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Reflections on Theory in Action

Exemplary Practitioners

A Review of Actors Who Make a Difference in Governing

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ABSTRACT

Some actors in the public sphere are excellent at what they do. Even if they could hardly do their work alone, they make a difference. This article presents a search for what are called exemplary practitioners. It describes and compares a group of six practitioners found in the literature: the reflective practitioner, the deliberative practitioner, the street-level bureaucrat, the front-line worker, the everyday maker, and the everyday fixer. It points at differences between the types and changes that occur over time. Also, the article concludes that the more recent types of identified practitioners add crucial skills to the repertoire that practitioners need to make a difference in the public sphere. In the epilogue, the researchers reflect on the research they did on the basis of the ideas in the article.

The world of politics, public administration, and policy making in the West has changed, or so we are asked to believe. We have entered an era of governance (Kjær, 2004; Rhodes, 1996) and live in a world of complexity, self-organization, and (governance) networks (Kickert, Klijn, & Koppejan, 1997; Sørensen & Torfing, 2005; Teisman & Klijn, 2008). In addition, conditions of the present state of affairs include interdependency, intractable conflicts and high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003). There have been changes in, for example, the relationship between citizens and the

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state and the attitudes and roles of citizens in the public sphere. These observations make clear that we have, once and for all, moved “beyond the stable state” (Schön, 1971). Such empirical observations go hand-in-hand with a change in theoretical perspective (Pierre, 2000, p. 3), the traces of which are, for instance, the prominence of concepts like complexity, self-organization, governance networks, and others.

Although a combination of conditions and theoretical descriptions of our times bring new problems to life and into view, they also offer new possibilities for dealing with them. Even if, in terms of steering, many people have lost their belief in a center or in a loyal constituency to lean on, few would deny that it is still possible to find new ways of coping with new problems or reframing old problems. The rapid development of *neighborhood governance* (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008) is a clear example of this. In some neighborhoods, referred to with terms like “deprived neighborhoods” and “neighborhoods in crisis” (Atkinson & Carmichael, 2008, p. 43), all kinds of social and economical problems seem to accumulate. In answer to these problems, new forms of (self-)steering in and around neighborhoods have been developed and old ones moderated. As Lowndes and Sullivan put it: “The idea of neighborhood governance has been stimulated by the combination of opportunities and challenges presented by the new governance arrangements becoming established in many democratic states” (p. 54). But these forms of steering and the rationales behind them are not of a single sort. Moreover, the effects and legitimacy of various solutions are debated. What we find missing in these debates, and especially in the academic contributions to them, is the important role that individual actors—who we refer to as *exemplary practitioners*—play in governance processes.

As we are most familiar with it, we take the Dutch debate on neighborhood governance as an example of such debates. A few years ago the Dutch government made a list of 40 “problem neighborhoods” (in Dutch, *probleemwijken*). The government was prepared to spend billions of euros to improve their situations within a period of 10 years, turning these neighborhoods into “power neighborhoods” (Steyaert, de Graaf, & Bodd, 2009). An important question, however, was—and still is—how the problems of these areas should be defined (Rein & Schön, 1977). Several approaches have been suggested from a scientific perspective. A number of Dutch researchers are focusing on questions of urban structure or the physical characteristics of the environment, supposing that these factors can explain the decline in these areas. They are trying to demonstrate that factors such as the nature of urban development, the age of the houses, or the position of an area within the regional network have an important impact on the quality of life (Knol, 2005; van Bergeijk et al., 2008).

Other researchers believe that social causes such as the socioeconomic status of the population in question are much more important than the physical

causes. These researchers are trying to demonstrate that feelings of safety are primarily related to ethnic heterogeneity or the proportion of people wanting to move (Ministerie van VROM, 2004). A third group of researchers is attending to processes on the cultural or even moral level because they believe that difficulties related to lifestyle or individual behavior might play an important role in this respect. They are pleading for more social control, better educational programs, and moral support for families with problems (Van den Brink, 2007). In general, we are witnessing a fierce debate among Dutch scientists nowadays, and it is not possible to predict which line of reasoning will turn out to be the most convincing.

The definition of problems makes a big difference in the way these neighborhoods are dealt with. We can illustrate this with two examples that might be familiar to most readers. More than 15 years ago the idea of new public management became rather popular (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). Many professionals in the Dutch (semi-)public sector reframed residents as consumers to enhance the efficiency of public organizations, to introduce elements of competition, to define the services they deliver as products, and so on. Although these ideas may be suited to highly educated or well-to-do people, they do not seem to apply to all people in deprived urban areas where many residents, first of all, must survive (WRR, 2005).

A second example relates to the definition of best practices. As many organizations are operating in the same areas, not only the residents but also the professionals are facing a complicated situation in which the goals of new public management, such as efficiency or transparency, cannot exist. As a result, more and more professionals as well as politicians started to look for best practices as the preferable approach. Knowing that a procedure in Situation A has yielded good results in solving Problem B, one can try to follow the same procedure in Situation C to solve Problem D. Again, although we have to acknowledge that this approach makes sense in many cases, it does not work very well in the most deprived areas. The main reason is that both the social context and the (often tacitly held) knowledge of individual professionals play an important role. In fact, one can hardly define a certain procedure or practice in isolation from a specific context and translate it into more general methods (Zouridis, 2003).

In general, the debate on Dutch neighborhood governance seems hardly unique (see, e.g., Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008). We are proposing an alternative track to the kind of research that has been done. We have decided to start looking for *exemplary practitioners*, that is, actors who make a difference in neighborhoods and in the public sphere more generally. With this article, our search starts in the literature. In public administration, public policy, planning, and related disciplines, the search for people who successfully deal with messy, wicked problems has been going on for quite a while. Although attention to individual practitioners has not been overwhelming, as a search we did in

relevant journals confirms, the literature shows ideas and some vivid characters that might match the general profile of an exemplary practitioner.

In this article, we think through earlier research that focused on the level of the individual actor. We studied texts in public administration and related disciplines like public policy and planning and asked ourselves the following questions: Which practitioners make a difference? What is their way of working? To what degree are various practitioners in the literature similar and to what degree are they different from one another? In the following pages, we tease out the contribution of studies focusing on individual practitioners and their ways of working. We studied texts in search of concrete actions that make up actors ways of working. We were also interested in the ways practitioners relate to the contexts in which they work. Looking at practitioners in this way might have a more direct impact on theory, and this theory can influence and inspire practice in a more direct fashion as well. There is a related set of questions that we want to learn about. We already know that the overall setting in which actors have to work has changed, but what does that mean for the challenges in the work of individual actors? Do we see changes in governing reflected in changes in (descriptions of) individual practitioners? What qualities have gained importance? And what qualities have remained important?

A SET OF PRACTITIONERS

There are actors—in the world of governing as anywhere else—who are excellent at what they do. They are hardly flawless but still exemplary. We think these actors and their ways of working, including the theories-in-action (Argyris & Schön, 1974, pp. 6–12) they use to generate them, run the risk of being overlooked in scientific treatments that typically give centrality to complex governance networks. Although the idea that individual acts and structures reinforce each other (Giddens, 1979, pp. 69–73) and need each other has long been a cliché, the ultimate interest is most often on the general level of system, network, or discourse.

Our focus is on the agency side of governing processes. Doing this, we are not trying to promote something that is totally new. We are neither creating an all-encompassing paradigm nor trying to trigger a return to the individual actor as the basic building block of social theory, bringing in a strong version of methodological individualism through the backdoor. We are simply saying that the perspective of the individual actor in networks runs the risk of becoming understudied and that we should be putting people back into networks (Rhodes, 2002). We believe that exemplary practitioners embody the local knowledge (Yanow, 2004) that is specific to the work and context they are in. At the same time, we do not believe that actors act on their own, according to the rules that they make up as they go along or ignoring what

other actors do. We think that actors have to cope with context. In a sense, we are following Catlaw's (2008, p. 520) proposal to think of these practitioners as theorists of a different sort.

In this section, we review six interesting characters. We focus on the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983), the deliberative practitioner (Forester, 1999), the street-level bureaucrat (Lipsky, 1980), the front-line worker (Durose, 2009; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Tops & Hartman, 2009), the everyday maker (Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999), and the everyday fixer (Hendriks & Tops, 2005). We leave out other possible characters such as the policy entrepreneur (Kingdon, 1984/1995) and the competent boundary spanner (Williams, 2002). The selection of these characters was made for various reasons. First, we want to focus on some vivid and thorough descriptions, instead of all available examples. Second, we want variety across time to generate ideas on what might have changed. Our selections contain descriptions generated from the mid-1970s to recent times, and we attempt to describe the main developments that might have occurred. Third, we want to include a variety of characters. Our selections include professionals working in or between organizations and also include active citizens. We want to know who these individuals are. We want to know what their way of working is. At the same time, to understand the way they go about what they do, it is important not to lose sight of the context in and conditions under which they work. To make a difference is always something that is done in contexts because something/someone can only stand out against a background.

From Reflective Practitioner to Deliberative Practitioner

The professionals that Donald Schön (1983, 1987) described in his work on reflective practice—an architect, a psychotherapist, a manager, a town planner, engineers, all working in the United States—dealt with situations of uncertainty, complexity, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict. According to Schön, these demand a certain way of combining thinking and acting: what he called *reflection-in-action*. Those actors who are capable of reflection-in-action—*reflective practitioners*—do not stop to think, nor are they in a rush to find a solution. Schön tells us that reflective practitioners are “thinking what they are doing while they are doing it” (1987, p. xi). They have “a conversation” with the situation they are facing. They experiment on the spot, and it is through this probing that they first reconstruct the problem they encounter and later work their way to a viable solution. Instead of applying rules to a standard situation, the reflective practitioners frame and reframe a situation until they get a grip on it. Problem setting, then, is as important as problem solving (Schön, 1983; see also Rein & Schön, 1977). The reflective practitioner's skill could be described as “a constant interplay between tacit knowledge and self-conscious awareness, the tacit knowledge serving as an anchor, the

explicit awareness serving as critique and corrective” (Sennett, 2008, p. 50). Taken together, Schön argued for the idea that “professional action actually proceeds by learning from experience” (Wagenaar, 2001, p. 233). At the same time, he argued against the artificial separation between problems and solutions, between ends and means, or between thinking and doing.

A question that seemed to have bothered Schön (1983, 1987) is what happens when the situation—literally—talks back because it consists of people with their own interests, ideas, and plans. The competent professionals that Schön celebrated in *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), such as a (teaching) architect and a (teaching) psychotherapist, hardly faced human obstacles. The materials they worked with did include their students, but these students did not put up a fight with their supervisor. The practitioners, by and large, seemed to work in “a universe of one” (Wagenaar, 2001). In his later work on reflective practice, Schön (1987) devoted more attention to the social and political aspects. Here, he argued that competent practitioners should be able to look not only at the situations they face but also at the social relationships that are involved in finding and solving problems. Looking at the way students and teachers worked together, Schön (1987) came to the conclusion that skillful practice would have to take the form of reciprocal reflection-in-action.

Many years later, John Forester (1999) described the work of *The Deliberative Practitioner*.¹ The practitioners central in that book are planners working in the United States and Europe. Forester gave these planners room to tell those practice stories that “illuminate complex and messy situations of real life no less than they portray the tragic choices citizens face in a world of deep conflict” (1999, p. 15). In a certain sense, the deliberative practitioner is an update of the reflective practitioner (cf. Wagenaar, 2001). Not only is this new character placed in a world that seems to have fewer illusions about the possibilities of technically solving problems than it previously had (cf. Forester, 1989, pp. 14–17), it is most of all Forester’s effort to show the sociopolitical aspects of successful practice that differentiates his work from Schön’s (1983, 1987).

Like reflective practitioners, Forester’s (1999) deliberative practitioners try to prevent the “rush to interpretation” getting the better of them. But whereas reflective practitioners mostly focus on framing and reframing problems, the deliberative practitioner also works on the relationships between the parties involved. It is not just about knowing the issue, it is about “getting to know the client as well as his or her ‘problem’” (Forester, 1999, p. 105). Designing and planning do not just involve shaping physical spaces, they also involve shaping spaces for deliberation and argumentation, according to Forester. Deliberative practitioners make sure there is time to think, to explore options and alternatives, and to rethink issues. In this process, it is important to build confidence as a basis for future evaluation of alternatives and decision making. Deliberative practice involves creating new groups, organizational forms, and

networks. It means designing public rituals that enable social learning. In the end, the parties involved will not only learn about each other, their own identity will also change throughout the course of the deliberative process.

Whereas Schön (1983, 1987) argued that in skillful practice thinking and acting are integrated, Forester (1999) built on this with what we could call a “but also” reasoning. For example, one has to have the technical competencies to make a plan, but one should also look at the emotions and values involved in solving problems. Professionals should try to learn about other parties and give them credit. In line with the more general idea of learning about others, Forester (1989, 1999, 2006) pointed to the importance of listening. Listening is a complex moral and political act. Forester also used the metaphor of friendship to talk about what is needed in planning:

Mediators [in other places he talks about planners in general, authors] must be instead [of technical experts, distant judges or neutral bureaucrats] more like respected, critical, and attentive friends—friends who can tell us when our clothes do not match, friends who can remind us when we are in danger of betraying ourselves, friends who can ask with us what is really possible, what we might shoot for, what we might live with. (1999, p. 195)

The way of working that Forester (1999) described involves what he calls “professional humility” (much like “passionate humility” described by Yanow, 1997) on the part of deliberative practitioners. Professional architect-planners themselves should be open to counterarguments and not turn to manipulation or strategic bargaining (Forester, 1999). A final contrast with Schön’s (1983, 1987) reflective practitioner seems to be that Forester’s character (or is it also Forester himself?) is more focused on finding solutions than problems: pragmatic solutions that do justice to the values of the actors involved. Forester’s recent work (2009) focuses on the work of mediators working under similar conditions as his deliberate practitioners.

From Street-Level Bureaucrat to the Front-Line Worker

Since the end of the 1960s, Michael Lipsky has researched the collective acts of public service agencies, resulting in his well-known book on street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980). In this book, he argued that it is the “decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, [that] effectively become the public policies they carry out” (p. xii). Lipsky’s focus was on the professional practice of street-level bureaucrats (e.g., police officers, teachers, social workers, and judges) and on the way they (personally) experience their work.

Four general conditions under which the kind of work of street-level

bureaucrats has to be done are the following. First, street-level bureaucrats have a permanent lack of resources. Second, the demand for their services is, in principle, unlimited and, in any case, greater than the supply. Third, the rules a street-level bureaucrat has to implement and the goals to be attained are often ambiguous and in conflict with each other (cf. Hupe & Hill, 2007; Wagenaar, 2004). Finally, their clients are not voluntary clients. In addition, street-level bureaucrats must deal with the fact that they are often seen as embodying government or policy and the various interests they serve. Hupe and Hill (2007) argued that street-level bureaucrats institutionalize their own work to cope with it; it becomes their standard operating procedure.

In general, street-level bureaucrats are motivated to serve the common good. They need to have (at least) four important competencies to successfully do their job. First, street-level bureaucrats are professional decision makers: “They usually make decisions on the spot” (Lipsky, 1980, p. 8). To be a good decision maker, they need to have discretion (Hupe & Hill, 2007). They have to translate programmatic formats into the human dimensions of situations. Second, because they have face-to-face contact with citizens, they need to have communication skills. For instance, they have to deal with emotions, conflicts, and even aggression. In addition, they have to clarify and communicate procedures and decisions. Third, street-level bureaucrats need to be problem solvers. Although citizens’ situations often do not fit into bureaucratic procedures, these bureaucrats have to be creative and find a solution for each case. Fourth, besides the relationship with their clients, they also have relationships within their (bureaucratic) organizations. “Street-level bureaucrats are very often not just working *in* organisations but are essentially located *at the boundaries*” (Hill, 2009, p. 254). They have to deal with and negotiate organizational control, while also producing according to externally or internally defined targets.

Street-level bureaucrats have developed certain coping strategies to keep their heads above water (Lipsky, 1980). Satyamurti (1981) called these strategies *defenses against discretion*, and Hughes (1958) called these *strategies of survival*. The first strategy is they make sure not to become too emotionally involved. Second, they create certain routines to deal with limited services and to control clients’ demands. Finally, they construct general labels and simplifications for the reality they face. These strategies certainly influence the way the agencies themselves work. Lipsky’s main argument is that street-level bureaucrats play an essential and rather paradoxical role in the implementation of public policy. Although street-level bureaucrats work at street level—often seen as the implementation phase of the policy process—they should also be seen as policymakers (see also Hupe & Hill, 2007) because their routines and strategies define how policy is actually made.

Street-level bureaucrats are not the type of practitioner one would neces-

sarily call exemplary, but their theories-in-use are interesting material for the purpose of comparison. What is more, Lispy's (1980) work has inspired subsequent generations of researchers. Over the last one-and-a-half decades, studies have been conducted that focus on actors who do seem to make a difference. These actors mostly go by the name *front-line workers* (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; see also Durose, 2009; Hartman & Tops, 2005; Tops & Hartman, 2009).

Over a period of three years, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) followed 48 front-line workers (cops, teachers, and counselors) in the Southwest and Midwest of the United States and collected and analyzed their stories. They showed that street-level workers operate within two narratives. First, they introduced the narrative of the state-agent. This implies the street-level workers' viewpoint that focuses on how they apply the state's laws, rules, and procedures to the cases they handle. This narrative is central to most existing literature about street-level workers. However, Maynard-Moody and Musheno described a second narrative: the citizen-agent. This narrative concentrates on the judgments that the street-level workers make about the identities and moral character of the people encountered and the workers' assessments of how these people react during encounters. Front-line workers decide who is a good or bad person, who has rights and who is disenfranchised, and what community actions are tolerated or punished (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Front-line workers decide who are worthy of their time and energy, for whom they are willing to go the extra mile.

Durose (2009), who did her research in Sheffield (United Kingdom), added the narrative of *civic entrepreneurialism*. This term reflects that local governance is a contested site for policy action in which front-line workers are "situated agents" using their "readings" and local knowledge to act entrepreneurially in order to both deliver policy and build networks and relationships with the community (Durose, 2009, p. 36). According to Hartman and Tops (2005; Tops & Hartman, 2009), who researched front-line work in large Dutch cities, for these practitioners everything is about acting on the spot, about implementation and interaction (engagement) with citizens. What differentiates working on the frontline from policy making is exactly this dynamism. Less than street-level bureaucrats, front-line workers cannot prepare the implementation in advance or from a distance because every situation is different. One has to act in accordance with what the situation demands. One has to organize "from the ground up" (Tops & Hartman, 2009, p. 199). What is important in dealing with concrete situations, as Durose (2009) stressed, is that front-line workers have to be more networkers than street-level bureaucrats because they build relationships with their community. All in all, the literature on street-level bureaucrats can roughly be characterized as institutional and organizational, while the literature on front-line workers is based more on sociological phenomena, such as citizenship and community empowerment.

From the Everyday Maker to the Everyday Fixer

During the second half of the 1990s, Hendrik Bang and Eva Sørensen (1999; Bang, 2005) investigated the shift from democratic government to democratic governance in an old working-class neighborhood in the Danish capital Copenhagen. In the course of the investigation, they discovered a new character whom they named *everyday maker* (Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999). Everyday makers, in contrast to expert citizens, seem to be young people (in their thirties). They are people who do not want to waste their precious time on participation in formal political institutions (Bang, 2005). Their interest in party politics is limited, and they also do not want to become professional activists. They have a “project identity,” and their everyday making is more fluid, unplanned, and more impulsive. Everyday makers want to solve their immediate and concrete policy problems “on the lowest possible level” (Bang & Sørensen, 1999, p. 336). To do this, they follow eight rules (Bang, 2005, p. 169; Bang & Sørensen, 1999, pp. 336–337; cf. Hendriks & Tops, 2002, pp. 24–26):

1. Do it yourself,
2. Do it where you are,
3. Do it for fun but also because you find it necessary,
4. Do it ad hoc and part-time,
5. Do it concretely rather than ideologically,
6. Do it responsibly and show trust in yourself,
7. Do it with tact and with respect for the differences of others, and
8. Do it by looking at expertise as an other, rather than as the enemy.

The idea of the everyday maker has been picked up by the Dutch researchers Frank Hendriks and Pieter Tops (2002; 2005; see also van de Wijdeven and Hendriks 2009; van de Wijdeven et al., 2006). Hendriks and Tops introduced a variation to the everyday maker: the everyday fixer. Everyday fixers are public entrepreneurs who know how to connect interests, agendas, and actors (Van de Wijdeven et al., 2006). To a large extent the (Dutch) everyday fixer makes use of the same rules as the (Danish) everyday maker. Van de Wijdeven et al. and Hendriks and Tops noticed two differences, however. First, fixers like to do it themselves (Rule 1), but they do make a lot of use of their personal network as well. Second, fixers operate less on an ad hoc basis (Rule 4); they show permanent dedication and involvement. In addition, Van de Wijdeven et al. pointed out that, although everyday makers typically are not professionals, it is possible that actors have turned their everyday making/fixing into a regular job.

The differences between the Danish everyday maker and the Dutch everyday fixer might also be understood from the prototypical case of the everyday fixer, Arie Schagen, on which Hendriks and Tops (2002, 2005) based their

more general description. Arie Schagen was (in 2002) the 58-year-old initiator and director of a neighborhood development corporation in the city quarter of Regentessekwartier-Valkenboslaan (ReVa) in The Hague. People like Schagen are indispensable. At the same time they irritate because—and Hendriks and Tops think this is essential to the actors' success—they seem to ignore the rules and codes. Schagen always knows what language is appropriate when he addresses the public, without losing his authenticity. He is called a fixer, a rebel with a cause, a bridge builder, a pragmatic doer, and a networker. He is at the same time the standard bearer for the development corporation and a battering ram for the neighborhood. He is good at creating relationships and enthusiasm. Nevertheless, his relationships always involve a combination of confrontation and cooperation. He is good at giving projects a kick-start, but is less involved in the technical matters of implementation and finance.

As becomes clear from the description of Schagen, the model for the everyday fixer is not the same as the model for the everyday maker. Schagen is not part of a young generation that has a different attitude toward public life. He is a special individual who makes his own plans. At the same time, the description makes a larger-than-life character of him. We should, however, not forget that there are certain conditions that make the work that Schagen does possible. Hendriks and Tops (2005, pp. 486–488) pointed to four of these conditions: (a) sense of urgency, (b) room to maneuver and space to identify and organize the social pressures that exist at ground level, (c) administrative backing of ideas, and (d) interpersonal coproductive relationships.

In Table 1 we give an overview of our six practitioners, including the literature in which they appear, their (official) roles/functions and their particular ways of working. In the next section we compare the various practitioners reviewed in this section and link them to the work to be done in neighborhoods in need.

TRAVELING TIME AND SPACE

As previously discussed, our selection of practitioners is not meant to be encyclopedic of the literature's offerings. Nor do we want to construct the One Ultimate Practitioner. What we have gathered here is a set of practitioners, relevant for understanding practices in the public sector and helpful for our future understanding of neighborhood governance in particular. We have to admit that the descriptions in the literature of practitioners are not that similar. Three characters—street-level bureaucrats, everyday makers, and front-line workers—that we describe remain prototypes in the texts we studied. Regarding the street-level bureaucrat, Hupe and Hill argued, "Lipsky gives less attention to . . . the differences between types of street-level bureaucrats" (2007, p. 284). Because there is wide variety in the nature of their tasks and the contexts differ, "this may have consequences for the degree of uniformity

in the performance, depending on category.” The other three—everyday fixer, deliberative practitioner, and reflective practitioner—take the form of real individuals whose practice is described in a more vivid, personal, and direct way. Moreover, the everyday fixer, the deliberative practitioner, and reflective practitioners did not just develop new ways of dealing with old problems, they developed exemplary ways of working. Nevertheless, all six characters are certainly related in some way. They could be seen as family members. Now, what can we learn from comparing these family members? And how do these ways of working align with what is needed in neighborhoods?

When we look for similarities between the selected practitioners, there are three important things to note. First, we see that all the characters are confronted with uncertainty and ambiguity. Reality does not fit the rules. These situations potentially offer the possibility to make a difference. Whether practitioners do exemplary work, however, depends on their (inter)personal skills and the conditions that favor these skills. Second, to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty, our characters have to become creative. This creativity could involve matching rules with situations. Third, these practitioners are no rookies. They are experienced practitioners. They have learned a craft and developed a repertoire (Schön, 1983). Fourth, even if experience has led practitioners to develop a repertoire, these ways of working are often combined with a pragmatic, case-by-case way of dealing with problems. A particular part of practice in which all these elements seem to come together is the way in which problems are approached. Problems seem to be set in ways that make them solvable. If we take the accumulation of problems, policies, and organizations in neighborhoods into account, all of the elements in the repertoire sketched seem to come in handy. They represent qualities that have remained important over time. But, do the creativity and experience of our six practitioners do the job? We think there are still some elements missing. For instance, what about the task of connecting various aspects of these problems (e.g., physical, social, and cultural) with the domains (professional, political, public) involved? These are questions that are hard to answer with the studies we looked at.

It is also important to take into account some differences between the six practitioners. If we look at differences, changes over time become a crucial element. There are two sets of practitioners to be distinguished here: the first ones include the reflective practitioner and the street-level bureaucrat, and the later ones (the rest). If we take into account changes over time, we can see that later on the focus is no longer on the inside of organizations. Citizens become more important (they even become characters whose way of working is worth studying in depth), and the sociopolitical aspects of the problems dealt with become increasingly central. Finally, social interaction as part of the work of practitioners becomes crucial. These elements are in line with the changes in neighborhood policies. Especially the front-line worker, the everyday fixer, and the deliberative practitioner have ways of working that come in handy when

Table 1. Overview of Practitioners with Their Roles and Ways of Working

	Function	Ways of working
Reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983/1987)	Architects, managers, engineers, psychotherapists, town planners, music teachers	Combine thinking and acting (reflection-in-action) Set the problem before trying to solve it (framing) Experiment (conversation with situation/reframing) Try to learn by doing
Deliberative practitioner (Forester, 1999)	Planners, mediator-facilitators	Try to get to know people and their problems (through listening) Work on relationships, rituals, networks Take values and emotions into account
Street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980)	Teachers, police officers, social workers, judges, nurses, etc.	Diminish emotional involvement and aspirations Develop routines Construct stereotypes and simplifications of reality Cope with uncertainties
Front-line workers (Durose, 2009; Hartman and Tops, 2005; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003; Tops and Hartman, 2009)	Police officers, teachers, counselors, etc.	Interact and engage with citizens Work bottom-up and intuitively Look for the essence of concrete situations Focus on effective interventions Try to understand (“read”) the situation deeply Take action on the spot Have a collective ambition; need the commitment of selected persons Work on relations with the community

Everyday maker (Bang, 2005; Bang and Sørensen, 1999)	Active citizens	Do it themselves Do it where they are Do it for fun but also because they find it necessary Do it ad hoc and part-time Do it concretely rather than ideologically Do it responsibly and show trust in themselves Do it with tact and with respect for the differences of others Do it by looking at expertise as the other rather than as enemy See everyday maker, but work less isolated and less ad hoc
Everyday fixer (Hendriks and Tops, 2002, 2005)	Active citizens/public entrepreneurs	

different aspects and domains need to be connected. These practitioners do not just seem good with complex policy problems, like their predecessors seemed to be. The front-line worker seems to bring in those social, citizen-focused skills that earlier street-level bureaucrats seemed to lack, or at least did not have to rely on to get their work done (compare Lipsky, 1980). The deliberative practitioner also shows the sociopolitical skills like listening and having a keen eye for identities and relationship skills that were relevant in the 1980s and before (cf. Forester, 1989; Schön, 1983), but that seem to us more crucial than ever in neighborhoods. Schön's reflective practitioner might have done a good job designing policy on paper, but we do not know how successful he would have been 10 years later, facing "customers," or 20 years later being forced to work with "coproducers."

There is, however, also a clear difference between the deliberative practitioner on the one hand, and the front-line worker and everyday maker and fixer on the other. The difference has to do with (the construction of) the opposition between talking and action. Whereas Forester's practitioners seem to use a lot of talk to do their job, front-line workers and everyday makers are focused on action, on getting things done. The difference might be the result of the kinds of cases that the different practitioners have to deal with. Forester's planners and mediators are working in environments that are to such a degree poisoned with conflict that long talk sessions and rituals are needed to provide a shared basis to go on. Concrete front-line and citizen actions are taken to cut or circumvent red tape.

Talking about the necessity of action is a rhetorical strategy. Take the example of the alderman Jan Koehoorn in Heart-less Town, a medium-size town in the Netherlands (the full case description can be found in Van Hulst, 2008a, pp. 91–116). After 25 years of political fights over the location for a new center, alderman Koehoorn is able to work toward a solution in a period of just two years. Part of the policy narrative that he puts forward is that actions are more important than mere talking. At first blush, it seems that the success of the process illustrates the success of a way of working that honors action over talk. But what remains out of sight is the history leading up to a certain moment when a sense of urgency can be created. It is questionable whether Koehoorn's way of working would have been successful at the beginning of the 25-year period.

All this, however, does not change the observation shared in the (Dutch) practice of neighborhood governance, that many good initiatives run aground in bureaucratic circles in which the only product is paper. It should also be clear that exemplary practitioners are not "just" fixing things. They do not just produce solutions. Probably, they are often working toward solutions. Put differently, they might work on possibilities (Catlaw, 2008) or on relationships that later on might lead to solving problems. So, what we have here are different ways of working that might be used in contexts filled with anger and grief (Forester, 1999) or in contexts hampered by red tape. The question that

remains is how exemplary practitioners would deal with a case that combines both. On top of that, being able to understand contexts and differences between them seems to be something that is increasingly in demand in a governance era. It might be those actors working at organizational peripheries, constantly needing to translate meaning from one context to another (Yanow, 2004), who have the opportunity to make the biggest difference.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

When we imagine problem setters and solvers in the public sphere, we think of individuals in various formal or informal positions (cf. Kingdon, 1984/1995). Although they are not all professionals, we think that the label of *exemplary practitioners* fits this category of individuals. We do not think that these practitioners do their work all by themselves. Nor do we believe in fairy tales of strong leaders who single-handedly dominate the discourse and fix problems once and for all. We think these practitioners are part of and work together with groups, teams, and organizations. Moreover, the sociopolitical work of forming what has been called *vital coalitions* (Hendriks & Tops, 2002)—that is, coalitions of people who are able to get things done and keep things going in and around neighborhoods—might itself be a central part of their practice. At the same time, we also believe that individual actors, through their deliberative, reflective, entrepreneurial, and pragmatic acting, can make important contributions to the way collectives try to deal with problems. There are some, albeit abstract, characteristics that unite practitioners who have caught the attention of researchers. Some individuals, alone and in collaboration with their partners, are able to positively and substantially influence the course of processes.

As we said before, to make a difference is always something that is done in context because something or someone can only stand out against a background. With the set of practitioners in mind, it becomes clearer how making a difference now is not the same as making a difference 30 years ago. Time matters. Although the conclusion that recent characters bring to the table some crucial skills could be the result of what caught the attention of the researchers whose work we selected, we do not think that the differences we found are coincidental. Dealing with complex issues (wicked problems) seems to be shifted toward cleverly combining work on physical matters with work on social relations. This is not only visible in the difference between Schön and Forester, it is also reflected in neighborhood renewal policies themselves and is in line with aspects of the observed shift from government to governance, such as the changed relations among citizens, civil servants, and professionals. We do not have the space here to elaborate on this point, but the differences seem to be, at least in part, the result of changes in the wider contexts in which practitioners operate. We would like to stress that studying the work of individuals involves studying the context in which they operate.

Importantly, making a difference in one context requires something other than making a difference in another. But, some exemplary practitioners, as we encounter them in practice, might well be able to attain results in various contexts. Context-sensitivity will be part of their trade.

This brings us back to the question of the value of looking at exemplary practitioners. Seen from a historical perspective, exemplary practitioners embody a specific period in time with their specific problems and (partial) solutions. Studying these practitioners, therefore, always involves studying the most relevant dilemmas in the public sphere at a certain point in time and space. When it comes to the possibility of future research, this literature review clears the ground for the empirical study of present-day exemplary practitioners. Dilemmas that should be of interest for such work include the tension between different kinds of local knowledge and ideas about what is problematic, possible, and good in a less hierarchical world. Think, for instance, of the possible tensions between professional knowledge of civil servants at the local or state level and the lay knowledge of citizens who experience everyday life in deprived neighborhoods. Our exemplary practitioners can often be found caught between two world(view)s. As Maynard-Moody and Musheno stated about the workers they studied: “Street-level workers must continually balance the demands of the state and the needs and potential of the individuals encountered” (2003, p. 157). We now know that some practitioners are able to connect domains, but we need to understand better how they do this under different conditions.

The result of such research has implications for both theory and practice. It can help us to better understand how tensions and challenges are dealt with on the ground. Teaching it can better prepare students for the hands-on work that awaits them. The study of individual practitioners might inspire students more than abstract sets of rules-of-thumb. We are not saying that practitioners’ skills and qualities that have been important in the past are no longer in need. Rather, new ones, like dealing with conflicts between or with citizens on a social level, have become a more basic part of the work done in the public sphere. At the same time, studies of practitioners could develop more appreciation in bureaucracies for the “dirty work” at the ground level.

EPILOGUE: A SPECIAL RESEARCH PROJECT IN NEIGHBORHOOD GOVERNANCE

**Merlijn van Hulst
Laurens de Graaf**

In this epilogue, we describe briefly how we did the empirical research we engaged in (after writing the previous article) and reflect on an important

research experience we had moving from the practitioner in theory to the practitioner in action. Regarding research strategies, we thought that thick descriptions grounded in thorough fieldwork would enable rich understandings of the role of individuals in neighborhood governance. The activities and the skills needed for this kind of research strategy are very similar to the ones needed for doing ethnography (Van Hulst, 2008b, p. 149).

One of the difficulties of our research was that actors do not go around wearing a name tag “exemplary practitioner.” That is why we used a new research approach for finding our subjects. Although this way of working involves common elements of regular qualitative research, like snowballing, it is different as an approach. We called it *scouting*. We invited a social entrepreneur, Dick de Ruijter, to join our research team. We asked him to look for exemplary practitioners working in disadvantaged neighborhoods in the five cities that participate in the investigation. The idea behind the use of a scout with similar characteristics as the people we were looking for was that he would have more chances of finding such people than we would following a formal route (e.g., ask for a list from the local government).

For a second round of research, we decided that particular forms of observation, especially following practitioners around, would help us look beyond espoused theory to find out more about the theories-in-use that practitioners exhibit. Throughout our observation days, there was often time to connect with the practitioner on a more personal level and discuss things that had happened during the day. Following practitioners around for one day also meant getting to know a part of the context in which a person acts and other actors who are part of that context. At the end of each observation day, we interviewed the practitioner. We asked what they did to make the project a success, what problems they ran into along the way, and how they dealt with them. At the end of the interview, we also asked people to tell us what motivates them in their work. During our fieldwork we both had experiences that reframed the way we look at our research practice:

[Laurens]: Until this project I had not done fieldwork in this manner. Being a novice, I quickly learned about observation as a method. But observation is more than just a method; it is a way of approaching the field and trying to get from theory to practice. What struck me most doing fieldwork was the energy that practitioners have—at least the ones that we studied. At the end of the long observation days I had to share my experiences with my wife. What I had been doing all day was much more intense than the kind of mainstream research I was familiar with. I think that I experienced (“through the body”) what many people in the field themselves feel. Hanging around in practice adds to the stories, attitudes, and opinions I had encountered in my previous research, the emotions, sound, and smell of practice. At the end of the day my respect for the people we study has grown.

[Merlijn]: My view of research was especially challenged the two times

I met with a social worker in a disadvantaged neighborhood in Amsterdam-West. The first time I joined Dick to meet him and make an appointment for a day I would do observations. The social worker and his associates questioned the credibility of the research we wanted to do, stating that policy makers and researchers always come to get something and never engage themselves over a longer period. During a (taped) conversation on a second occasion the social worker explained how he himself had decided to give up a comfortable working life as an observer (he used to be a journalist) after the murder of Theo van Gogh (Amsterdam, 2004). He decided that he had to go into neighborhoods and really become involved in the dirty work. The story about this—indeed, exemplary—move made me understand the limits of the academic research I had been doing. An important question became how I can do more with my ethnographic sensibility (Pader, 2006). I decided to think about ways that I, as a researcher, could become more engaged. A way forward might be to prolong the present research by following one or two practitioners around for a longer time and take a more active role in their environment.

As researchers, we have been moving back and forth between observations that triggered the project, literature, hunches, and empirical observations. This iterative, circular research practice has been supported by the organization around the investigation. Our investigation has been embedded in a research consortium with two universities (Tilburg University, TU Delft), NICIS Institute, and five Dutch local governments: Amsterdam, The Hague, Leeuwarden, Utrecht, and Zwolle. The various moments of interaction were used to shape and reshape the project. In the final stage of our project, we will try to use the lessons we learned to make (a small but hopefully significant) difference ourselves, both in practice and academia.

NOTES

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1. Some things are interesting to keep in mind here. First, Forester wrote already at length about these issues in his *Planning in the Face of Power* (1989). Second, Forester does not appear to have written about an actual character in the same way as Schön. One might argue that both have written more about practice than about

practitioners. We do not see this as a problem, because our interest is mainly on the practice of practitioners as well. Third, in his book, Forester (1999) referred to Schön (1983), both crediting him and showing the limits of his work.

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