Challenges of studying agency in regional development: What did 27 review reports teach us?

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Challenges of studying agency in regional development: What did 27 review reports teach us?

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Abstract:
The regional development studies community increasingly considers the significance of agency when working to reveal the secrets of local and regional development. While the rapidly emerging literature on agency has increased our understanding of what people do or fail to do for their regions, many scholars have faced challenges incorporating novel conceptual lenses in a discipline more accustomed to studying structures. With the aim to contribute to a collective learning process, we analyze 27 review reports received for a special issue in Regional Studies on "Agency and Regional Development Against All Odds". We found challenges, for instance, related to articulating the contribution, conceptual layering and drift, and slippery research questions. These three challenges point to the need to decide on the main concept and theory (the hero of the dish), which is particularly challenging and daunting when it requires sacrificing safe conceptual terrain and exploring a more unknown, emerging field. The authors of the special issue have responded brilliantly to the reviewers' recommendations and with these reflections, we hope to share this learning experience. The work, however, continues - to improve our capacity to study human agency, we must take pains to clarify meta-theoretical commitments, elaborate middle-range theories, and experiment with a variety of methods. The growing body of work on the relationships between human agency and structures is an exciting ontological, theoretical, and methodological programme in the making.

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1 Introduction

The regional development studies community increasingly considers the significance of agency when working to reveal the secrets of local and regional development. We have argued that by systematically linking actors to structural issues, we can illuminate why some regions develop better (or worse) than others. Broadly speaking, we are interested in the causal power of human agency in explaining temporally sequenced events shaping regional development (e.g Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020; Sotarauta & Grillitsch, 2023a; Sotarauta & Grillitsch, 2023b). In this working paper, we briefly summarise what we learnt when we edited a special issue for *Regional Studies* on 'agency and regional development against all odds'.

Regional development scholars have increasingly integrated agency into the many contemporary targets of interest: Isaksen et al. (2019) highlight system- and firm-level agency. Huggins and Thompson (2019) elaborate on the behavioural principles of agency. Benner (2022) argue for more studies on agency-driven transformative episodes within evolving or stable structural contexts, and Jolly, Grillitsch and Hansen (2020) and Sotarauta, Kurikka and Kolehmainen (2022) analyse the changing roles of agency over time. Moulaert et al. (2016) present a model that integrates agency, structures, institutions, and discourse (ASID model). Beer, Barnes, and Horne (2021) combine the theory of the trinity of change agency constructed by Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020), with Moulaert et al.'s ASID model, producing a three-dimensional model of place-based industrial strategies and economic trajectories. Moreover, Hassink, Isaksen and Trippl (2019) argue that we should examine how various actors' expectations shape developmental paths instead of focusing on structures or path dependencies (Hassink, Isaksen and Trippl, 2019; 1637).

Consequently, in regional development studies, many concepts have been adopted to specify the meta-concept of agency, including, for example, place-based leadership (Collinge, Gibney & Mabey, 2010); institutional entrepreneurship (Sotarauta & Pulkkinen, 2011); policy entrepreneurship (Perkmann, 2007); governance entrepreneurship (Méndez-Picazo, Galindo-Martin & Ribeiro-Soriani, 2012) and innovative entrepreneurship (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). However, as is often the case, emerging concepts and approaches first remain fuzzy, too abstract for many to understand or operationalise, and poorly connected to more established theories. Nevertheless, not forgetting the obvious, it takes a village – a community of scholars – to cultivate and nourish new concepts, provide robust definitions, and refine emerging theory in many empirical contexts. All this demands a great deal of work and time.

While the rapidly emerging literature on agency, including the articles of the special issue (Sotarauta & Grillitsch, 2023b), has increased our understanding of what people do or fail to do for their regions, many scholars have faced challenges incorporating novel conceptual lenses in a discipline more accustomed to studying structures. In this paper, we summarise what we learned when editing the special issue. We use 27 review reports as empirical material to highlight the issues the authors (including ourselves) found challenging.

2 How can we enhance our scholarly contribution?

The analysis

We all have experience with good and bad reviews. Commonly, we applaud the favourable reviews as positive feedback and the unfavourable reviews as negative feedback. This is human. However, we should be able to put our emotions aside and welcome all the reviews helping us to learn about our work as positive. Sometimes, a scholarly attack against our dearest ideas or bashing of painfully collected and analysed empirical data may be a significant push to learn, which is, in our understanding, positive feedback. Conversely, an uplifting review report tickling scholarly egos may lock us into our thinking and turn into negative feedback. A personal cognitive lock-in often comes disguised in praise. We recommend adopting an evolutionary view on review reports – anything that helps us to learn makes us stronger.

Consequently, we analysed all 27 first-round review reports for the special issue, including the ones we received as guest editors for the submitted papers and those we received for the papers we authored with our colleagues (managed by the overseeing editor of Regional Studies). We approached all the review reports as sources of positive feedback. Their analyses were sharp, and in the first round, recommendations ranged from major changes to rejection. Overall, the reviewers did excellent work to improve the quality of the papers. They made many necessary, sometimes painful observations, pushing the authors to sharpen their thinking and polish their writing. We do not repeat all the reviewers' traditional targets of attention, for example the need to improve papers' coherence by ensuring that each section contributes to the flow of the text and that the theory is explicitly connected to the empirical analyses. We mainly target agency-specific issues, aiming to provide future papers on agency in regional development with food for thought.

We compiled all the review reports into a file and imported them into Atlas.ti (qualitative data analysis software). The text contained 95 pages, which we analysed by drawing on deductive coding. Reading all the submitted papers, the review reports and summaries, as well as writing recommendations for the overseeing editor gave us a clear overview of the papers' pros and cons. Of course, the common understanding of the anatomy of a good journal article also influenced our deduction. Using Atlas.ti allowed us to challenge or verify our preunderstanding and search for omitted issues. It also allowed us to identify issues recurring in more than one paper. The deductive codes were (a) anchoring to the literature, (b) originality and contribution to the literature, (c) theoretical precision and (d) the quality of empirical analyses. The analysis surfaced the following issues we discuss briefly below: articulating the contribution and anchoring to the literature, conceptual layering and drift and slippery research questions.

Focussing on the critical points may give a negative impression. However, analysing the critical points does not imply that the first submissions were of poor quality or that all the submissions suffered from all the identified issues. Instead, we aim to show the issues the reviewers returned to repeatedly, in one way or another. Overall, our analysis highlights the importance of the very basics of good research. Solid research questions supported by well-

grounded theory and well-defined core concepts are the cornerstones of a good study of human agency.

Articulating contributions and anchoring to the literature

We firmly believe every scholarly piece should aim at contributing to the literature, be the contribution major or minor, seminal or incremental, long-term or short-term. However, of course, it is impossible to know in advance what makes a big splash and what remains unnoticed. Furthermore, whatever happens to an individual article, it is the entire village and the collective effort – many articles and books – that make the research a significant force and an enjoyable endeavour.

Many special issue authors were shy about showing their contributions to the literature. They struggled to anchor their work in the relevant literature, or perhaps they struggled with identifying it. They aimed at engaging with too many theories and forgot that their work was supposed to be about agency. An overly expansive anchoring to the literature quickly leads to excessively general arguments. As one of the reviewers concluded, "It (a paper) seeks to cover everything, and it fails to provide an in-depth analysis on everything. So many questions remain unanswered". If the research questions remain unanswered, there is no contribution. All this leads to the core question of articulating the contribution – "how do your findings support and challenge existing theory" (Reviewer), being aware of what the theory is that a paper aims to develop.

> "What is the main contribution to the literature, and to what literature?" (Reviewer)

The disconnect may also be temporal. Identifying and articulating a contribution calls for keeping pace with the continuously evolving literature. In some cases, the authors did not acknowledge the rapid development of the field and argued for a gap that existed in the literature 10–15 years ago. As one reviewer put it, "[I]t's a bit weird that you talk about recent years yet cite a paper from 16 years ago" (Reviewer). In summary, we should boldly engage in a scholarly debate, know the relevant literature and aim to contribute to a selected theory regarding human agency.

> "The disconnect makes it difficult to distinguish the theoretical contribution of the paper: There is actually quite substantial overlap and repetition between the arguments in the introduction and what is concluded at the end of the paper". (Reviewer)

Conceptual layering and drift

Many initial special issue submissions suffered from agency suppressed by other conceptual frames, resulting in conceptual layering and drift.

> "I don't think it's a good idea to bring so many terms into one paper, which only confuses your readers. The whole paper is jumping from one theory to another and from one type of terminology to another type. In doing so, you can't talk enough about every theory". (Reviewer)

One reviewer concluded his report by asking what concepts are central to the framework in a paper he reviewed – it is a fundamental question. Moreover, he asked which concepts support the core of the study and what concepts briefly present the conceptual context, again, an excellent question. As was: What is the unit of analysis? These questions reminded one of us (Markku) about a competitive reality show, Master Chef Australia, in which the judges continuously ask contestants what the hero of the dish is and what ingredients elevate the hero. Indeed, separating the conceptual hero from the supporting elements is crucial.

Accordingly, suppose the anchoring to the literature is too ambitious. In that case, conceptual layering and consequent drift are inevitable, structural explanations suppressing the search for the powers of human agency. All too often, concepts and approaches promising to focus on agency are added atop existing conceptual frameworks without adequately conceptualising them for the study. We should identify the core concepts and make them into heroes. All too often it is spices (supporting or contextual concepts) that surface from a paper, covering the core concepts underneath. Conceptual layering may elude the original ambition to study agency and lead to conceptual drift, which, for a reader, may appear as conceptual confusion and an overly complex conceptual framework. Moreover, ontological commitments may remain undiscussed or even unrecognised (Sotarauta & Grillitsch, 2023a). No wonder reviewers ask what the core of an article is or what it is all about.

In sum, instead of delving deep into human agency, many authors add it atop theories they have used earlier and know well: an agentic framework losing explanatory power and a paper becoming overly descriptive. Perhaps the authors are not willing to 'sacrifice' safe conceptual terrain to explore the unknown landscape in more depth, leading to an unbalanced conceptual framework that highlights the supporting (contextual) concepts more than those focusing on agency. If this happens, it will be challenging to explain the contribution, and the article will become more confusing than clear.

> "The paper needs a more focused conceptual framework, including a balanced discussion of A, B and C [concepts removed for anonymity]. Your theoretical argument does not support the empirical analysis as well as it should". (Reviewer)

Slippery research questions

The difficulties briefly discussed above may result from a slippery research question or the complete absence of a research question. A solid research question is essential to keeping an eye on human agency. As one of the reviewers reminded the authors, an article should answer research questions by drawing on the empirical material, but this is not enough. It must also return to the literature, explain how the findings relate to what we know, and add value to the current literature on human agency. In summary, having a slippery research question makes it difficult to contribute to the literature and heroify the core concepts.

> "It might be worthwhile to mention the key research question and explain to the readers the added value of having a new perspective related to the role of X [removed for anonymity], as you mention". (Reviewer)

3   Conclusion

We hope nobody perceives this reflection paper as disappointed or pessimistic. It is not. We decided to use review reports for the special issue in Regional Studies on "Agency and Regional Development Against All Odds" (Sotarauta & Grillitsch, 2023) for collective learning, and as we all know too well, reviewers tend to point at weaknesses instead of strengths. The authors responded brilliantly to the reviewers' recommendations and showed an excellent capacity for evolutionary learning. Nonetheless, the special issue is not the final word – of course not. Neither does it present a coherent theory of human agency in regional development. It takes one step forward in constructing a theory (or theories) and methodology for bringing agency and structure closer analytically.

Social scientists have extensively been studying everything regarding human agency. However, regional development studies, which to a large extent relies on and develops structural explanations, would be well positioned to provide a distinctive contribution to the study of human agency by linking it theoretically and methodologically to structural changes – all with great sensitivity to the context with an ambition to reveal the general causal powers of human agency (causation) and its idiosyncratic patterns (formation). Thus, to improve our capacity to study human agency, we must take pains to clarify meta-theoretical commitments, elaborate middle-range theories, and experiment with a variety of methods.

Research on agency in regional development undoubtedly increases our understanding of the relations and interplay between human actions and socially produced structures. This line of inquiry is built on the conviction that human agency is necessary to reproduce and transform structures. The articles published in the special issue follow this appreciation by focusing, in their ways, on purposeful and meaningful actions performed by human actors to promote regional development in their parts of the world. The growing body of work on the relationships between human agency and structures is an exciting ontological, theoretical, and methodological programme in the making.

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