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RESEARCH AS USUAL

How Researching Public Problems Affects Problem Solving

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Abstract

While Western welfare systems work fine for the majority of people, they have become part of the problem for those who need it the most: people suffering from multiple deprivation. The partnerships Western governments have set up to join up the fragmented welfare system often break down. While research has identified many barriers and solutions, this knowledge does not necessarily help public officials and citizens implicated in the everyday practice of making quick decisions about complicated, ethically challenging, and constantly changing situations while interacting with each other. Besides the rare case of action research in policy analysis, researchers are usually placed outside of these interactive processes. This paper develops an actionable approach to examining how everyday practices of researching public problems emerge from the push and pull between two co-existing and incompatible systems of “research as usual”: one in which researchers and local governance actors collaborate as everyday practice, and one in which their worlds are separated by institutional pressures, languages, and practices. Ethnographic and action research methods will be used to work with public officials and citizens to facilitate processes of joint inquiry or “researching”: activities aimed at understanding the world and interpreting the effects of efforts to change it. Researching problems of multiple deprivation together could generate new solutions and collaborative relationships for harnessing multiple deprivation.

Starting with practice: the shadow of hierarchy

The only real starting point for research aimed at becoming part of, and improving, practice, is practice. Therefore, I will start with a story that I drew up together with Martien, a warm and energetic public professional I met during fieldwork in Amsterdam and continued to be in touch with. Since May 2010, she is leading the so-called Neighbourhood Practice Team (BPT - *Buurt Praktijk Team*), a team of “exemplary practitioners” that is experimenting with a radically new approach to harnessing problems of multiple deprivation in a disadvantaged area in the City District Amsterdam West. So what is the story?

The story starts with a dramatic and resilient safety problem. A gang of youngsters (between 16 and 24 years old) engaged in criminal activities of various kinds, called the “Chassé group”, was causing great distress in the neighbourhood for over ten years. Forty public professionals were hovering around them. Each with their own assumptions –acquired over the course of ten years–, analyses, support plans, and objectives. Despite the best intentions and efforts of these skilled and committed public professionals, the youngsters developed from a group engaged in incidental petty theft and aggression into a well-organised criminal network. Intimidation, burglaries, and blowing and urinating in porches had become commonplace. The group was only sliding deeper and deeper into criminal activities, up to the point that the group forced a mother to prostitute herself and a social worker was beaten up with a hammer. How does a problem like this get out of hand? Where do things go wrong? How do public professionals get trapped in the system in which they have to operate?

“We have created Frankenstein’s Monster” concluded one of the city’s aldermen in 2008 about the programs and projects for the city’s youngsters. He decided that a better understanding was needed of what programs were available for troubled children and youngsters – from the perspective of a child and its family. Ultimately, he wanted to improve the cooperation between public professionals and their organisations to make

sure that there were no overlaps or missing links in the programs and projects. Following on from that, in May 2010, the chairwoman of City District Amsterdam West commissioned an analysis of the problems around dealing with complex youth groups, especially the Chassé group. The analysis led to the perhaps not very surprising, but nevertheless fundamental, insight that public professionals worked out of standard policies and procedures rather than the dynamics of the problems at hand. Instead, they should organise themselves as the Chassé group did: a flexible and pragmatic network. Following the motto 'It takes a network to beat a network', several stakeholders decided to form a joint team to experiment with a new way of working, for which each would provide one of their most skilled professionals. The Neighbourhood Practice Team (BPT) was born.

Now, almost three years later, the BPT has managed to break through the ingrained patterns which were keeping recurrent problems in place, significantly reduce the problems with the youth groups, and build social networks, trust, and satisfaction among residents and public professionals. They did this by bringing public professionals and residents together, formulating concrete shared norms, mapping patterns, and working hands-on in dealing with the youth groups as well as the public professionals and residents. The key to their approach was to always take the dynamics of the problems at hand as starting point, rather than the policies and programs of the public welfare organisations. That meant refraining from big goals and long term plans (e.g., "improving safety in the area") and, instead, working with residents to tease out the nitty-gritty of problems and setting concrete norms (e.g., "no more blowing and urinating in that porch"), and finding quick and practical solutions. That did not only require getting public professionals to improvise beyond their standard sets of services and work outside regular office hours, but also, and more fundamentally, to get them to stop working from the rules and procedures of their own organisation or profession. They needed to start thinking from the needs of the specific problem and act in a coherent and concerted way to advance the collaboratively set norms.

Why is this such an important story? Well, I would say that these are the types of problems and dynamics that people face on a daily basis in local governance practice. And they are in need of better solutions, such as the one offered by the BPT. I am not just talking about problems such as vandalism or crime, but also dereliction, physical decay, segregation, poor schooling, unemployment, ill health, poor housing, homelessness, family fragmentation, poverty, powerlessness, exclusion, stigmatisation, domestic violence, drug dealing, litter and bulk garbage, alcohol abuse, bad roads, ill-maintained public greenery, language lags and illiteracy, graffiti, low social cohesion, illegal immigrants, lacking public facilities, and gender inequality. It is here, in what Goss calls "the real-life dramas unfolding in day-to-day encounters" (Goss, 2001, p. 2), that the Gordian knot of modern governance lays.

The core challenge for local governance is to implement integrated approaches that help people suffering from multiple deprivation to structurally improve their quality of life. However, while the system of public welfare provision seems to work fine for the majority of people, it does not for those who need it the most: residents of deprived neighbourhoods, unemployed or low paid workers, school drop outs, addicts, homeless, youth gangs, immigrants and ethnic minorities, multiple problem families, (ex) delinquents, and (mental) health care patients. Despite available budgets, organisational capacity, and skilled professionals, it proves near to impossible to move such underprivileged people out of structural disadvantage. In fact, rather than alleviating their problems, the complex and fragmented welfare system tends to push them deeper into multiple deprivation. Indeed, the system of welfare provision has become part of the problem (Goss, 2001; Bogdanor, 2005; Kruijer et al., 2008). Although the costs of this adverse situation are difficult to quantify, some

tentative analyses have estimated that, on a yearly basis, billions of pounds are spent on combatting multiple deprivation without generating the desired effects (Kruiter et al., 2008, pp. 26-28; Trouw, 2012). Let alone the tremendous frustration and emotional damages inflicted on the people desperately struggling to improve their living conditions, as well as on the professionals toiling to help them.

But not all seems hopeless. Over the past years, an increasing number of innovative, collaborative approaches have emerged which, like the BPT, are productively harnessing this Gordian knot of multiple deprivation (Fung, 2004; Beresford & Hoban, 2005; Wagenaar, 2007a; De Souza-Briggs, 2008; Elias, 2010; Innes & Booher, 2010; Wagenaar & Specht, 2010; Community_Links, 2011). I will return to these approaches in more detail later on. But their key lesson seems to be this: empower all those involved around concrete problems to collaboratively enquire the problem, develop tailor-made solutions, and enact these with the continued support of those in power. However, successes remain incidental and disjointed, as projects often do not manage to structurally break with deeply engrained patterns of thinking, interacting, and organising.

Martien was also facing this underlying problem: getting public professionals and residents to work together in a new, problem-driven way was only the beginning of her battle; continuing to have the support of the line managers of the professionals' organisations and the Municipality's policy makers turned out to be the real bottleneck. If these middle level managers could not be pleased with conventional "numbers" and "checklists" proving that the BPT was "working", they would simply withdraw their professionals from the project to work again according to organisational goals, procedures, and mandate. Such moves reduced the willingness of residents to keep on participating, which in turn further constrained the ability of the BPT to solve problems and convince managers to continue to collaborate, leading to a vicious cycle (see figure 1). The problem, then, is that the BPT, as well as other innovative approaches, continue to operate "in the shadow of hierarchy" (Wagenaar, 2001), i.e., the compartmentalised welfare system that cuts up problems according to professional and hierarchical boundaries; managers and politicians who put individual or sector-specific interests above courage, risk, and innovation; civic initiatives being smothered by long decision making processes and complex funding cycles; etc.

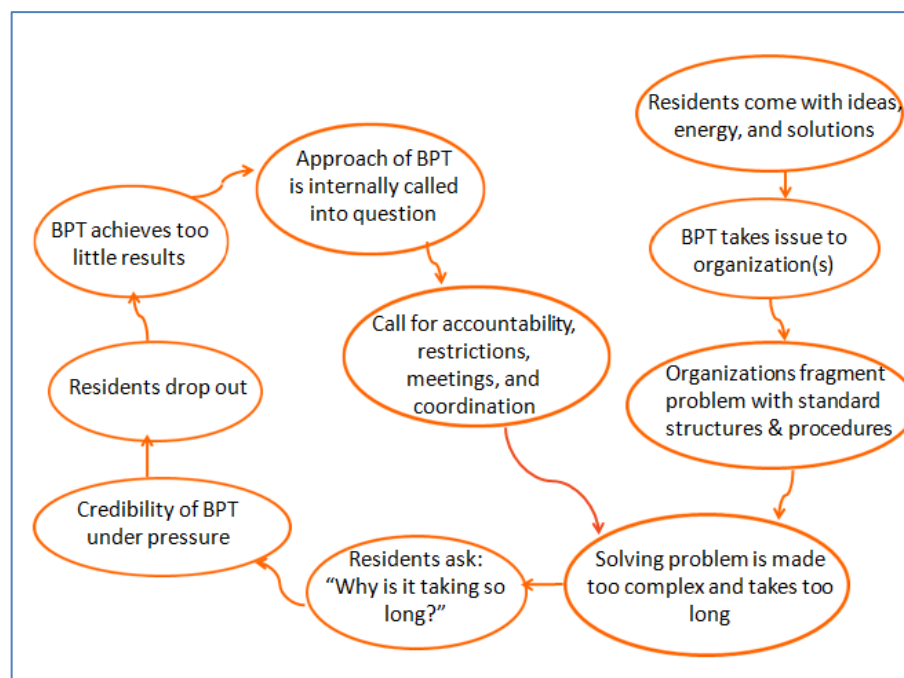


Figure 1. The shadow of hierarchy

There are a variety of ways of approaching this conundrum. First of all, we could classify the omnipotent eclipse the shadow of hierarchy casts over innovative approaches to multiple deprivation as the unintended consequences of governmental action (Merton, 1936): for such reasons as complexity, unpredictability, and limited rationality, the system ends up being part of the problem rather than the solution. It is a clear case of “how certain schemes intended to improve the human condition have failed” (Scott, 1998), resulting from “administrative evil” (Adams & Balfour, 1998), or policy failure (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973/1984) at best. This helps us to grasp the nature of the puzzle at a general level, but does not necessarily take us to the core of the issue at hand. The policy failure, or implementation literature does point us in the right direction: the inability to coordinate many diverging interests, values, and practices in the face of intricate problems and a fragmented system of possible (partial) solutions. Indeed, a burgeoning literature on collaborative governance, network management, collaborative planning, and public policy mediation has identified countless pitfalls to the at times stunning achievements of “dealing with differences” (Fischer, 1993; Kickert et al., 1997; Huxham et al., 2000; Healey, 2006; Ansell & Gash, 2007; Forester, 2009; Innes & Booher, 2010; McGuire & Agranoff, 2011).

This mixture of potentials and pitfalls forms my point of departure: the inevitably problematic dynamics of everyday governance practice. One of the major findings of my previous research (Bartels, 2012b) was that participatory practice is inherently challenging, because the setting in which public professionals and citizens met was a relentlessly complex, ambiguous, and changeable *work in progress*, the content of their conversations was an incessant *struggling* over different bits and pieces of expertise, and maintaining their relationships came down to constantly *making connections*. That is not to say that nothing works, but rather that determining what will work in a particular situation requires a certain collaborative or communicative “capacity”. What such capacity comes down to cannot be codified or captured in a final definition and it is neither a permanent and universal thing that individuals *have* irrespective of time and place. Rather, it is social and situated capacity that emerges and exists “in-between” people while being implicated in concrete situations. This capacity can only be cultivated as part of these situated interactive processes.

What I am proposing fits in with the approach of critical pragmatism, which seeks to advance democracy as a way of life –i.e. an inclusive, participatory, communicative practice– by searching for pragmatic solutions to move problematic situations forward while remaining critical of power structures and inequalities (Forester, 1989, 1993, 1999, 2009; Wagenaar, 2011a). “The task is not to try and create a perfect structure, but to find ways that people ... can outperform the structural constraints they face” (Goss, 2001, p. 89) in “difficult and uncomfortable realities” (ibidem, 156). Constructive modes of communicating can overcome engrained patterns if we pragmatically seek to bridge structural opposites and resolve deep-seated conflicts. Enhancing the quality of communicative processes (rather than providing final solutions) is also the main purpose of Interpretative Policy Analysis (Hoppe, 1999; Fischer, 2003; Wagenaar, 2007b). However, critical pragmatist research has up to now focused primarily on what planners, policy makers, and mediators do to resolve planning conflicts or policy controversies.

Up to now, (academic) researchers place themselves outside of the problem setting; they are hardly ever part of the situated communicative processes (see Bartels, 2012a). But if communicative capacity, as well as suitable solutions to problems of multiple deprivation, can only emerge from these processes, researchers can only generate usable knowledge when they are an integral part of the “on-going business” of fragmented

professional organisations struggling with multiple deprivation on a day-to-day basis. That is what “research as usual” could become: a system in which researchers and local governance actors are involved in collaborative processes of researching public problems in order to find innovative solutions to, and build capacity for, dealing with multiple deprivation. On the other hand, “research as usual” also refers to the more traditional system in which research and practice are separated worlds with distinct institutional pressures, languages, and practices (Locock & Boaz, 2004; Laws, 2007). What I propose to do, then, is to uncover the ways in which the “push and pull” between these two co-existing and incompatible systems give shape to the everyday practices of researching public problems.

The remainder of this paper will (1) provide an overview of the development of the welfare system of public professionalism; (2) further develop a critical pragmatist approach to researching public problems; (3) juxtapose in more detail the two competing systems of research as usual; and (4) work out an actionable methodology to examining how researching public problems affects problem solving. This will lead us to a conclusion that goes back to where we started: the real life dramas of everyday practice.

The system of professions: toward processes of task-sharing

If we want to turn the welfare system from being part of the problem into offering solutions to multiple deprivation, we first have to understand how the shadow of hierarchy has grown so tall that it eclipses most of governance practice. For some time now, it has been argued that a key mechanism behind the rise and crisis of the modern welfare state is the system of professions (Mosher, 1982; Bertillon, 1990; Schön, 1991). Professionals are the people who administer and provide welfare to society; it is the system that organises and legitimates their knowledge, orientations, values, careers, and jurisdictions that has brought the welfare state, and the shadow of hierarchy, into being. How did this come about?

Once, among all occupations, only law, medicine, clergy, and university teaching were deemed “professions” – i.e., exclusive occupational groups who control a clear-cut field of practice, apply abstract knowledge and concrete skills gained through higher education, and have a protected career system in place (Mosher, 1982, pp. 115-116; Abbott, 1988, p. 8; Freidson, 2001, pp. 18-22). But this limited gentlemanly class, situated well above the rest of society, gradually turned into a complex array of specialised experts functioning as the key enablers of the modern system of rule of law, representative democracy, and welfare state. The 17th and 18th century saw the birth of universal rights, such as freedom of speech, the right to property, and equal treatment in legal disputes. This new social and political order was supported by a rational body of legal knowledge held by academically trained specialists. The struggle for political rights and majority rule in the 19th and 20th century generated a demand for technical experts able to translate mass opinion and public interest into concrete decisions and actions. But the strongest emancipation and diversification of the professions occurred when the redistribution of financial and social resources to combat inequalities and injustices demanded an ever increasingly specialised system of welfare administrators and service providers (Bertillon, 1990). In a word, the centuries long “rationalisation of society” implied the establishment of a public service system consisting of appointed experts with high degrees of technical specialisation (Weber, 1922/1978).

Somewhat paradoxically, a fundamental conflict with democracy emerged. As society and government grew more dependent on the professions (Mosher, 1982), they also increased their autonomy from political or managerial control by further specialising in the substance of their own occupational fields and controlling

systems of training, careers, and decision making. Profession-specific skills, orientations, values, and knowledge erected boundaries fragmenting the public interest and obscuring their broader meaning to society. Ignoring repeated calls for rekindling a public ethos of collaboration, moral values, and practical judgment (Mosher, 1971, 1978; Adams et al., 1988; Green et al., 1993), the budget cuts, privatisations, business-like management, and deregulation of the 1980s and 1990s further increased the fragmentation of the professions and the welfare system (Perri 6, 1997, pp. 6-7; Bogdanor, 2005; Kruiter et al., 2008, pp. 20-25). Narrow performance indicators and restricted resources forced already fragmented services to compete rather than cooperate and dump difficult to help clients on each other. It led to a system in which

[d]ozens of different agencies may deal with the same client. Problems that are in practice rounded ones are sliced into separate segments for treatment by social services, police, probation, the benefits agency, and job centres. Problems that require long term efforts to help repair fractured families, to help people out of drug abuse, to regain confidence and self esteem, are dealt with within the confines of annual spending rounds and by professions, the vast majority of whose efforts go to dealing with the damage of social exclusion after it has happened rather than preventing it (Perri 6, 1997, p. 5).

What materialised was a deep crisis of confidence in the professions and their adequacy for solving problems and contributing to society (Schön, 1991). This crisis goes beyond the need to resolve the fragmentation of knowledge and services; it involves a deep epistemological criticism on the idea that competent governance requires the application of specialized knowledge to concrete cases. That is, traditional professional competences are fundamentally “mismatched to the changing characteristics of the situations of practice – the complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflicts which are ... central to the world of professional practice” (Schön, 1991, p. 14). While Schön saw a solution in the ability of professionals to enter into reflective conversations with the situation at hand, an approach to which I will return later on, more recent contributions in policy analysis and planning claim “the moral and instrumental bankruptcy of the expert model ... [in] the fragmented, pluralistic, adversarial world that has eroded the steering capacity of central governments and that transferred policymaking power to a fragmented field of social and political actors” (Wagenaar, 2001, p. 234; Forester, 1999; Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003).

Western government has over the past 15 years been infused with principles and policies of partnership, participation, collaboration, and joined up government aimed at reforming the fragmented welfare state (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002; Bogdanor, 2005; Davies, 2009). Since New Labour commenced with *Modernising Government* (Cabinet Office, 1998), for example, British governance has become congested with around 11,000 partnerships of every stripe (Wilson & Game, 2011, p. 159), and countless partnership policies and agreements. Notwithstanding their achievements and contextual variations, partnerships often suffer from “collaborative inertia” (Huxham et al., 2000) due to inherent challenges such as turf battles, lack of trust, limited time and resources, ambiguity of rules, goals, and members, pre-existing antagonism, multiple lines of accountability, and political interference (Ansell & Gash, 2007; McGuire & Agranoff, 2011). The main problem is that collaboration has been added on to, rather than fundamentally reformed, the underlying system of professions, with its distinct occupational fields, fragmented institutions, and conventional epistemology of practice.

The sociology of professions helps to understand the origins and nature of this deep-rooted divisiveness. Here, professionalism is fathomed in terms of the ways and institutional circumstances in which

occupational groups control certain types of knowledge, skill, and work as their *exclusive jurisdiction* (Abbott, 1988). “Professionalism may be said to exist when an organized occupation gains the power to determine who is qualified to perform a defined set of tasks, to prevent all others from performing that work, and to control the criteria by which to evaluate performance” (Freidson, 2001, p. 12). Sociological analyses not only look at the professions as a way to organise work, but more fundamentally examine the processes through which they establish and maintain their jurisdictions, along with associated privileged positions in the labour market, allocation of resources and income, social identities and status, discretionary autonomy, the stratification of society, and discourses of legitimacy (Wilensky, 1964; Abbott, 1988; Collins, 1990; Larson, 1990; Freidson, 1994, 2001). When we recognize that the system of professions consists of competitive struggles for survival with no inherent connection to public service or civic ethos, pessimism should not be the main conclusion; but, rather, that the system is socially organised and, therefore, can be transformed by reworking professional boundaries.

However, reworking the system of professions cannot be done from within its current epistemological and ontological grounding. Process philosophy provides a viable alternative by joining relational ontology, pragmatist epistemology, and collaborative practice. From this perspective, the system needs to move away from divisive struggles and erecting boundaries by adopting a *relational ontology* (Stout & Staton, 2011; Stout, 2012) in which the inherent interwovenness of professions with each other and society drives them to harmonising differences, sharing tasks, and facilitating change. This takes us beyond repeated calls for cultivating public ethos amongst public professionals (Mosher, 1982; Adams et al., 1988; Green et al., 1993; Brint, 1994; Perry, 2007); it implies engaging in *collaborative practice* in which public professionals are no longer “task-monopolisers” who discredit the expertise and skills of others, but become “task-sharers” who enable others to develop their democratic competences and solve public problems (Dzur, 2004, 2008). That, in turn, asks for a *pragmatist epistemology* in which appropriate action does not involve application of abstract knowledge to a concrete situation, but, on the contrary, emerges in the course of interacting with others and the situation at hand (Cook & Brown, 1999; Wagenaar & Cook, 2011; Cook & Wagenaar, 2012).

Despite the profound transformations involved in reconstituting the system of professions accordingly, it is not a matter of grand design or systematic reform. Rather, it is a *practical* problem of organising work around “public problems that have little respect for professional boundaries” (Mosher, 1978, p. 150). Once again, we need to start with practice. That means conceiving of professionalism as *work*, i.e. “a set of activities that employees of public agencies engage in to deal with some of society’s most pressing problems” (Wagenaar, 2004, p. 643; see also Colebatch, 2006). By that I do not mean looking at mundane activities such as sending an email, talking to colleagues, or filling a form, nor at rational(ised) aspects such as organisational structures, bureaucratic procedures, or policy decisions. Instead, I have in mind the deeper, underlying practices constitutive of daily work:

the hundreds of practical judgments, the everyday, taken-for-granted routines and practices, the explicit and tacit knowledge that is brought to bear on concrete situations, the moving about in the legal-moral environment of large administrative bureaucracies, the mastering of difficult human-emotional situations, the negotiating of discretionary space, and the interactive give and take with colleagues that, taken together, make up everyday public administration (Wagenaar, 2004, p. 644).

It is by critically engaging with such practices, casting the shadow of hierarchy on the daily lives of people, that we can discover how processes of task-sharing might be unlocked. The next section further develops this critical pragmatist approach to reworking the system of professions.

The work of researching public problems

Perhaps I should stress once more that the principal purpose of this paper is to develop an analytical framework to better understand 'practice'. Although I recognise, with Freeman et al. (2011), that "[t]he very concept of 'practice' is an abstraction, a heuristic, an inevitable misrepresentation of what is endlessly empirical, particular, grounded, local and specific" (p. 130), this still embryonic subject area offers a philosophically sophisticated and empirically grounded approach to critically examine daily activities of (re)working public problems. In a nutshell, a practice approach enables us to capture the situated, interactive processes through which public actors move around in the world. Practice studies of the critical pragmatist stripe, moreover, seek to stimulate the democratic abilities of actors implicated in messy, conflict-ridden situations to pragmatically work these out while confronting hurdles such as power inequalities and exclusion (Wagenaar, 2011a, 2012). In that spirit, I depict research as work, i.e. an analytical and practical activity which shapes everyday encounters for better or worse depending on the democratic capacity for joint inquiry into the situation at hand.

Practice philosophy challenges the conventional idea that practice is the mere product of the application of knowledge. In its pragmatist epistemology, or epistemology of practice, "knowing is an aspect of our interaction with the social and physical world" (Cook & Brown, 1999, p. 381). Knowledge is not information fixed in our minds that is used in action or forms a necessary pre-condition to action; it is an emergent part of action in a particular context of meaning. What we know emerges from what the world allows us to do when we intervene in concrete situations, the ways in which the world 'talks back' when we interact with it. If we start seeing knowing, or even better, understanding as part of our interactions with others and situations, intelligible action can only flow from on-going dialectical processes of *coming to an understanding* with a fundamentally open-ended and indeterminate physical and social world. Any understanding is necessarily incomplete, provisional, and fallible; the best we can hope for is temporary stabilisation of the 'push and pull' that arises from our engagement with the details of indeterminate situations perpetually evolving beyond our control (Cook & Brown, 1999; Wagenaar & Cook, 2003, 2011; Wagenaar, 2004, 2012; Cook & Wagenaar, 2012).

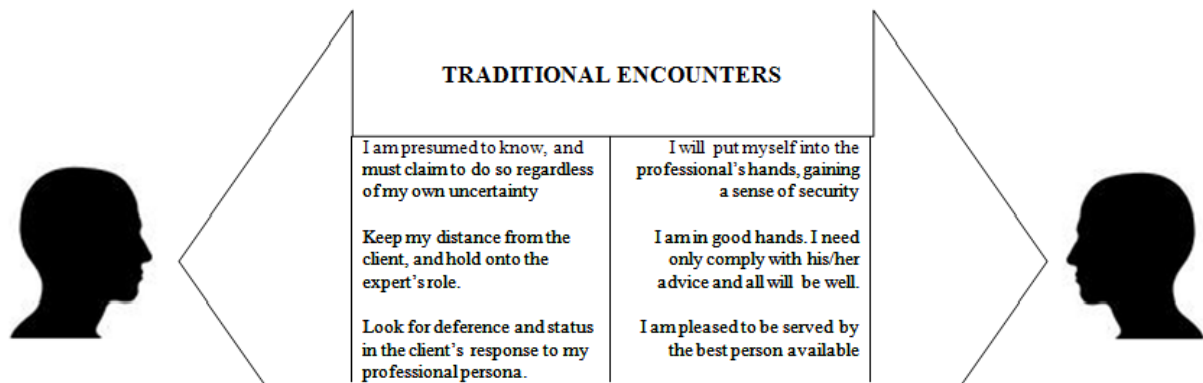
A practice approach has profound implications for the governance of public problems. Critical pragmatism, especially as developed in the work of John Forester (1989, 1993, 1999, 2009), clearly spells out the hard work needed to harness the messy, changing situations that public actors find themselves in. The indeterminacy of these situations, and the democratic shortcomings thrown up by the shadow of hierarchy, invite interventions that bring about a better future state of being. Forester's work illuminates how planners and mediators labour to practically organise communicative interactions that produce pragmatic strategies for dealing with structural power differentials, exclusion, and conflict. In seemingly bleak circumstances, carefully crafted joint inquiry and practical judgment can lead to ground-breaking results (see Wagenaar, 2001, 2011a). But there are no shortcuts to do so; understanding how to facilitate collaborative practice is a social, situated ability highly contingent on the specifics of the situation at hand.

The type of research germane to the radically uncertain and deeply pluralist practice of modern governance, then, generates understandings of situated practices as to enable constructive working relationships and transformative capacity (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003; Wagenaar, 2007b). Its turns away from *representing* practice in abstract idioms to *intervening* in practice to generate actionable knowledge (Wagenaar, 2012). This means that we can no longer conceive of the academic profession as a fixed position held exclusively by trained experts engaged in the disinterested search for truth and knowledge for its own sake. Just like other public professionals, academic researchers have to become “task sharers” engaged in an interactive practice of bringing to bear various forms of knowledge and action in handling the situation at hand. “Researching” should be pragmatically understood as performing any type of activity aimed at understanding the world around us and interpreting the effects of our efforts to change it. This “practice of understanding” (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 5) involves such activities as signalling, investigating, diagnosing, reasoning, communicating, pondering, judging, and acting as to change problematic situations. Through the performance of all these manifold activities, then, researching is just another form of *work* (Strauss, 2010, pp. 81-97) inherent to the processes of addressing public problems.

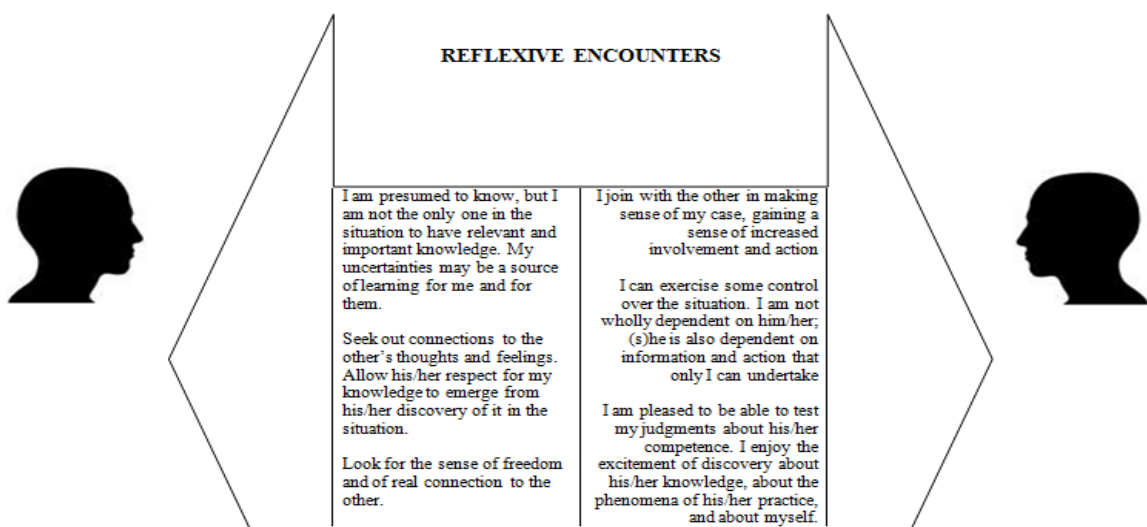
This renders the distinction between researcher and “subjects” futile; everyone is an interpreter, inquirer, or analyst of some kind (Lambright & Teich, 1978, pp. 133-134; Schön, 1991, pp. 308-309; Yanow, 2000, pp. 3-5). The differences in our research practices are related to the division of labour and far-reaching specialisation of academic professions. Policy makers, civil servants, social workers, and citizens are no less analysts than academics are; they just use different analytical tools and strategies, are engaged in different modes of knowledge generation, and are differently situated in physical and social spaces. What I will examine, then, is the work of academic researchers *in relation to* other analysts in the process of addressing public problems. What such work comes down to is one of the main questions I will labour to answer with my research. To be sure, I can draw upon a number of fields here –public administration, science and technology studies (STS), policy analysis, and action research– and I will, subsequently, explore various approaches, experiences, and challenges of these fields in the remainder of this paper. But let me first further develop the pragmatist take on research as work.

While challenging to the still dominant, conventional association of “research” with academic institutions and professions, seeing research as joint inquiry into public problems is at the heart of the philosophy of one of the founding fathers of (American) pragmatism, John Dewey. Indeed, “the model democratic professional for Dewey is the social scientist” (Dzur, 2004, p. 10). Although they have substantive expertise, academic researchers should not aspire to represent or act *for* others in generating knowledge, but work *with* them to cultivate the capacity for collective inquiry. Researchers are, whether they like or live up to or not, “participants in a larger societal conversation; when they play their parts well, they help that conversation to become a reflective one” (Schön, 1991, p. 246). Originally, Dewey imagined this in terms of researchers countering common sense knowledge of public problems and society with their capacities for submitting claims to systematic scrutiny and public debate, gathering and analysing evidence, and engaging in abstract thinking (see Dzur, 2004). Taking this one step further, interpretative policy analysts nowadays see the role of research(ers) not as providing final resolutions to public problems (as these are not believed to exist), but, rather, to facilitate communicative processes that enable democratic, effective, and inclusive policy making (Hoppe, 1999; Fischer, 2003; Wagenaar, 2011b).

Interpretative research capacities can facilitate the restructuring of public encounters (Schön, 1991, pp. 290-307). As discussed in the previous section, public professionals have traditionally defined themselves vis-à-vis clients and other types of professionals to obtain social control, status, and jurisdiction, thereby erecting the boundaries that constitute the fragmented system of professions. Their encounters are based on fixed norms and roles (see figure 2): the professional makes competent, authoritative decisions while clients other types of professionals accept their authority and judgment. This model has underpinned the crisis of professions, as it fails to engage both actors in a reflexive conversation with each other and the situation at hand. In contrast, in reflexive encounters (see figure 3) both actors not only recognise that professional expertise and authority have limits, but also that these should be discovered through reflexive conversations. That is, any claim to authority or any decision taken is necessarily partial and fallible and should therefore emerge from a dialogical process of coming to a fuller understanding of the situation. This requires what is probably the most fundamental interpretative research capacity: the ability to recognise that social behaviour always takes place in a context of meaning, to tolerate meaning pluralism, and to analyse the variety of meanings in meaningful and constructive ways (Yanow, 2000; Wagenaar, 2011b).



**Figure 2. Professional <---> Citizen
(adapted from Schön, 1991, pp. 290-307)**



**Figure 3. Professional <---> Citizen
(adapted from Schön, 1991, pp. 290-307)**

However, academic researchers face serious, unyielding challenges to meaningful and constructive integration of pluralities of meanings, as well as the myriad of associated forms of knowledge, beliefs, emotions, and practices. First of all, “meaning” (and its study) is not of one kind, but has many faces: on a general level we can already distinguish between hermeneutic, discursive, and dialogical (approaches to) meaning (Wagenaar, 2011b). How to navigate the ever expanding methodological universe is a relentless challenge for researchers. But there is something else that renders research work demanding: the inherently fragmented and ambiguous study of public problems.

The study of public problems is the trade of scholars of public administration, public management, and public policy. I will concentrate on the study of public administration here, as the debate on the nature and identity of the study is the oldest and developed in this field. Although public administration dates back over 5000 years to Sumerian society, the *study* of public administration as we know it today started to develop around the turn of the twentieth century. However, it has been fraught with constant debate of whether public administration constituted a discipline of its own distinct from political science, sociology, economics, law, philosophy, and business management. In the 1960s this debate even created a ‘crisis of identity’, as it turned out that its main object of analysis was not amenable to straightforward definition, the nature of the study (as a science or an art) was unclear, and it had a double meaning of both an intellectual and practical field of activity. By now, this crisis has been overcome by rejecting the need, or even the possibility, to be a distinct discipline with a single, incontestable theoretical foundation. Instead, the study of public administration is seen as a differentiated, interdisciplinary field comprising inherent tensions, ambiguous concepts, a multifaceted identity, and flexible boundaries that requires constant evaluation of the ways in which different forms of knowledge are integrated (Raadschelders, 2000, 2005; Rutgers, 2003, 2004).

This, in conclusion, is what the work of researching public problems comes down to: inevitable, constant struggle with linking up different insights, activities, meanings, beliefs, etc. Integrating knowledge means addressing intrinsic fragmentation on an epistemological and methodological level (appropriate theories and methods of analysis), ontological level (the nature of what we study), institutional level (intra- and interdisciplinary boundaries), and pragmatic level (intellectual, psychological and organisational challenges) (Raadschelders, 2000, 2005). Rather than aspiring to authoritative claims to knowledge and skill, the special ability of researchers of public problems lies in relating to a great many types of disciplines, persons, knowledge, values, and beliefs, and to bring these together in meaningful ways. Moreover, the task ahead is to instil such a democratic capacity for joint inquiry in everyday encounters around public problems. The question is, however, whether this can effectively become “research as usual”. That is what the next section enquires into based on work in science and technology studies (STS) and policy analysis on the boundaries between science and society.

Research as usual: competing systems of science-society relations

Science and society are commonly seen as two different ‘worlds’ with divergent time scales, languages, needs, and incentives. Cliché images are abound: the notorious ‘gap’ separating science and society allegedly needs to be bridged by knowledge ‘transfer’, ‘translation’, or ‘utilisation’ – either by government striving for sound ‘evidence based policy making’, or by researchers ‘speaking truth to power’ (see Hoppe, 2005). In actual

practice, however, the ‘scientisation of politics’ and the ‘politicisation of science’ have led to much more complex and nuanced relationships, with science and society thoroughly interwoven through myriad forms of applied research, policy advice, knowledge partnerships, and knowledge utilisation. Research in STS of knowledge production and in policy analysis of its utilisation has built sophisticated understandings of the many different forms, mechanisms, and barriers out there (see e.g., Nutley et al., 2003; Hoppe, 2005). The debate seems to be divided between those who in the end judge science and society to be either ‘different worlds’ or ‘seamless webs’. But there is a third approach, *boundary work*, in which both these systems operate in constant tension with each other in the everyday processes of exchanging knowledge and practices of organising this across institutional boundaries. What will effectively become ‘research as usual’ will emerge from working the boundaries between the competing systems of science-society relations.

The conventional image of academic researchers is that of the lab-coated scientist or eccentric arm-chair philosopher engaged in the disinterested search for truth and knowledge for its own sake. Developing scientific knowledge is an autonomous process that may enable societal and economic progress, but is the exclusive domain of researchers, while its use is the responsibility of societal actors. Researchers are not professionals, as they lack any direct clients, and are more like politicians, representing, or acting on behalf of, society by addressing intellectual and technical problems which affect society as a whole but supersede the control or capacities of affected individuals (Lambright & Teich, 1978; Brown, 2009). Already in the 1970s, however, landmark contributions in STS by Thomas Kuhn and Bruno Latour, amongst others, shifted comprehension of knowledge and truth as logical outcomes of the impersonal application of scientific procedures on an objective reality towards the social, practical, local, and political processes through which knowledge and truth were constructed and organised (Hoppe, 2005, pp. 204-205; Regeer & Bunders, 2009, pp. 53-55). This not only meant that the boundaries between science and society were more porous than assumed; researchers were to be considered professionals after all, and they needed to grapple with their public roles and responsibilities.

Initially, this development away from what was labelled a ‘Mode-0’ model of science and society relations led to a ‘Mode-1’ model focused on coordination of knowledge needs and supply and translation of objective knowledge into contingent practice. Strategic research programmes, sector councils, and knowledge centres and knowledge networks emerged based on the assumption that “[k]nowledge and technology development ... should be influenced via policy and financing structures, so that the output of science and technology better meets the needs of society” (Regeer & Bunders, 2009, p. 35). Nevertheless, the norm remained that science and society were not to interfere with each other’s worlds and keep processes of knowledge production and utilisation institutionally and methodologically separate. The real innovation came with the ‘Mode-2’ model, in which knowledge generation and problem-solving cannot be clearly distinguished and, instead require intensive collaboration grounded in the particular circumstances of specific cases. Usable knowledge emerges in the course of interacting in localised, contextualised, and negotiated processes (Nowotny et al., 2003; Laws & Hajer, 2006; Hessels & Van Lente, 2008; Regeer & Bunders, 2009, pp. 12-15).

However, the distinction between Mode 0, 1, and 2 is much contested, as it is as much an empirical development as a normative model. Regeer & Bunders (2009) therefore suggest to see them as ideal types, i.e. analytically pure models that do not exist in reality but are nevertheless useful yardsticks to make sense of practical manifestations, tensions, and problems (Weber, 1949). Yet that does not negate that science-society

encounters in daily practice take place within complex multi-level systems that either ‘push’ researchers and practitioners over their boundaries or ‘pull’ them away from each other. National policy cultures, policy area traditions, the position of universities, the types of funding bodies, the scope and size of the policy advice sector, and public attitudes towards science, to name a few, all condition boundary work practices (Hoppe, 2010). Therefore, I propose to distinguish between two incompatible but equally present systems: one in which science and society are fundamentally separated worlds connected through functional relationships inhibited by barriers to knowledge transfer, and one in which they form a seamless web of intertwined activities. Let me first expand each of these and then turn to their coexistence.

The *system of different worlds* is all but founded on obsolete images of researchers locked in ivory towers and intellectually incapable practitioners. Rather, here ‘research as usual’ refers to the numerous practical barriers inhibiting straightforward knowledge transfer; e.g., time and resource constraints, researchers’ dissemination skills, fit with existing culture and routines, supportiveness of institutional setting, and incentives or rewards for transfer (see Nutley et al., 2003). Moreover, imposing ideals of knowledge utilisation, evidence based policy making, and public participation risks that practical and valuable differences between research and practice are neglected or that narrow ‘impact indicators’ generate undesirable consequences (Locock & Boaz, 2004; Hoppe, 2010). We should simply not overestimate the degree to which science and society are, can, and should be integrated. While some advocate the need to keep both worlds apart to some degree (Locock & Boaz, 2004), others point at the many regrettable, inevitable intransigencies that deflect easy changes to ‘research as usual’ (Argyris et al., 1985; Laws, 2007; Regeer & Bunders, 2009; Hoppe, 2010; Pieczka & Escobar, 2013).

The *system of seamless webs* is not motivated from a naive idealism disregarding all these barriers and intransigencies, but rejects the conventional epistemological distinctions of knowledge/action, objective/subjective, research/practice (Greenhalgh & Wieringa, 2011). Knowledge is not something that can be extracted from practice and applied to it, because it does not exist external to practice. Knowledge is fundamentally intertwined with situated actions, relationships, interactions, and power. ‘Research as usual’ is not a rational, linear process of piecing together different bits of knowledge, but a communicative process through which meaning is ascribed while interacting in a shared practice (Wenger, 1998). Science and society, then, are fundamentally interwoven as they constitute and constantly (re)define each other. Research does not unilaterally determine what the problem is; the problem equally defines the research (Regeer & Bunders, 2009). It is ‘research as usual’ for researchers to fulfil many roles in society and to be engaged in manifold interactions with practitioners while acquiring insights and implementing solutions (Lambright & Teich, 1978; Hoppe, 2010). Even for only one country it is near to impossible to list and grapple with the nature and influence of all its research institutes, policy advisors, research projects, and knowledge partnerships.

Now, I am not trying to settle on the debate over whether one system is empirically more accurate or normatively more desirable than the other. On the analytical level, first of all, it has already been shown, from the perspective of both systems, that science-society relations consist of complex, differentiated practices and institutions, conditioned by multi-dimensional, context-dependent, and variable barriers and frictions. Indeed, depending on the contingencies of the case, we could capture science-society relations in an enlightenment, technocracy, bureaucratic, engineering, advocacy, adversarial, dispositional, learning, or coping model (Hoppe, 2005). While such an analysis is absolutely valuable and necessary, my aim is to move from a representative to an *interventionist* understanding of ‘research as usual’ (Wagenaar, 2012). That is, illuminating how its daily

practice is organised, with both systems at play simultaneously and actors crossing or withdrawing behind boundaries as situations demand. “Like tectonic plates, the [systems] have been pushed over and under each other in the course of history” (Hoppe, 2005, p. 212). The key, then, to understanding how researching public problems affects problem solving lies in the ongoing work of negotiating the boundaries of neither fully separate nor integrated systems of ‘research as usual’.

Boundary work thus involves both demarcating and overcoming the differences that set actors apart. Professionals need to maintain some distance to safeguard their work from undue infringement by others, while staying close enough to nurture mutual understanding and trust (Hoppe, 2010). Boundary work is an incessant struggling with mutually adjusting different forms of knowledge, emotions, values, and beliefs. Doing so hinges on the communicative capacity for saying and doing the right thing in the course of encountering each other in evolving situations (Bartels, 2012b). Working together on boundaries means that these boundaries are vague and fluid; i.e., actors bring certain inchoate differences to the situation which, through interacting, toss up temporarily stable boundaries (Abbott, 1995). In other words, boundary work is the “yoking” of the different persons, practices, organisations, and institutions that constitute ‘research as usual’. In more practical terms, it is the work that boundary spanners, facilitative leaders, and exemplary practitioners are engaged in to enable those implicated in intractable public problems to move out of complex, messy, conflicted situations. Drawing upon studies of their daily practices, the next and final section develops methods to inform researchers engaging in boundary work.

Actionable research: intervening in practice

The aim of my research is to closely interact with public officials and citizens working the boundaries between systems, practices, and people around multiple deprivation, right at the point where the push and pull between the two systems of research of usual is at its strongest. Intervening in their daily practice should illuminate just how to bring about joint processes of researching problems. How this will work cannot be specified in advance, but will emerge through the process of collaborating with public officials and citizens in addressing the problems they are facing. To be sure, ethnography and action research provide valuable guidelines and heuristics for gaining intimate familiarity with the everyday practices of local actors and collaborating with them. But intervening in practice is inherently improvisational. I will be drawing on a repertoire of possible theories, methods, and practices, while aspiring to be “actionable”: following the needs of the situation at hand rather than the needs of the research.

As I have already argued elsewhere (Bartels, 2012a, pp. 441-443), researchers can learn a great deal from all the skilful performances of facilitators, mediators, public network managers, exemplary practitioners, and proactive citizens in resolving conflicts, creating common ground, building trust, bargaining behind the scenes, and so on. As I have no space to discuss more than a snippet of the rich collection of practices that has been documented so far (e.g., Crosby & Bryson, 2005; Forester, 2009; Van Hulst et al., 2011), I will highlight two key principles underpinning the work of boundary workers. The first is to bring people together “on the lowest possible level” (Bang & Sørensen, 1999). Participatory projects have achieved groundbreaking results because key individuals organised people around concrete problems that affected them. They empowered public officials and citizens to make decisions and take action, while ensuring political and financial support from policy makers (Fung, 2004; Fischer, 2006; De Souza-Briggs, 2008). Second, boundary workers enable

stakeholders to overcome conflict and stalemate by creating participatory spaces in which they listen, learn, and act together (Innes & Booher, 2003; Laws & Forester, 2007; Forester, 2009). Boundary workers facilitate constructive conversations by exploring the complexity of the issue at hand, working through deeply engrained values and painful emotions, and identifying new, pragmatic solutions.

Another reason for not listing many facilitative practices is that it is difficult to grasp what they mean or how to perform them when they are stripped of the details of the situation at hand. Indeed, knowing what to do or say in indeterminate, evolving encounters located within complex institutional settings is a practical and situated capacity (Forester, 2009; Wagenaar & Specht, 2010; Bartels, 2012b). The same goes for the research practices that I will bring to bear in concrete situations; specifying them in advance is of little value because they have to emerge from my interaction with the people and specifics of that situation. The kind of questions I will ask during an interview, for example, or whether to do an interview at all, will be driven by the needs of the situation rather than the needs of the research. I will not be there to vindicate a theory or “do” ethnography; I will be there to help solve problems. By being problem-driven or practice-driven, and not theory-driven or method-driven (Shapiro, 2002; Bartels, 2012a), I aspire to generate actionable knowledge, i.e. knowledge that is usable for people in addressing the problems they are facing. A wonderful example of this is the study by Loeber (2007), who, upon discovering that her theoretical concepts made little sense to the research participants for understanding their daily work, completely redid the research by starting from the needs and perceptions of the participants and ended up with an account that helped to reorganise and improve their work and self-understandings.

Actionable research flies right in the face of traditional ideas of knowledge and the relations between researchers and subjects [sic]. Any research approach grounded on some form of realism will seek to minimise the influence of the researcher’s presence, values, and interpretations as to represent an objective picture of reality as much untainted as possible by subjectivities (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, pp. 10-18; Wagenaar, 2007b, pp. 314-316). In contrast, I do not aspire to *re-present* practice but to *present* it in real time as situations unfold in all their dazzling complexity (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007; Wagenaar, 2012). In line with the notion of democratic professionalism explained above, I cannot monopolise the power to analyse and judge the experiences of research participants as an outside arbiter. As I will intervene in their everyday practice, I will need to structure my relationships with public officials and citizens in such ways that they will benefit as much from participating in the research as will I (Shdaimah et al., 2009; Light et al., 2011). To understand more deeply how such a participatory, interventionist approach works out in practice, we can turn to the closely related approaches of ethnography and action research.

Although ethnography is far too multifaceted and diverse to be captured in a standard definition (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Kubik, 2009; Schatz, 2009) “it usually involves the researcher participating ... in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3). “Being there” for a long time will not only prevent the researcher from providing an impressionistic analysis but also the participants from putting up a special performance for the research (Prus, 1996; Wedeen, 2009). The ethnographer will gradually adjust his/her life around the peculiarities of the research setting to gain intimate familiarity with what people do (rather than just what they say they do). In this process, the ethnographer will engage in a mix of participant-observation, interviewing, diary keeping, text analysis, shadowing, visual and sensory analysis, desk research, problem solving, and capacity building according to what his/her interaction

with local people tosses up and allows for. Doing so is no mean feat; data and access will not automatically be available. It is often not clear where to begin, how to get access, what questions to ask, or how to respond to ethical dilemmas. Negotiating and re-negotiating access and presence, having formal and informal conversations with people, and interpreting experiences and artifacts requires well-developed interpersonal skills, improvisation, and reflexivity, or, in a word, *ethnographic sensibility* (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Hendriks, 2007; Van Hulst, 2008; Schatz, 2009).

The advantages of ethnographic research are many: the researcher can get close to all kinds of otherwise inaccessible settings and artefacts, understand a setting or phenomenon by experiencing it first hand, compare different forms of knowledge within the setting with theory, and witness evolving interactive processes as they happen (Van Hulst, 2008). Besides the intrinsic value of this wealth of in-depth insight for policy, academic debate, and society in general, ethnographers of the critical stripe also stress the importance of bringing about emancipation or transformation. Here we stray in the direction of the adjacent field of (participatory) action research, where the basic principle is not just “being there” but being situated in problematic situations as to effectuate change and build transformative capacity (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Kindon et al., 2007). The action researcher collaborates with local actors –who are seen as competent researchers and change agents– to define the problems to be researched, generate relevant knowledge, learn and improve skills and capacities, take action, and evaluate the outcomes. To deal with the many tensions inherent to this process, action research not only turns on “sensibility” but also on maintaining relationships of trust that make everyone stick with the research even when tensions run high (see e.g., Stahl & Shdaimah, 2008).

As the specific methods and practices I will use will depend on local needs and interactions, my research follows the key principle of auto-ethnography (see Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012): the “main tool ... is not an object or a technique. *You* are the main tool: your presence, body language, speech, and ability to engage with” (Escobar, 2011, p. 88; emphasis in original) people. The “dramathurgical presence” (Prus, 1996, p. 107) of the researcher in the field is a valuable asset for generating knowledge through engaging with the push and pull of the setting or phenomenon (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 16). By asking seemingly innocent questions, bringing people together for joint reflection, or even by just being present, the researcher can create breaches, disruptions, and inversions of normal events and practices to see how people react and adjust. To be sure, this is all but a neat, one-way process of manipulating participants in an isolated lab setting; it involves “ubiquitous ethical quandaries that crop up as one inhabits dynamic social processes and relationships that are often unpredictable, multiply entangled, difficult to interpret, and typically beyond the control of the researcher. These ethical challenges must be negotiated in real time, as they happen, and they are not neatly bounded” (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 179). This messy, unfolding practice is both the challenge and power of actionable research.

To some degree, intervening in practice resembles Schön’s (1991) professional who conducts “on-the-spot experiments” to enter into a reflective conversation with the situation at hand. But to suggest that conversations aimed at improving the transfer of knowledge and experiences are even possible (let alone to be strived for) would seriously misrepresent the fragmented, pluralistic, adversarial world that public officials and citizens inhabit. They need to make quick decisions about complicated, ethically challenging, and constantly changing situations *in the process of* interacting with each other. An actionable researcher will seek to become a

part of this process, and change its course as it happens, by improvising in the face of the many uncertainties, ambiguities, and challenges that pop up. Improvising does not mean acting in the spur of the moment without any preparation; it means sensibly drawing from a repertoire of possible theories, methods, and practices. How this happens is a matter of living in the world, of the research “process as it relates to affective experiences such as doubt, elation, hope, fears, confidence, stress, exhaustion, energy, and projections ... interwoven with mundane details of ‘normal life’ such as babies, unreasonable landlords, and computer glitches” (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, pp. 5-6). It is through this embedded and embodied process, in the end, that researching public problems will interweave with the real life dramas of everyday practice.

Final remarks

We have come a long way from the story at the start. But the journey through the system of professions, the work of researching public problems, competing systems of science-society relations, and actionable research now brings us back to Martien and her Neighbourhood Practice Team labouring to harness safety problems in Amsterdam West: what research practices can we bring to bear when encountering the real life dramas of everyday governance practice? Or, *how does researching public problems affect problem solving?*

The success Martien and her team have had is in many ways exceptional; that their activities continue to be eclipsed by the “shadow of hierarchy” is not. Many governments have over the past decade set up collaborative partnerships to harness intricate problems of multiple deprivation which resist conventional policies, structures, and practices. However, such collaborative schemes often break down in the face of the fragmented welfare system that cuts up public problems along professional and hierarchical boundaries, lets sector-specific or political interests prevail over innovation and flexibility, and smothers civic initiatives with lengthy decision-making processes and complex funding cycles. Despite the best intentions, political commitment, and organisational means, “partners” are often not able to break through engrained patterns of thinking, acting, and organising.

Although research has identified countless barriers and solutions, all this knowledge is not necessarily of any help to public officials and citizens implicated in the everyday practice of multiple deprivation. They constantly need to make quick decisions about complicated, ethically challenging, and evolving situations *in the process of interacting with each other*. Academic researchers are usually external to these interactive processes; they tend to observe and report back what their findings are. However, there is no “magic bullet” for handling the uncomfortable reality of uncertainty, pluralism, and complexity in which public officials and citizens move around; for every specific problem, fitting solutions can only emerge from the interactions between all those involved. Researchers can only generate usable, or actionable knowledge when they are part of the interactive processes of searching and re-searching solutions to problems of multiple deprivation.

In this paper, I have developed an actionable approach to untying the Gordian knot of multiple deprivation. I aim to critically engage with the daily practices of public officials to find out how the in-built fragmenting tendencies for task-monopolising might make way for collaborative processes of task-sharing. To do so, I adopt a practice approach in which knowledge is not a set of representative idioms to be applied to practice, but is a necessarily incomplete, provisional, and fallible understanding of indeterminate and evolving situations. Research, in this perspective, should be broadly conceived of as performing any type of activity

aimed at understanding the world around us and interpreting the effects of our efforts to change it. Going beyond the divisive monopolisation of research by academics, research should be seen as practice or work, i.e. an analytical and practical activity which shapes everyday encounters for better or worse depending on the democratic capacity for joint inquiry into the situation at hand. However, enabling public officials and citizens to engage in such processes of joint inquiry does not come down to simple knowledge transfer; it will be a constant struggle with linking up different insights, activities, meanings, and beliefs, while handling the push and pull of two competing systems of 'research as usual'.

My research, then, sets out to come to an understanding of what 'research as usual' means by working the boundaries between these systems in everyday practice. What this will come down cannot be specified in advance, as I will draw on a repertoire of ethnographic and action research practices in the improvisational process of collaboratively addressing the problems public officials and citizens are facing. Rather than being theory- or method-driven, I will aspire to follow the needs of the situation at hand to generate actionable knowledge. Intervening in practice as such should enable me to capture the socially, politically, ethically, and emotionally embedded and embodied ways in which researching public problems affects problem solving, and help people who, such as Martien, are implicated in the daily practice of multiple deprivation to better handle the real life dramas of modern governance.

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