

Do we have a strong case? Taking stock of the Dutch Case Studies Project on Chaplaincy

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Introduction

One of the most famous contemporary Dutch photographers is Erwin Olaf. Currently there is a double exhibition of his complete works in The Hague. Olaf has a rare hereditary lung disease. For the Lung Foundation Netherlands, he made a series of three self-portraits a few years ago, in which he visualises the increasing consequences of this chronic illness with the aid of image manipulation. You could say that it is a case study of himself, from the perspective of the disease that is becoming increasingly radical, and with the help of photographic means and modern techniques to manipulate the image. From this perspective and with these means he is able to penetrate deeper into his own N = 1 study, and to establish the basic patterns and ground lines of his life - at least from the perspective of that chronic illness. The special thing is that as a spectator you immediately understand what is going on, and that what Erwin Olaf shows in these images, is credible or plausible, that his images - this N = 1 study - are more universal than his private situation. It is also clear that for such an N = 1 study, very different methods can be used.

It was a fantastic idea from George Fitchett (2011) to develop a body of case studies with in order to identify good practices in chaplaincy, as a basis for further research into the effectiveness of chaplaincy, for training of chaplains and the clarification of what chaplaincy involves for colleagues, managers and policy makers. The conference with him in March 2015 in Utrecht led to the Dutch Case Studies Project in Chaplaincy which is now about halfway. Martin Walton and I were overwhelmed by the interest. At this moment, there are 56 chaplains involved in the project, in principle for four years, as well as more than 10 researchers from four universities. The project has a special resonance with the professional group itself, but also in the world of chaplaincy research in the Netherlands and with government and policy makers. Today and tomorrow, we are marking time. Personally, I want to do this by reflecting on some of the special features of the project and on a number of questions that have gradually emerged from the project. In any case, it is clear that it is a research project in which chaplains recognize themselves and also feel that they can contribute. I myself once again thought about the starting points of the project against the background of what a naturalistic case study is.

Naturalistic case studies

Case studies are particularly suitable for researching reality, especially when it comes to mapping the complexity of and interactions in a specific situation, and to approaching the meanings people give to situations and events. Case studies explicitly contribute to *evidence-based practice* (EPB), mainly through the clarification of clinical practice and experience and through attention to the values and contexts of clients. Because, according to the original views on EBP, these two elements - clinical experience and values of the client - should be explicitly combined with the best scientific insights and research results. Not taking into account clinical experience and the values and context of the

client is not EBP and does not lead to good care, often rather to the contrary (Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes, & Richardson, 1996; Council for Public Health and Society, 2017).

Case studies are '*the science of the particular*', in the terms of Abma and Stake (2014). In their view of the naturalistic case study, Abma and Stake (2014, pp. 1151-1152) formulate five distinctive features of the case study. I will outline these characteristics briefly and then choose them as a starting point for the exploration of some striking features of the *Dutch Case Studies Project in Chaplaincy*. It will become clear that these characteristics are particularly well suited to the professional ethos and skills of chaplains.

1. In a case study so-called *emic issues* are at stake, issues that emerge out of the case and are not imposed from the outside. The purpose of a case study is to better understand a specific situation or case, especially the underlying values and meanings. Although in the beginning a case study is always approached from a certain focus and research question, the design is not fully determined in advance. Issues, questions and points of attention arise from the case itself (*emic* versus *etic*), and can be further developed and investigated.
2. In a case study the *influence of the context* is discounted continually. The meaning of an experience is always determined by the specific situation. There are constant interactions with the context, a case is never an isolated item. Within each case, there are also parts, dimensions and domains, each of which has an influence on the whole and on other parts. Studying these parts contributes to the understanding of the case as a whole.
3. A case study explicitly pays attention to *meaning and interpretation*. In a case study the point is understanding (*Verstehen*) instead of explanation (*Erklären*). The premise is that meaning arises precisely in the dialogue between man and his environment. Meaning is not given in advance, but arises in dialogue, in interaction. And it is precisely that meaning construction in interaction and the meaning of experiences that are central to a case study. This means that the researcher does not take an objective distant position, but is involved in the interaction, and therefore also in the process of finding meaning and interpretation. At the same time, it is necessary to realize some distance, so that the broader context and different perspectives remain visible. In addition, multiple partiality is required.
4. A case study is aimed at *holistic understanding*, ie that it concerns the organic relationship of events, interactions, contexts, perspectives and influences and it is not directed towards a single causal correlation. The understanding of reality is served by researching and taking into account multiple perspectives of stakeholders. The researcher observes, listens, asks questions, probes and interprets, and thus is himself the instrument to come to such a holistic understanding.
5. The purpose of a case study is to provide detailed information. It is not so much about representativeness as about what we can *learn from this specific case*. It is about the learning potential. At the beginning of a case study, it is often not clear which cases will yield relevant information. In the mutual comparison it becomes clear which cases have this potential explicitly, and lead to challenging and promising insights, and reveal the complexity and dynamics of specific situations. Case studies provide local knowledge that is time- and context-bound, and which often leads to so-called vicarious experience for those who are able to translate the described experiences into their own context. The latter works better if it is a question of 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973), and the case is presented in a narrative form. A story is accessible through the development of characters along the way, the problems that arise, the dialogue and struggle that that will arise. A story clarifies the complexity and context, has room for ambivalence and shows the general human character of a case.

Against the background of these characteristics of a naturalistic case study, I would like to explain some aspects of the Dutch CSP Chaplaincy.

Objectives of the CSP

At the start of the project, in 2016, we formulated the following as objectives:

1. Description of spiritual care interventions and their effects in relation to
 - a. existential well-being, recovery and coping with illness, disability, loss and end of life within the various fields of healthcare and primary care,
 - b. dealing with responsibility, guilt, punishment and reconciliation within the context of justice, and
 - c. violence, war and peace within the armed forces.
2. Description of the interaction of chaplains with other employees involved with the specific client, with the surrounding organization and the effects of this interaction on the accompaniment of clients.
3. Selection of *good practices* of chaplaincy
 - a. representative case in view of the target group
 - b. paradigmatic case in view of the method of chaplaincy
 - c. unusual case that due to the deviating nature casts a special light on the target group or the method
 - d. critical case that is a test for the usual method or understanding of the task.
4. Creating research communities of chaplains working together with researchers and together broadening and strengthening the empirical and theoretical basis of chaplaincy.

These objectives fit well into the perspective of the naturalistic case study as described by Abma and Stake (2014). It is a detailed description of situations and events in which the significance and interpretation of these events play a central role. It involves layered complex situations with many interactions between numerous parties, whereby the interaction between chaplain and client is not isolated from the context. The descriptions as *thick descriptions* offer many learning moments. I will mention a few already here; today and tomorrow, several of these learning aspects will be discussed further. The chaplain is associated (often by clients but certainly by colleagues) with '*death and doom*', and is therefore often called to help if dealing with grief, loss and mortality in personal way, or if there is question of the accumulation of (existential) problems. An important intervention of chaplaincy is *reframing*, among other things with the help of humour, metaphors, prayer and ritual. Another example of an important intervention of chaplaincy is the *recognition* that there is nothing more to change in a situation or event, an important intervention in a society that believes in manipulability and autonomy. And yet another intervention is to *represent* (as a person, as a functionary) a religious tradition. In themselves these are insights that are not earth-shattering, but they appear as well-founded interventions and as essential in concrete contexts.

A fixed format for the case study and a fixed structure for the reflection

From the very beginning we have chosen a fixed format for the description of a case (van Loenen, Körver, Walton, & de Vries, 2017; Walton & Körver, 2017). This format uses a number of sections:

1. background variables of the client or the client system,

2. backgrounds and context, including the characteristics of the chaplain, and the presence of other people involved,
3. accompaniment: first contact, exploration, clarification, physical observations, interactions and interventions, plans and agreements, results,
4. communication with other stakeholders about the case,
5. reflections and feedback, and
6. a summary plus a motivation for the choice of this case.

The discussion in the research communities also follows a fixed structure:

7. informative questions, general remarks,
8. meaning and worldview: existential experiences or questions, spiritual needs, ethical aspects, aesthetic dimension,
9. accompaniment, seen from practice and theory: method, worldview, theoretical elements,
10. outcomes and objectives,
11. critical issues and important observations during the course of the discussion,
12. summary, plus a review of the choice for the case, possible title, recommendations for good practices.

Using this format, the contributor is urged to articulate the different layers, aspects and perspectives in the case at hand. In doing so, chaplains observe they are doing much more than they originally thought. The complexity and the intense character of cases emerge more sharply. A regular, important observation is that chaplains do indeed have an objective to which they coordinate their interventions, while at first they often say: 'I had no clear goal when I started the conversation'. What has been done intuitively reflects a greater degree of professionalism than was initially assumed. *Tacit knowledge* (Polanyi, 1967) becomes conscious and can be better managed. In a sense the sections of the format can be considered *sensitizing concepts* (Bowen, 2006) that direct the initial description and analysis. Among others, we make use of the definition of chaplaincy by the Dutch Association of Spiritual Caregivers as a sensitizing concept, a definition in which four dimensions of meaning and worldview are distinguished: existential, spiritual, ethical and aesthetic (VGVZ, 2015). Comparability of the case studies has been increased by the fixed format and the fixed structure for the reflection. Even though each case is unique and describes a special situation of chaplaincy in great detail, it can be clarified by comparison which case represents a good practice and which criteria and effective elements of promising interventions can be identified (from Yperen, Veerman, & van den Berg, 2015, van Yperen, Veerman, & Bijl, 2017).

Speaking in the third person within long-term research communities

In the research communities, the chaplain who presents his / her case study speaks in the third person about himself: 'she', 'he' or 'this chaplain'. This decision seems to be in contradiction with the way Abma and Stake (2014) speak about the close involvement of the researcher in the case studied. Nevertheless, we have chosen this option, especially because the case study is a description of the personal practice of the chaplain in question. The involvement could be too intense, a level of involvement that could make it difficult to see more than the own perspective and the broader context of the case. The contributor must be able to realize both involvement and distance. It is an example of what in another context Thomas Scheff, speaking of the possibility of catharsis in ritual, has called *aesthetic distance*: not too close so that it does not become a reliving, not too far away to prevent it from being a summary of facts (Scheff, 2001). Moreover, by speaking in the third person, we accentuate that the research community is not a supervision group, with the emphasis on the

personal learning process of the chaplain. The emphasis is precisely on the description and analysis of the case from the perspective of the profession and its development.

The research communities consist of 8 to 12 chaplains, with one or two researchers as chairs. They are classified by field of activity. In principle, the participating chaplains have committed themselves for a period of four years, in consultation with their employer. They meet four times a year for a whole day, usually discussing two cases. This method guarantees that the community continues to use the format better, the attitude as co-researcher can be developed, by comparison with previous case discussions the community can better assess what an example of a good practice is, and the community makes the transition from very special situations to more everyday descriptions which, by the way, also reveal the complexity and stratification of interventions and effects.

A few brief considerations about questions that have gradually arisen during the project.

Influence of the research community on the result

It cannot be otherwise that a group of chaplains plus a chairman / researcher gradually develop habits and their own language, especially if they collaborate intensively over a longer period of time. Could that have an influence on the result, on the reflection and analysis? Does it develop one-sidedness? Are there blind spots? And is that a problem then?

There is no doubt that a community develops a personal style through mutual involvement and close cooperation. It is precisely this involvement that helps to clarify the meaning and interpretation of interventions and interactions. The fact that chaplains with very different backgrounds and work experience have a seat in a research community, and the fact that reflection on case studies on the one hand and work on the other hand alternate over a longer period of time, guarantee that there is no question of monoculture. In addition, several questions have been included in the format of the reflection that ask for the process in the group. Moreover, the *Research Collaboration Group* of researchers filled up with a few members who do not lead a research community meets several times a year. The project leaders have agreed that they will visit each other's group and the other groups in the next months, to discuss and compare the working methods of each group. In this way we want to get an impression of the influence of the group (and of the chair!), also one of the subjects of the PhD research by Niels den Toom in which the influence of participation in the project on the participants' professionalism is examined.

Contribution of theory and literature

Some researchers in the project are more cautious than others when introducing literature and theoretical models. Their starting point is that the theory must emerge from the empirical data in an inductive way. At the same time one could say that the format for the case study and the given structure for the reflection is already theory-driven and contains some sensitizing concepts, as indicated earlier. As chair in the research community of hospital chaplains, I regularly supply literature and theoretical models. Two thoughts are guiding: (1) my questions and interest in discussing during the reflection on a case study are already influenced by that literature and theory. It is better to make them explicit; (2) I feel very close to some researchers in the tradition of

grounded theory who emphasize the importance of *theoretical sensitivity*. That sensitivity is fed by earlier theories and models and the continuous interaction between that knowledge and the data. Of course it is important to start a case study with as few preconceived ideas as possible. It is important that a researcher orientates himself as widely as possible in literature, to be able to see connections and patterns and structures at all. At the same time he has to be constantly aware that theories and models will not take the upper hand (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Although in a case study the complexity of a situation, event or interaction has to be raised as high as possible, research is simultaneously an activity to reduce complexity, such as chaplaincy always to a certain extent. Theories and models are needed to be able to see something, as in sensory perceptions. These theories and models create order and the ability to act (Landsman, 2018).

Finally

Of course I could discuss some more issues, such as the representativeness of case studies, the comparability of case studies, and the description of the role of the participating chaplains. Some questions are coming up these days. Others must be further discussed and thought through. In any case, the first data and publications are now available. The project itself proved to be complex and required a long start-up phase. Step by step results become available - as during this conference. It appears that we have found an extremely suitable way to give a basis to the beautiful and indispensable profession of chaplaincy. In collaboration with the professionals themselves.

I conclude with the closing words of an American photographer, Emmett Gowin, when he retired in 2009 as a lecturer at Princeton University (Emmet Gowin, 2013, page 64):

'And, finally, this is what I need to say to you.
There are things in your life
that only you will see,
stories that only you will hear.
If you do not tell them or write them down,
if you do not make the picture,
these things will not be seen,
these things will not be heard.'