

# **RESEARCH METHODS AS BRIDGING DEVICES: PATH AND CONTEXT MAPPING IN GOVERNANCE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose** - The purpose of this paper is to investigate the potential, both analytically and practically, of understanding research methods as bridging devices. Methods can bridge theory and empirics, but it is argued that they can perform several bridging functions: between theory and praxis, between analysis and strategy and between past and future. The focus is on those forms of bridging relevant for understanding and effectuating change in governance, at community level and at the scale of organizations.

**Design/methodology/approach** - The paper develops a perspective on methods as bridging devices. It uses the newly minted methods of governance path and context mapping as a case study. These methods conceptually derive from evolutionary governance theory (EGT) and were developed and tested in Canadian empirical research. The case helps to develop insight in features, forms and limitations of methods as bridging devices in governance research and practice. The authors then use the case to further develop the initial concept of bridging more generally, emphasizing the shifting balance between methods as bridging and creating boundaries.

**Findings** - Both the case study and the theoretical analysis underline the necessary imperfection of any method as bridging device. The authors affirm the potential of method to perform different bridging functions at the same time, while revealing clear tradeoffs in each role. Tradeoffs occur with adapted versions

of the method producing new strengths and weaknesses in new contexts. In each of the forms of bridging involved neither side can be reduced to the other, so a gap always remains. It is demonstrated that the practice of bridging through method in governance is greatly helped when methods are flexibly deployed in ongoing processes of bricolage, nesting and modification. Governance enables the continuous production of new framing devices and other methods.

Originality/value - The idea of methods as bridging devices is new, and can assist the development of a broader understanding of the various forms and functions of research methods. Moreover, it helps to discern roles of research methods in the functioning of governance. The context of governance helps to recognize the multi-functionality of research methods, and their transformation in a context of pressured decision-making. Moreover, this approach contributes to the understanding of governance as adumbrated by EGT.

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