What values should guide the town's branding process?

Participating in the sense-making of the event were also the visitors and customers, we may assume, for instance by giving feedback to the network members, both verbally, and in non-verbal, behavioral ways, during their visits with the network members.

6. *FCEs generate social and reputational resources that can be deployed elsewhere and for other purposes.*

One of the organisations that gained the most from SpARTathlo, at the area of social and reputational resources, was the organisation *Activate Now*, which had a central role in the facilitation of the whole project. First, this project was clearly at a higher scale than other actions the organisation had undertaken earlier. It involved greater complexity, public exposure and risk taking. Despite this difficulty, the work conducted was professional and the overall outcome quite positive. It provided the young professionals of *Activate Now* the opportunity to demonstrate their capacities and acquire the self-confidence necessary to keep on working on similar local development projects. The SpARTathlo action provided an excellent opportunity for the emergence of productive partnerships between the team of *Activate Now* and the PAR group as well as a group of (mostly) young (and mostly underemployed) professionals in the broader region (photographers, digital marketing experts, image consultant expert). To conclude, this collaborative action also addressed, in a sustainable manner, the problem of un/underemployment, at least for the specific group of young professionals involved, in the planning and implementation of the action and created new prospects for local economic development which would create new employment opportunities in the town.

Concerning the 56 members of the network, as noted above, many professionals stated that they were strengthened by the SpARTathlo action in different ways. Some of them improved their marketing strategy, as they understood the significance of catchy slogans and the power of photography and social media. Several members of the network indicated that

the action mobilized and inspired them with new ideas not only for the three days of SpARTathlo, but for the future as well (e.g. for new products, better promotion, partnerships).

The SpARTathlo action will ultimately be assessed by what will follow. It is important that such an investment (in time-expertise-money) be a stepping stone for other actions organized in a professional and consistent manner and not merely a flash in the pan. When members of the network were asked, whether the intervention should be repeated next year, 98% replied “Yes” and 2% answered “yes, but not exactly the way it was implemented”, highlighting the need for an approach that takes also into account the particularities of certain areas (e.g. shops far from the town centre require a different approach which will address their needs). Moreover, 85% suggested that similar events should be organized throughout the year. Finally, during the evaluation session of the PAR group after the event, all participants were positive about the repetition of the action next year.

What is the field in this case, and how was it configured

In the previous section, we have argued that the SpARTathlo meets the criteria of the FCE definition offered by Lampel and Mayer. In this section, we will discuss more specifically how we may best delineate *the field* of the present case. Is it the town of Sparta, with its immediate surroundings? Is it primarily the PAR group and network members? How do the visitors and customers, both from the local community, and from further afar, fit into the picture?

Based on what we have discussed in the theory chapter, and based on the open, we could say agnostic, quality of the field concept, we will argue that the field in this case includes all the above-mentioned groups to a lesser or larger degree. On a general level, this claim is supported by McAdam and Scott’s (2005) idea of the heuristic value of the OF-concept to explore heterogeneous but related actors in their context (see also DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Relevant to our argument is also the idea of a recursive relation between a FCE and its field, i.e., that FCEs do not simply emerge from existing fields, they just as much produce and define fields (Schüßler et al. 2013, Lampel and Meyer 2008). They do so, for instance, by establishing mechanisms for who is to be invited to the FCEs and in what roles.

First and foremost, however, the field emerges when people within it start to think of their own goals and projects as partially overlapping or complementary with those of the others within the emerging field, and when they develop an interest in what the others do, *because* their plans and actions have a potential effect on their own life and activities.

The FCE, then, is the place where all this becomes visible, and also, where this dynamics is further enhanced. During the FCE, the initially complex mix of overlapping interests and awarenesses may then gradually develop into a feeling of a “we”, in the sense that the participants develop new insights on how they are connected.

So much said, the participants are *also* present at the event, as well as in the corresponding field, in distinct and different roles that imply different types of attachment and influence. Sometimes, these roles may also involve latent or actual competition or conflict of interest. What may appear to be a successful outcome for one, thus, does not need to be so for another. For instance, in a FCE serving as the meeting point of an industry, some of the participating businesses may be competitors. Still, however, they may refer to each other as a “we”, implying that, in spite of this competition, they see themselves as part of a community of some sort, or a *field*, to use the terminology that we presently employ.

Returning to the SpARTathlo case, to identify its field, two significant groups should be distinguished initially: First the organisers, involving the NGO Activate Now and the PAR group as well as the broader network of shops and restaurants. Secondly, and just as important, the visitors and customers. Without the latter group, the event would have been unimaginable. At some level, the success of the event may also be measured by their involvement in it. And as a main underlying aim of the event was to stimulate local innovation and economic growth, the significance of the customer group (and other visitors as potential customers) cannot be underrated, as innovation theory emphasises how innovation and economic growth is stimulated by customer involvement (Grabher, Ibert, & Flohr, 2008; Stamm, 2004; Svare, 2016).

By looking at the SpARTathlo case through the FCE theory-lens, however, we also realise that visitors and customers, by being involved in the event, have also the potential to become part of the “we” that see themselves connected to the others involved, and, thus, as part of the field. From other festivals, we know that festival audiences often develop an interest in the place of the festival, not only to the extent that they become recurrent visitors, but also in the sense that they seek information on what happens at the specific place between festivals, or recommend it to others (Fakeye & Crompton, 1992; Shani, Rivera, & Hara, 2009). In this sense, they become part of the local “we”, even if they live most of their lives elsewhere. Being part of such a “we” over time also creates the potential for becoming more than just temporary visitors, or customers in a traditional sense, but even as co-creators in the further development of the field, including the regional businesses.

Following up the idea that a FCE creates its field just as much as the opposite, we will argue that the field in our case also involves all those shop-owners and institution representatives, etc., that were not part of the network, but who observed, during the event, how the others participated. Even if they were not part of the evaluation, we may assume that some of them started to consider how they might profit from participating in a future event. Others may have been inspired by the innovations they observed, or by the entrepreneurial spirit unfolding around them, to become more entrepreneurial or innovative themselves. If so, they too became part of the field in the sense that they, too, were affected or “configured” by what was taking place.

In the FCE literature, special emphasis is laid on the so-called field entrepreneurs, that is, those especially active in developing the field through active design, with an overt field-building agenda (Lampel and Meyer, 2008, Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006). The leading field entrepreneurs in the SpARTathlo event were the NGO *Activate Now* who was also the first to propose the idea in the PAR group. As field entrepreneurs, we may also count the PAR group and the 56 members of the network.

By acting as field entrepreneurs, *Activate Now* has profited strongly. For *Activate Now* SpARTathlo was a pivotal occasion which proved that it has the capacity and the required expertise to contribute decisively to the design and implementation of local development actions. It up-scaled considerably its activities, it increased its recognition in the town and strengthened its record. Characteristically enough, as a result of the above, representatives of the municipality, in the first meeting of the PAR group after the implementation of the event, made several suggestions to the organization for future projects it could undertake. Among other proposals, *Activate Now* was invited to consider seriously and pursue the or-

ganisation of the big annual cultural events of the municipality by preparing event concept notes and submitting proposals.

6. Concluding remarks

We will now return to the research questions of the paper, and answer these questions by summarizing and reflecting on the above elaborations.

Is it possible to describe and analyse events organised as part of an action research product, like the SpARTathlo in Spain, as an FCE? As we have argued above, this is possible.

What insights does such an analysis produce, that may be useful?

The SpARTathlo event that serves as the case of this paper, was originally organised as part of a participatory action research project. In designing and reflecting on such projects, our main attention is typically directed at those directly involved in the project as stakeholders. Their aims and projects is the focus, and in evaluating the project, the main relevant question is how these stakeholder aims were realised. Even if exceptions may occur, this perspective is mainly limited to the interests of the stakeholders.

So, what about FCE theory? In our interpretation, it invites us to extend the perspective to include not only the stakeholders of the PAR project, but also all the others affected by it. The perspective, thus, is broadened beyond what we find in a typical action research project. FCE theory encourages us to explore everybody affected by the event, and how they may be involved in further action, to the benefit both to themselves and the others within the resulting field.

This may lead to the insight that the event had far more wide-reaching effects than one was originally aware of. At a motivational level, this may increase the enthusiasm of those organising the event, and thus mobilise more energy that may benefit the process. At a pragmatic level, it may engender a further reflection on how these other groups may be involved, to increase the total value produced by the event.

This may then also be part of the planning of new follow-up events. The pivotal questions are: How do we design an event so that it produces an optimal “configuration”? Who should we involve, and how? And, introducing the FCE concept of dramaturgy: what sort of dramaturgy during the event itself will engender optimal productivity in the effects? In the actual planning of an event, this may, for instance, be specified by the following questions:

- We have designed this activity for this group. Are there other groups that we could involve in this activity, whose presence would increase the general or specific value of the event?
- If we succeed in having these people attend, what could we do to increase the possibility not only that they leave satisfied, but also that they promote their satisfaction to others, and so that they return (preferably with friends) at a later time?

In both of these examples, the idea is that by a relative small addition to what has already been organised, a significant positive effect may be created. To be sure, finding the right addition requires imagination and creativity. But, as we see it, one of the great values of the FCE concept, is that it may inspire and guide such creativity. It does so by inviting us to

look for unexpected connections between persons, institutions, places and happenings, that may then be involved in the planning of future events. It also guides our creativity by inviting us to visualise the physical space in which the event is to unfold, its scenography, so to say, with the necessary supplies and other objects, both aesthetic and functional, as well as the optimal sequence of actions and events.

The FCE concept, moreover, reminds us that we sometimes come together, not only to complete a certain project, but as a by-product also to build a field, that is, to build and strengthen relationships. Again, the metaphor of dramaturgy is relevant, as it invites us to consider how human relationships and communication have more dimensions than those we see unfold, when people talk around a table. Talking may, of course, form a significant part of a FCE. Still, a FCE is also a dynamic space, where participants may interact in a number of other ways, displaying a more multidimensional version of their personality or identity, and thus, let the others discover more of who they are, and hopefully, in a way that is constructive for the further development of the field.

How can such insights help improve the design of future events of this sort within action research? The short answer is that all that has been said above should be taken into account when someone is planning action research events. This does not mean that every point made above will necessarily be of relevance to *all* such events. But they may be used as reflection points, and potential starting points for improving the planning. Firstly, FCE theory can improve the mapping both of stakeholders and also of others involved, that is the mapping of the “field” at the early stage of planning, so as to develop a more comprehensive analysis of the potential dynamics the intervention can generate. Consequently, conceiving a development intervention as a FCE can enhance our strategic planning process in that it helps us to understand complexity and at the same time, it provides us with a tool to address this complexity.

On the other hand, the above analysis has demonstrated that by using FCE theory as a heuristic tool, co-researchers or field entrepreneurs can significantly enhance the effectiveness of their intervention. FCE theory places the emphasis on the transformative dynamics of an intervention and helps us to look for the big picture, so to speak, “the forest and not only the trees”. Thus, a development intervention conceived as a FCE, helps us to introduce well-designed activities that multiply the effectiveness of the action and capitalise on its wider effects, thereby enhancing its sustainability.

In conclusion, the case of SpARTathlo has demonstrated that PAR is an appropriate method to design and implement local socio-economic development interventions. The collaboration of relevant stakeholders with the support of university researchers, based on the principles of PAR, resulted in innovative development through actions which addressed real needs, allowing for the best use of existing local resources (e.g. highly skilled human resources, territorial resources).

The above discussion, also, demonstrates that PAR and FCE-theory can work hand in hand, as the latter fits well with the qualities of a PAR process, namely collaboration, openness, and transformative learning.

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