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Published in:
Critical Policy Studies

Document version:
Early version, also known as pre-print

Publication date:
2012

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
van Hulst, M. J., de Graaf, L. J., & van den Brink, G. J. M. (2012). The work of exemplary practitioners in neighborhood governance. *Critical Policy Studies*, 6(4), 433-450.

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Publisher: Routledge

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Critical Policy Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcps20>

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To cite this article: Merlijn van Hulst, Laurens de Graaf & Gabriël van den Brink (2012): The work of exemplary practitioners in neighborhood governance, *Critical Policy Studies*, 6:4, 434-451

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2012.730763>

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The work of exemplary practitioners in neighborhood governance

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In order to understand how exemplary work is done in the complex urban environment of disadvantaged neighborhoods, we studied a group of 43 individuals – civil servants, professionals and active citizens – who make a difference. Various so-called ‘exemplary practitioners’ were found in the literature and in the neighborhoods of five cities. The working methods of exemplary practitioners show a mix and a dose of entrepreneurialism, strategic networking and empathic engagement that differ from standard bureaucracy but fit very well with what is needed in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Two striking examples illustrate these working methods.

Keywords: boundary spanners; neighborhoods; social entrepreneurs; frontline workers; shadowing

1. The complex interface between people, policies and systems

Practitioners involved in public policymaking find themselves confronted with uncertainty, differences and interdependence. Because of this, it is hard to predict the future, let alone to steer it through public policies. Recognition of the dynamic nature of policy processes is by no means new. What seems to have changed empirically, however, is *the extent* to which policymakers are confronted with it (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). In the field of public administration, the use of complex systems theory to explain the dynamics surrounding public policies has become increasingly popular (e.g. Wagenaar 2007, Teisman *et al.* 2009). Complexity theorists tell us that governance processes nowadays are ‘erratic and non-linear; stability and predictability are an exception in these processes’ (Boons *et al.* 2009, p. 232).

In this article we are concerned with the dilemmas this (unstable) state of affairs poses for individuals who work in urban environments known as ‘disadvantaged’ neighborhoods. These are areas where social and economic problems have accumulated. The problems in these areas have been the object of policymaking and implementation for many years and they are known for their ‘wickedness’ (Rittel and Webber 1973). Now and then successes are celebrated, but at the same time new problems pop up for which new policies are designed. In the study of policy, the difference between policies on paper and their implementation in actual cases has a long tradition in implementation studies (e.g. Pressman and Wildavsky 1973, Yanow 1996, Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, Lipsky 2010). The organization of planned and at times unsolicited change in people’s lives is not a straightforward matter. As Wagenaar (2007, p. 21) observed: ‘In many cases implementation quickly runs aground as it becomes mired in bureaucratic inertia, fierce opposition

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of citizen groups and interest associations, the unintended, strategic use of the program by the target groups, or the fatal combination of all three'. As a result of this, policies are frequently developed in an effort to deal with the unintended consequences of previous policies.

In general, recipients of policy in disadvantaged neighborhoods suffer from the consequences of a frequent mismatch between what bureaucratic organizations offer and their own view of what they need. At the same time, many valuable initiatives that are developed bottom-up by members of the civil society do not survive the fierce competition for attention and funds (Giltay Veth 2009). In addition, sub-systems through which policies are designed or implemented – increasingly specialized as they are – can be in contradiction with one another or at least not well adjusted. In disadvantaged neighborhoods a clear manifestation of this can be found. We see an increasingly large group of people with multiple needs (Tops and Hartman 2005, Kruiter *et al.* 2008). The sub-system of care, already overburdened and fragmented, can hardly handle these cases, mainly because the file information is scattered across care providers. It is these kinds of situations that, from a complexity theoretical point of view, are very problematic. An important condition under which actors in complex systems can cope with problems is the flow of various sorts of knowledge – including local knowledge about problems and feedback on (inter)actions – through the system (Wagenaar 2007). In addition, the cooperation of various providers is difficult to attain.¹ All and all, what seems to be needed are creative ways to mediate and at times redesign the multidimensional interface between (groups of) people, (formal and informal) policies and (sub)-systems.

2. A focus on individuals

There is a risk that studies that focus on complex governance networks and institutions underestimate the role played by individual actors (Rhodes 2002, Lowndes 2005). Various researchers who have shown a keen awareness of the increasing societal and administrative complexity, however, have chosen to focus on how work gets done by individuals (e.g. Schön 1983, Healey 1992, Forester 1999, Lipsky 2010). The idea is that what happens in practice is not the result of what strong actors decide, but that what individual actors do can have important consequences and that indeed there is a difference among individuals in what they are able to attain.

Those who work at the street level use their cultural, personal and professional knowledge and judgment to interpret people's situations. Since the decisions that people working at the street level make are not and cannot be the automatic result of rules and regulations, they are in the position to match situations with what they have on offer. However, early research on implementation also points out that street-level bureaucrats often use their discretionary authority in a defensive manner in an effort to manage what otherwise would be an overwhelming workload, as Lipsky (2010) argued persuasively a long time ago. The point is that the working conditions – characterized by a lack of resources (time, information, etc.); a demand that grows to meet the supply; vague, conflicting or ambiguous goals; difficulty measured performance and non-voluntary clients – like the (non)alignment of sub-systems – 'help' to mediate between people and policies. Street-level bureaucrats would, for instance, simplify the complexity of their work by using fixed labels to categorize people.² However, people and their problems do not fit neatly into preconceived boxes.

On top of that, the 'harder' the case the less effort would often be put into it (Engbersen 2006) because it is easier and more satisfying to help those cases by which results can be

obtained relatively easily. The result of such maneuvering can be disproportionately seen in disadvantaged neighborhoods, where many of the harder cases can be found. But even if these are general behaviors that can be found when individuals work under pressure (Lipsky 2010, p. xvii), and when public organizations through their procedures and managerial steering often stimulate that behavior, and even, perhaps, with the shift to even more governance than in Lipsky's days, workers do have the option of making their own choices and might, for instance, reject certain simplifications. Next to that, there are many people working in the public sphere with less direct steering (e.g. volunteers) by formal policies and managers. These people indeed can and do make their own choices, even if in general they have even less resources (money, time, information, etc.) at their disposal and because of this – as mentioned above – their initiatives have a tough time surviving.

What then is the role of individual actors in successes that are achieved in disadvantaged neighborhoods? Are there individuals who are able to succeed where others would fail? This seems to be the case (Engbersen *et al.* 2007). Some argue that in disadvantaged neighborhoods there are practitioners who are exemplary in what they do and they are worth studying in their own right (Van Hulst *et al.* 2011). That does not mean that individuals do not need others to succeed. On the contrary, the way these practitioners work with others will probably be one of the central elements of their success. Nor does it mean that the acts of single individuals are the answer to problems that become visible at the level of a neighborhood as a whole. The only claim that some make and that we support is that the 'messy, conflicted, dirty-hands experience' (Forester 1999, p. 8) of practitioners does not get enough attention, while much could be learned from it when dealing with public problems (cf. Williams 2002).

Just like the researchers mentioned above, we are interested in the practitioners' practices, i.e. their working methods.³ We decided to study the work of a range of individual practitioners: active citizens doing voluntary work in their neighborhoods, public managers and policymakers in the local bureaucracy and housing corporations, and people working at the street level like police officers and social/youth/community workers. Our research was broad in scope and aimed at exploring the ways in which certain practitioners might make a difference. We did, however, specify that the people we studied were considered *exemplary urban practitioners*,⁴ i.e. practitioners who, according to others in practice, stood out because of what they achieved. We asked ourselves how practitioners in disadvantaged neighborhoods proceed when engaging in controversial, politically sensitive policy processes that might develop in unintended and surprising ways. We wanted to know what contribution they might make in the important task of mediating and at times redesigning the multidimensional interface between (groups of) people, (formal and informal) policies and (sub)-systems.

3. Exemplary practitioners

In the public administration literature and that of related disciplines, there are various examples of practitioners who might fit the profile of exemplary practitioners. In order to recognize the ways of working that these practitioners might have, we first had to discover what the literature had to say about such 'characters'. A group of characters came to our attention: the street-level bureaucrat (Lipsky 2010), the front-line worker (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, Durose 2007, 2009, 2011, Tops and Hartman 2009), the everyday maker (Bang and Sørensen 1999, Bang 2005), the every-day fixer (Hendriks and Tops 2005), various types of entrepreneurs (political, policy, social, civic, institutional) (see e.g. Dahl [1961] 2005, Kingdon 1984, Leadbeater 1997), the reflective practitioner

(Schön 1983) and the deliberative practitioner (Forester 1999). Not all of these characters are known for their exemplary work and we did not find all of them in our field research. The following are descriptions of the characters that became central to our research.⁵

3.1. *Front-line workers*

First of all, whereas Lipsky (2010) talked about street-level bureaucrats, nowadays the concept of front-line workers is used to talk about people in similar positions. Front-line worker is a general category, but in fact the individuals that are talked about in the literature are those who go beyond what their predecessors did and what their colleagues do. With specific reference to Dutch front-line workers, Tops and Hartman (2009, see also Durose 2009, 2011 for a British case) argued that those who do their work successfully possess particular characteristics and skills needed on the front line. They are able to ‘read situations’. They know the actors involved, what they have gone through, and see the opportunities that a situation offers.⁶ In addition, front-line workers can summon up appropriate ways to act on the spot, a quality that might also be referred to as improvisation skills and ‘bricolage’, practice-based kinds of intelligence related to what Schön (1983) called reflection-in-action.⁷ Finally, they are engaged in what they do, doing their job with heart and soul. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) found that once a front-line worker judged someone as ‘worthy’, they would go the extra mile to help such person. Going the extra mile might include persuading bosses, bending rules or even using one’s personal resources.

3.2. *Entrepreneurs*

Another concept that appears frequently in the literature is that of entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs are people willing ‘to invest their resources – time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money – in the hope of a future return’ (Kingdon, 1984, p. 122). Dahl ([1961] 2005, compare Walker 1974) at the beginning of the 1960s talked about *political entrepreneurs*. Those are actors at the top of the political hierarchy capable of ‘pyramiding’ resources. Two decades later Kingdon (1984) observed – still within the political-administrative system – the *policy entrepreneur* who is able to connect people, agendas and policies. Policy entrepreneurs are very good at defining problems, have a keen eye for recognizing opportunities, are team builders and set the example for a new route to take (Mintrom and Norman 2009). In the 1990s an entrepreneurial way of doing was observed in civil society, where *social entrepreneurs* were said to make a difference. Social entrepreneurs are private individuals who take initiative to address social challenges of their communities (Korosec and Berman 2006). Leadbeater (1997, p. 53) saw three skills that these social entrepreneurs have: First, ‘they take under-utilised, discarded resources and spot ways of using them to satisfy unmet needs’. Second, ‘they create new services and products, new ways of dealing with problems, often by bringing together approaches that have traditionally been kept separate’. Thirdly, ‘they transform the institutions they are in charge of, taking moribund organisations and turning them into dynamic creative ones. Most importantly, they can transform the neighbourhoods and communities they serve by opening up possibilities for self-development’.⁸ In neighborhoods, these people will probably start a project or organization around a specific policy problem or a societal group with a particular profile and are able to gather the resources necessary to keep it going (Korosec and Berman 2006).

3.3. *Everyday fixers*

A third type is Hendriks and Tops' 'everyday fixers' (2002, 2005, see also Van de Wijdeven and Hendriks 2009).⁹ These are active citizens or proto-professionals whose life-long dedication and personal drive help them to get things done.¹⁰ Hendriks and Tops use one case to illustrate the type of actor they are talking about. This person is the initiator and director of a neighborhood development corporation in a city quarter in The Hague (the Netherlands). He was indispensable, but also clashed with people because he seemed to ignore the rules and codes. This person always knew what language was appropriate when he addressed the public, without losing his authenticity. He was called a fixer, a rebel *with* a cause, a bridge-builder, a pragmatic doer, and a networker. He was good at creating relationships and enthusiasm. Nevertheless, his relationships always involved a combination of confrontation and cooperation. People like this everyday fixer combine this skill with the ability 'to communicate, to persuade, to imagine oneself in someone else's world and to bring together different worlds' (Hendriks and Tops 2005, p. 487). Being successful in this way can help them to become informal leaders, but they are not the type of person to stay with the same project for long. They would rather kick-start a process and then move on to another problem.

3.4. *Boundary spanners*

Finally, the idea of a boundary spanner was developed in the literature on inter-organizational relations (Steadman 1992). Boundary spanners work in positions between two or more systems (e.g. the juridical system and the health system, different organizations). They deal with people on both sides of the boundary and specialize in negotiating the interactions between systems. Boundary spanners are characterized by 'their ability to engage with others and deploy effective relational and interpersonal competencies' (Williams 2002, p. 110). They might be called in when a conflict arises between groups of actors in a different network. Active listening and empathizing are skills that will be crucial in the work of boundary spanners dealing with conflicts (Williams 2002). This reminds us of the work Forester (1999) referred to as deliberative practitioners (see Forester 1989 on the importance of listening). Deliberative practitioners try to prevent the 'rush to interpretation' getting the better of them. A deliberative practitioner works on the relationships between the parties involved in a conflict. 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).

These four characters might seem quite different at first blush. There is, however, some interesting overlap across them. A first similarity can be found in the entrepreneurial 'way of doing' that these individuals all have. Front-line workers (Durose 2011), everyday fixers (Hendriks and Tops 2005) and boundary spanners (Williams 2002) have also been called entrepreneurs. The popularity of entrepreneurialism might be understood as a result of New Public Management thinking. However, the entrepreneurs we are referring to are not entrepreneurs in a managerial sense (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008). Nor is being an entrepreneur as we mean it here about making money, even if that medium is what many business entrepreneurs focus on and even if a lack of it (money) can play an important role in allowing or hampering social change in neighborhoods. Being an entrepreneur involves coming up with innovations, solutions that fit specific problems, which might include smart ways to bend existing rules.¹¹

Another similarity is that these practitioners are driven by a wish to move the local society in a certain direction. They are very engaged in what they do. With some, this engagement seems to manifest itself in the ability and willingness to listen emphatically,

whereas in others it can be mainly understood from the drive they have in their work. A third similarity is the position that these practitioners take. To do their work well they have to meet many different people and because of that they have a relatively large and diverse network. The figure of the boundary spanner is therefore, to some extent, applicable to all the practitioners.¹² Individuals in boundary spanning positions have to make sure they are trusted and make use of this trust to build alliances between groups of people in different (sub-) systems (Steadman 1992). They must be both knowledgeable of and credible to people on different sides of the boundaries. They must be aware of norms – formal and informal – of both systems, as well as of the operations and organizational politics.

An important by-product of both engagement and network position, and a condition for innovation, is access to different kinds of *local knowledge* – ‘the very mundane, yet expert understanding of and practical reasoning about local conditions derived from lived experience’ (Yanow 2004, p. S12). Local knowledge of the neighborhoods, for example, can become crucial in an effort to gain a clear sense of what the communities experience as problems (Engbersen *et al.* 2007). And as Durose (2009, p. 47) noted, the front-line workers she studied were not just coping, or trying to deal with cases that did not fit the rules; they used ‘their contextual understanding to actively engage with “hard to reach” groups in the community’.

4. Our research

After searching for characters in the literature we started our fieldwork. The first part of that fieldwork consisted of searching for practitioners who stand out via a procedure we called *scouting*.¹³ We asked a member of the research team to look for exemplary urban practitioners working in disadvantaged neighborhoods in the five cities that participated in the investigation: Amsterdam, The Hague, Leeuwarden, Utrecht and Zwolle. The basic idea was that the team member would go out into the neighborhood to talk to a large group of people in order to find practitioners who ‘stand out’, in the sense of having played an important part in the successful development of an organization or of certain project(s) in the neighborhood or in the public sphere in general. The person who did the scouting has strong, well-developed social skills and an entrepreneurial working method, much like the type of people we were looking for. The reason for selecting this person for the job was that, in our view, finding specific people by contacting and talking to many people in a couple of months would demand those qualities and not just the regular skills that are needed for doing research involving, for example, interviewing in an organization that ensures good access to interviewees.¹⁴

Our colleague went to work from February 2009 until December 2009, contacting a large number of people in order to identify a group of practitioners who fit the description we were after. He talked to 225 people about their own work and that of others and gathered around 1000 names of people who might be ‘interesting’; an alternative kind of ‘snowballing’. We discussed the scouting procedure and the preliminary results of his scouting on various occasions. In the end, a list was made of practitioners who have done exemplary work. We did not develop a precise set of criteria for searching exemplary urban practitioners. Our research was meant to explore which ways of working seem to matter in disadvantaged neighborhoods and not, for example, to test a sharply pre-defined set of competencies to determine their correlation with an objectified measure of success in complex projects. In the preparation of the list our colleague relied on the judgment of his many conversation partners, his own judgment and on research group discussions.

The second part of the fieldwork involved following these actors around and interviewing them.¹⁵ For this round, we drew inspiration from John Forester's work on practice stories and profiles of practitioners (see <http://courses2.cit.cornell.edu/fit117/> and Forester 2006) and decided to develop short profiles of 43 practitioners. In order to make those profiles, we observed our practitioners throughout the course of a working day. As people tend to move around quite a bit – and the people we observed were certainly no exception – by default this meant following them around, also called shadowing. This is hardly a new technique: Mintzberg's structured observation (1970) is probably the best-known example of it, but is one that is not often used (McDonald 2005, Czarniawska 2007, Noordegraaf 2007).

Shadowing people meant participating in these people's lives, even if it was just a small bit of it. It involved writing up what was said and done, and later on (on the train ride home or at our desk) trying to understand what was done by what was said, and what was said by what was done. During this period of observation, there was often time to connect with the practitioner on a more personal level and briefly discuss things that had happened during the day. Shadowing practitioners meant getting to know a part of the context in which they acted, and the other actors who were part of that context. It also gave rise to unforeseen opportunities, e.g. we discovered that it was interesting to have brief conversations with people who knew the practitioner (the one being observed) well. During these conversations, we would ask them to describe the person we were following in 20 seconds. On several occasions, this offered interesting insights.

The observations did not stand alone, however. At the end of each observation day, we actually interviewed the practitioners. These interviews lasted between one and three hours. We kept in mind Forester's advice (2006) on interviewing practitioners about their work: the interviews focused on a project we asked the practitioners to select. It had to be a project in which they had invested a substantial part of their time and which illustrated the way they worked. We asked what they did to make the project a success, what problems they had run into along the way and how they had dealt with them. We asked people to be as concrete as possible (see also Weiss 1994) and to tell us about what they did, rather than just what they thought about what they did. The key to the research day in-the-field was that its separate elements would develop into a unifying whole. Throughout the day, an image of the person would begin to form, a relationship would be built and the interview at the end would, partly as a result of the previous interaction, bring out a rich narrative. The activities and the skills needed for this kind of research strategy are very similar to the ones needed for doing ethnography (Van Hulst 2008): social skills, flexibility, sensibility and reflexivity.

During analysis of the cases we compared the profiles with the characters that we had encountered in the literature. We asked ourselves whether the practitioners would fit the types of actors described there or whether new types were needed. There was certainly a big overlap between various characters in the literature and the ways of working we encountered in the field. A large group of actors fit very well in the descriptions made of *social* entrepreneurs and of front-line workers. These practitioners played an important role in present-day neighborhood governance in that they were able to organize around a more holistic view of people and groups in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

We also encountered various actors who fit the description of everyday fixers and boundary spanners. These actors seemed more rare. The difference between the everyday fixers as described in the literature and those we encountered in the field is that the literature only pinpointed this type among active citizens, while we also saw the ways of working in more bureaucratic settings (even though these practitioners did adapt their ways of working to the specific environment and the specific role in which they operated).

5. The social worker and civil servant

Below we present two practitioners from the list of practitioners. These up-close-and-personal portraits render our material in a way that fits well with the interpretive approach we used to collect our data. We chose these two because they were locally well known and appreciated for their work. What makes them particularly interesting is that they have similar backgrounds and demographic characteristics, but each developed a different style to get things done.¹⁶

5.1. *The social worker*

The first practitioner – let us call him ‘the social worker’ – grew up in a working-class family in the northern part of the Netherlands. A ‘leftist’, he briefly dabbled in politics before studying to become a social worker, after which he began a career in business. In the second half of the 1980s, he became a social worker, a job he remained in for over a decade. Next, he became co-director of an organization for social work, a position he fulfilled until recently. When we met him, his working area was Leeuwarden and he was involved in various projects. Many people working in the public sphere either know him or know of him.

Together with his all-time ‘partner-in-crime’, he used to do social work with the ‘hard-to-reach’ groups, such as homeless people and trailer-park residents. According to the social worker, he and his partner would select problems that others would rather not handle, and they liked to work in ‘neighborhoods where there was a lot of trouble’. Those were the kinds of challenges they went after. Following the rules was not this duo’s priority. Because of their pioneering work, their preference for difficult cases, and their ignorance of the prevailing rules, they became known as ‘cowboys’.

His unorthodox way of working brought him into conflict with public managers, true then as it is today. At the time of our research, ‘our’ social worker had a conflict with a high-ranking policymaker in the municipality. He was planning to start a new organization for social work despite a policy that discouraged new organizations of that sort. What stood out in our observation was his rather direct way of acting. For instance, he parked his car in the non-parking zone in front of city hall and went inside to ask permission to do so. Although this action (in the presence of an observer) might have been partly impression management, it also seemed to be his style. He chose to deal with dilemmas head-on and in a straightforward manner. Another example of an unorthodox approach in social work with young people was his going out to work on the streets after five in the afternoon instead of between nine and five. This became an accepted and valued change in professional practice in the city at a later point in time.

Our social worker was known also as a problem solver, as someone who fixed a lot of things for many different people. A civil servant told us that not so long ago, the municipality got into conflict with the residents of one of the neighborhoods. Our first practitioner and a colleague of his were the only ones who were able to start up the conversation. When we shadowed him, he was mediating between various parties (a resident, a school and the municipality) involved in a conflict over the use of land. He explained to the resident why the local government communicates the way it does, while asking the institutions involved to understand the resident’s feelings and interests. Our first practitioner has been doing these kinds of things for a long time.

Another illustration of his working methods is a project in which he worked with young people creating graffiti in the public domain, normally considered to be vandalism. He was able to help these young people turn graffiti into a public, respectable art form, thus transforming it into accepted public life. Throughout the years, he also helped these

young people to form a community. In this case, his knowledge of the sub-culture was crucial. Our social worker told us an anecdote about the manner in which he connected the ‘underground artists’ to one another:

I wanted to involve them more. The first time around, there were seven or eight writers [which is what these artists call themselves]. It was extraordinary to hear that they used their writer’s names to address one another. They also said: if you have a writer’s name, in fact you have an anonymous name and I cannot betray you because I do not know your name. Then we came to a situation in which I said to Daan: ‘Why don’t you do this [project] with Koen?’ And he responded: ‘Koen? Who is that?’ Then I said: ‘He is sitting right next to you.’ They had to get used to it, using each other’s real name. But through all of these small steps, there was more and more involvement in the project.

This shows how our social worker not only used local knowledge to work with people, but actually used it to transform the practice. The art project has been running for over ten years now and several partners in the city have become involved. Our social worker has been working on it with a buddy in the civil service: he monitors the project in the city and works with the artists as a mentor; his buddy has promoted the project at City Hall. Together, they have succeeded in promoting graffiti as an art form and the practitioners as artists. Both local government and the youngsters seem to be happy with this. The city does not have to clean walls like it had to do before. The youngsters are provided with nine walls in the city where they can practice their skills without getting into trouble with the authorities, the so-called ‘Halls of Fame’. They also run a business that is asked by various organizations (e.g. schools, an energy company, the local football club) to make wall paintings on their buildings.

The ability to make connections goes hand-in-hand with the interest our first practitioner continues to show in other people. As he said himself, ‘all contacts are valuable’. He always makes sure he knows as much as he can about the people he works with. He also uses the local language to make connections with those for whom it is their mother tongue. The Frisian language is spoken only by part of the inhabitants of the Frisian province of which Leeuwarden is the capital. In his view, speaking the local language draws people closer together. This intense way of relating to others has two sides to it, or so it would seem. On the one hand, our first practitioner is genuinely interested in the people he works with and wants to know them well. On the other hand, he knows that any knowledge thus gained might also prove instrumental at a later point in time. This more strategic aspect to making connections also became visible in the way he handled the project in which he served as a sort of mediator between a resident and several institutes. He was able to clearly mark his own position and use the information he obtained as a mediator in a strategic manner. Finally, our social worker could be called *well*-connected. He maintains a good relationship with one of the city’s aldermen. Nevertheless, he relies on his own abilities most of all to get things done.

5.2. *The civil servant*

We call our second practitioner ‘the civil servant’. The civil servant studied history, but, like the first practitioner, started his career in business. After a study in public administration, he became secretary of a regular meeting of Amsterdam administrators. His next job, as a local bureaucrat in an Amsterdam city district, taught him how to get things done at the neighborhood level. Presently, he is a ‘participation broker’, making sure that citizens and civil society members in the neighborhood in which he works can develop their initiatives

in the public sphere. He has no clear job description by which he is guided and this suits his preferred way of working, which is why he calls himself a ‘free spirit’.

As became clear from our observations and interview, an entrepreneurial use of networks and knowledge can be crucial. Our second practitioner talked about brokering and shifting gears:

When I talk about brokering I think of bringing people together, and when I talk about shifting gears I mean trying things out, . . . to find out if you can use a higher gear, if you can intensify things a little. For example, with the music, in relation to the Concert Hall [this referred to a certain project he was working on]. Then, all of a sudden, I see possibilities and I put in additional effort. I also try to steer a bit more. If I see possibilities I become a bit more directive. . . . Of course, I have information because of working in the local bureaucracy that people on the outside do not have. For example about the merger [of various neighborhoods]. This kind of information you use.

What we see here is that a civil servant is able to get things done because of his special position. The civil servant knows the people and the projects in the neighborhood and is able to see their overlap and counterparts. He connects people if he thinks they can help each other with their initiatives. When we observed him, he was having meetings with civil service organizations that he wanted to introduce to the chief executive officer (CEO) of the newly formed city district. He advised them on the best way to present themselves to this public manager. His willingness to help and his central position in the local network made him a popular figure with the active members of the neighborhood community. One of them characterized him in half a sentence as ‘always helping, knowing everything, knowing everybody’. According to this contact, our civil servant demonstrates a degree of engagement that is rather rare. Like many others we met, he would contact his network partners in the neighborhood frequently, most of the time preferring face-to-face contact to other forms of connection. During our period of observation, we met a person who told us that a colleague of hers had had bad experiences with civil servants until he met our second practitioner. The colleague had called her and exclaimed: ‘He [the civil servant] listens!’

His approach involves showing genuine interest, listening to what people are up to and responding to them. As he explained:

At the beginning you have listen, and through Socratic questioning you try to find out what is of importance to people. But not by force, like you have to do that. . . . By putting myself in the shoes of the person who is taking initiatives, by looking at the ways I could help you through my function. The second is to show interest often: ‘How are you? Is it working out?’ I also go to a lot of performances and events. I do that in my free time. But I just find it interesting. . . . I notice that this is highly appreciated. That you visit, that you are visible. I think you can invite people and persuade them because you respond quickly yourself. I often get reactions from people who say: ‘I’m going to modify my image of the civil servant, because I got an answer.’ It often happens that people send an idea or a question to the government and simply never hear anything about it again. Sometimes they do not know to which department, budget or even alderman it belongs. Then they start to discuss it and forget about the fact that a question came in from the outside. And even if you do not know the answer right away, it is good to say so and periodically give an update on the progress.

Our second practitioner knows that the projects are only as strong as the people who take the initiative. He encourages people to create their project and facilitates them the best he can. He is there for them. One of the implications of this attitude is that he avoids having to go to meetings of the local bureaucracy. In this way, he tries to maximize his availability

for people in the neighborhood. At the same time, he goes around the local bureaucracy to promote initiatives to his colleagues.

6. Two styles, one figure

Now, let us reflect on the two practitioners described above. How could we typify them with the literature on practitioners in mind? Our first practitioner, the social worker, has some characteristics that differentiate him from many others. He is a true problem solver. He is someone you call when things get rough and when you need a negotiator. He might often fix things without breaking the rules, but it is not for nothing that he and his partner became known as cowboys. One of our other practitioners had a sign on his door: ‘Know the rules so you can break them properly’. It is not that these practitioners do not care about rules, procedures and hierarchy; it is just that they are more interested in the ends than in the means. Practitioners like him are pioneers, on the lookout for the worst cases. This seems to be what makes them tick. What is more, he is able to transform practices – the graffiti case is a good example. All and all, what we know about our first practitioner fits quite well the general profile of a social entrepreneur, but his involvement in many different projects and his love–hate relationship with local authorities reminds us even more of Hendriks and Tops’ (2002, 2005) image of the everyday fixer.

Our second practitioner fits the general profile of a front-line worker sketched above. But he is more than that. He has an entrepreneurial work methodology, ‘brokering’ and ‘shifting gears’ to get things moving. But this is not so much about bending the rules when needed or negotiating in times of trouble. It is a way of working that he deploys constantly. Working with actors, agendas and policies inside and outside the bureaucratic system, his entrepreneurial moves are more those of the policy entrepreneur than of a social entrepreneur.¹⁷ If he found that two discussion partners possibly shared an interest, he would look for ways in which a joint project could be started. Although he does not behave in an overtly rebellious way as the social worker, he nevertheless refrains from going to bureaucratic meetings because he reserves his time and energy first and foremost for his contacts in the neighborhood. While this hardly constitutes a revolution, it is a small act of rebellion against the prevailing town hall culture. What seems to make him special to the members of civil society is his willingness to listen emphatically. To be sure, listening is very active, rather than a passive action (also see Forester 1989). Listening is a matter of trying to find out if you really understand the person who is speaking. In addition, our second practitioner is keenly aware of the responsibility that goes with listening: answering those who ask for information, advice or help.¹⁸

So the two practitioners have their distinctive methods of working. At the same time, however, the two practitioners have overlapping methods. Generally put, they make vital connections. In a society in which building strong networks is important, connecting is a very important part of neighborhood governance (Purdue 2001). At the most basic level, our two practitioners talk to people who do not talk to each other and might not even know of each other’s existence. This explains why, in the neighborhoods themselves, these kinds of practitioners are valued so much. Connecting then involves ‘translating’ local knowledge (Yanow 2004). But, our exemplary urban practitioners do not just translate the local knowledge about the neighborhood in order for policies to better fit with people, as the literature would have us expect (Engbersen *et al.* 2007, Durose 2009). They also let the knowledge flow through the system (Wagenaar 2007) in the other direction, when they explain to residents, for instance, the way local government works or help members of civil society present themselves favorably to a public manager. They can, as Healey (1992, p. 17) said of skilled planners, ‘operate across knowledge forms in their daily work’.

Moreover, they try to make the various parties involved fit better and in the process help to transform both. In this sense they work as boundary spanners, connecting different (sub)-systems (if we might call the neighborhood a system) and at times transforming them as well. In this process their relative independency might make it easier to trust them and for them to adjust their work to their partners. One might object that in a case like the graffiti project the social worker only works to ‘normalize’ the practice of graffiti spraying as it was and in this way only disciplines the youngsters. But transformation took place on both sides of the boundary. The graffiti *sprayers* re-entered the public space as graffiti *artists*. The municipality did more than just allowing (the Dutch term in use for this is ‘*gedogen*’) the art, it actually encouraged it and offered (physical and social) space for the practice. The reframing that took place is in main part thanks to the long-term engagement of our first practitioner.

What we also see here is that the civil servant and the social worker are genuinely interested in the people they work with and they will go the extra mile to help them (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). They favor meeting people face-to-face, talking to them in their own language (literally or not) and listening to their stories. But at the same time there is a more strategic side to their interest in people. Both practitioners understand that they can use their knowledge to create new connections and to bring together divergent interests. They are indeed well aware of the political decision-making they are involved in and they use their skills intentionally – to paraphrase Laswell – to get certain things to certain people at certain times and in certain ways. All and all, our two practitioners embody vital connections in the system as a whole. Often they are able to reach and engage groups that are hard to reach for local government and other public organizations (cf. Durose 2011). Indeed, our two practitioners – each in their own way – mediate and at times redesign the multidimensional interface between (groups of) people, (formal and informal) policies and (sub)-systems.

It is questionable whether many public managers would be very pleased with such independent practitioners working in ‘their’ cities and neighborhoods. The conduct of these practitioners raises questions for legitimate governance like: How do we as public managers keep track of what these people are doing? What if they act contrary to official policy? What is problematic about these questions is that they start from the position that exemplary urban practitioners work alone. But even the best practitioners around cannot work alone. Many of the exemplary urban practitioners we met excelled at what they did outside the local bureaucracy, but lacked resources on the inside. Both practitioners presented here compensated for this through their involvement and working relations with somebody else: a buddy. The social worker had a buddy in the local bureaucracy with whom he supported the underground art project. The civil servant was supported by a colleague who took care of the local bureaucratic procedures for him. Buddies helped them by freeing their hands for their more entrepreneurial, person-focused style of working. Their buddies were knowledgeable of the institutional rules and procedures in a way that our practitioners were not, even if they knew enough about them to explain them to people in the neighborhood.

This finding was confirmed when we studied a practitioner who did not have a buddy ‘on the inside’. This practitioner was clearly frustrated by the limits of what he could get done in the neighborhood. Some practitioners, like our social worker, might have various buddies, for example someone inside the local bureaucracy to deal with procedures, and a ‘partner in crime’ out in the field. One civil servant working with active citizens and members of civil society was a buddy for several of these contacts, but in turn had his own buddy in the local bureaucracy who took care of his clients’ local bureaucratic procedures and organizational work, in which he had less expertise. We did notice, however, that even if some of our exemplary urban practitioners seemed to be working autonomously and at

times even appeared to be loners, most were also team players when it came to achieving social goals.

7. Concluding thoughts

New theories of governance might make us expect that regular policymaking and implementation are being replaced or supported organically by new, complex and adaptive governance arrangements. Still, there will be a mess of mismatches between policies and people and (sub)-systems that call for individuals who make ‘local government more open and sensitive to all clients than had traditionally been the case’ (Healey 1992, p. 19). Exemplary urban practitioners make a difference because they bring something that is badly needed to neighborhoods. They have and do something different that can catalyze social change, even if their actions are ‘only the first of one of many steps needed’ (Waddock and Post 1991, p. 395) to actually resolve a complex problem.

Let us revisit the kind of work that exemplary urban practitioners do in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The working methods of exemplary practitioners in our five Dutch cities show a mix and a dose of entrepreneurialism, strategic networking and empathic engagement that differ from standard bureaucracy but fit very well with what is needed in disadvantaged neighborhoods. This finding is in line with what Durose (2009, 2011) recently observed in the United Kingdom, but it also goes further in that we have found these ways of working in a broad variety of practitioners. The work of exemplary practitioners is political work. It is directed towards goals that seem to be beyond the reach of ‘normal’ politics. It entails efforts to redistribute resources and efforts to empower, often without the explicit ‘positions of public authority’ (Lipsky 2010, p. 84) to back it up. These practitioners are motivated by a view of a better local society, even if they are often pragmatic in their view of how we could get there.

An important reason for their success might be that they are rather independent and because of this are able to follow their personal and professional knowledge and judgment. It is for this reason that their exemplarity is not something that can be easily copied (Norval 2007). But they cannot do their work alone. The work itself is about social interactions. On the one hand, they come into contact with many people when they try to mediate between people, policies and (sub)-system. And even if they are often a – if not *the* – central actor in a project or organization, they need these people to collaborate. Their work is part of a practice (Wagenaar 2004). In addition, they need to work with others who complement them in the more technical, administrative and organizational aspects of their work. The buddy system we encountered is the way they deal with this. In their study of everyday fixers, Hendriks and Tops (2005) also stated that in order to be successful, these actors needed to be backed by local administrators.

Understanding exemplary urban practitioners also means understanding what they are not. Exemplary urban practitioners are successful in their work in the rough-and-tumble of the world outside the bureaucratic institutions; others are clearly successful inside the bureaucratic institutions themselves. Exemplary urban practitioners can be exemplary because they make a fit with the environment in which they ‘do their thing’. Not giving up too quickly as they fight to get things done remains an important condition for them to succeed. It is not just a matter of survival of the *fittest*, but also one of survival of the *fitting*.¹⁹

The preceding does not mean that our practitioners are always able to make a difference. One of our practitioners, for instance, had been going through a rough time:

I have helped so many people out of their own misery and advised so many people to do certain things. In mergers, in conflicts over work. I have worked out and arranged so many things. And then, I became a victim myself. I was really in a dark place for some time. I never noticed and never expected that I could be affected this way and could get depressed because of such a process. I just was a victim.

Professionally, he did not survive the organizational fights in which he became involved. Should we therefore drop him from our list? No, even if he had a rough period behind him, everyone around him confirmed his qualities.

Again, this underlines the idea that exemplary urban practitioners of the kind we focused on are not stand-alone, ever-successful persons. The lesson is that the success of exemplary urban practitioners might turn out to be fragile if the context surrounding them or the environment at large no longer values what they offer. But in the end, this might happen if the urban environment, and in particular the major players, including the local bureaucracy, do not embrace but reject the innovative practices of exemplary urban practitioners.

Acknowledgments

While working on this article, we have been associates of NICIS Institute, The Hague (now Platform 31). Previous versions of this article were presented in sessions at the Interpretive Policy Analysis Conference (Grenoble) and a NICIS seminar on Neighbourhood Dynamics and Social Mobility (The Hague), both in 2010. We would like to thank the organizers and participants in those sessions for their comments. We would like to thank Eva Bosch and Ton van der Pennen (Delft University of Technology) for the discussions in our research group and three anonymous reviewers for *Critical Policy Studies*. Finally, the research would not have succeeded without exemplary practitioners giving us access to their practice. We want to thank in particular the two practitioners whose work is discussed in this article.

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Notes

1. For a recent report, see, for instance, Van den Brink and Bruinsma (2011).
2. To be sure, the concept of complexity is used differently by various authors. Lipsky (2010, p. 83) for instance says that 'routines and simplifications aid the management of complexity;

environmental structuring limits the complexity to be managed'. When Lipsky (2010) talks about complexity he is talking about the complexity that individuals have to deal with as a result of earlier mentioned mismatches, but his is not explicitly taking a complexity theoretical perspective. In this article we take the observations of complexity theorists in public administration as a starting point. What they do is explain why there is (still) a problem with the notion of centrally planned policy as the effort to structurally erase public problems.

3. This is not to be confused with best practice, which is mostly treated as a practice stripped of the actors that carry it. Leadbeater and Goss (1998, p. 22) say something wise about this: 'Good practice can never be bottled and applied somewhere else like an ointment. There are no one-size-fits-all, magic solutions to complex social problems. The public sector is highly heterogeneous: entrepreneurial solutions will vary for different organizations, with different histories, cultures, users and political leadership'.
4. The concept of exemplars was suggested by John Forester (personal communication). The use we make of the term might conflict with the way he sees things. The idea of exemplarity gets a profound treatment in the recent work of Aletta Norval (2007).
5. In comparison to our previous literature scan, we basically selected two types that we found in the field and added two more types that we only referred to briefly in previous papers.
6. What is important in dealing with concrete situations, as Durose (2009) for instance stressed, is that front-line workers have to be more networkers than street-level bureaucrats because they build relationships with their community.
7. Engbersen *et al.* (2007) looked at social leaders in Dutch disadvantaged neighborhoods. They stated that it was especially the ability to make a difference on the basis of personal qualities and engagement, that is special.
8. Lowndes (2005) talked about institutional entrepreneurs, who remind us of policy entrepreneurs. Leadbeater and Goss (1998) have talked about civic entrepreneurs and Durose (2009, 2011) has likened front-line workers to civic entrepreneurs. More recent work on policy entrepreneurs is presented in Huitema and Meijerink (2009) and by Mintrom and Norman (2009). In research on neighborhoods, variations of the concept have gained popularity over the last few years (Hendriks and Tops 2005, Durose 2009, Van de Wijdeven and Hendriks 2009, Giltay Veth 2009).
9. Everyday fixers are a variation of the everyday maker Bang and Sorensen (1999) talked about.
10. The idea of everyday fixers builds on the idea of the everyday maker whose working methods have been listed by Bang and Sorensen (1999). However, in our opinion the difference Tops and Hendriks observe between fixers and makers (they suggest it is the result of a cultural difference) is crucial. Everyday makers are much closer to the political/administrative system as a result of their bigger networks in it and their prolonged involvement with what happens in the public domain.
11. Efficiency does not seem to be their worry.
12. Social entrepreneurs might be most active in networks in the social sphere and hardly in the political-administrative system, for political and policy entrepreneurs the opposite might count. It needs to be pointed out that boundary spanners are less bound to one organization than front-line workers in general.
13. We are not aware of other who have used this concept to talk about their 'sampling' strategy. Murphy (1980), however, talks about scouting that analysts can do for the evaluation of programs.
14. We do admit that this way of finding people has a certain bias. We do not believe, however, that looking for people can be done without any bias. For instance, if we would have asked local government to come up with a list, this list would have had a 'governmental' bias. Our colleague did talk to people in local government to get some good leads, but worked mostly independently. In the end he went over the list with people in local government. In one of the cities there was some resistance against one of the names on the list because this person had gotten into conflict with a high-ranking public official. The person remained on the list anyhow and became part of the research.
15. As researchers, we have been moving back and forth between observations that triggered the project, the literature, hunches and empirical observations. This iterative, circular research practice has been supported by the organization around the investigation. Our investigation is embedded in a consortium with three research institutes and five cities. The various moments of interaction were used to shape and reshape the project.

16. They are both white males born around 1950 who became involved in neighborhood work in the second half of their careers.
17. This difference with the way our first practitioner works also shows itself in that his contact in the neighborhood is mostly with social entrepreneurs from civil society and not so much with individual residents or groups of residents.
18. The difference between the working methods of the civil servant and those of the social worker can partly be explained by the former's professional identity as a civil servant. But it may be just the other way around: a more diplomatic character would gravitate more naturally towards a job in the civil service, than work as a social worker.
19. Compare Giltay Veth (2009). He talks about survival of the fittest (project and practitioners) in Dutch disadvantaged neighborhoods. Survival of the fitting is an expression of Kenneth Boulding (see Morgan 1986).

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