**Doing What’s Necessary:**

**How Encounters in Practice Shape and Improve Interactive Governance**

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Interactive governance has rapidly been institutionalized as common practice in the public sector and desirable solution to dealing with complex societal problems. At the same time, it has been characterized by continuous tensions between the new, emergent, and unpredictable practices it generated and the persistence of established ways of thinking, acting, and organizing (Huxham et al., 2000; Edelenbos, 2005; Hoppe, 2011). Processes of *government-driven democratization* have often been found not to facilitate productive collaboration between organizational actors and citizens due to the institutional dysfunctions caused by powerful elites, rigid bureaucracies and fragmented welfare provision. Community self-organization is therefore currently promoted as it is argued that such *citizen-driven participation* can enable more effective, democratic, and bottom-up dynamics and outcomes. Political discourse now claims that welfare states should be reformed as to get citizens, volunteers, and communities to take care of local problems and public services by themselves. However, this development is criticized for turning into a governance technique that increases rather than reduces public officials’ power and worsens rather than alleviates socio-economic inequality. It appears, then, that neither government-driven democratization nor citizen-driven participation provide meaningful norms in and of themselves that can guarantee productive dynamics and positive outcomes.

In this chapter, I suggest that a fundamental reason for this is that making interactive governance work does not hinge on who is driving it but on the quality of the relational dynamics between stakeholders. By examining and evaluating how it takes shape through encounters in daily practice, we can reveal whether stakeholders *in their interactions* enact particularistic, decoupled and institutionalized practices that sustain pre-determined institutional interests, procedures and routines (*logic of the organization*) or relational, experiential and holistic practices to discover how to best address the needs and dynamics of the situation at hand (*law of the situation*). What is going on in an area and what should be done about it, to which degrees its interactive governance should be government-driven or citizen-driven, and how to link situated practices with the institutional setting; all of this should emerge from extensive face-to-face contact, situated experiences and an inclusive process of unifying differences between all those involved.

This framework is empirically grounded in and practically illustrated by the case of the neighborhood Landlust in Amsterdam-West (the Netherlands) and its *Neighborhood Practice Team* (Buurt Praktijk Team – BPT). In little more than a year, this team of only a handful of public professionals and residents managed to turn around a seemingly hopeless situation—of severe anti-social behavior, a planning conflict and a disconnect between public agencies and residents—by being constantly present in the neighborhood, developing a shared view, and organizing small activities. This innovative approach generated tensions with existing agencies and professionals who did not share the BPT’s sense of urgency, understand and value its approach, or see the need for institutional change. As such, it is an intermediary or hybrid form (Connelly, 2014) that cannot be classified as either government-driven democratization or community self-organization. Despite being government-initiated and not citizen-driven, it was not driven by government but by the fundamental norm and subtle practice of *doing what’s necessary*: following the needs of the residents and the dynamics of the neighborhood rather than abiding by pre-set interests, goals and procedures.

The case and framework are based on four months of fieldwork in Amsterdam that explored how the Municipality’s policy of ‘area-focused working’ actually worked in practice and how this approach to interactive governance could be improved. My project concentrated on BPTs as their innovative approach successfully addressed long-standing problems in deprived neighborhoods but also triggered profound tensions in the local institutional setting. I conducted what I call ‘practice research’ (Bartels, 2015b) by actively participating in the daily practice of the BPTs to jointly deepen our understanding of its added value and tensions and enact ways to deal with these. One of the activities I engaged in was conducting an evaluation of the BPT Landlust to explain its activities, achievements, and issues to the executives of the public agencies and those critical of its approach. I conducted twelve interviews, studied thirteen policy documents, participated in three team meetings, made two neighborhood walks, worked in the neighborhood office for 1.5 month, organized a resident meeting, conducted a pilot study of how children experience the neighborhood, and prepared and participated in an executive meeting. The resulting report (Bartels, 2014) forms the basis for this chapter.

As ‘doing what’s necessary’ is admittedly quite an elusive notion, this chapter provides a theoretical framework and practical recommendations to explain how it works, what challenges it runs into, and why it makes a difference. In the next section, I review the tensions involved with institutionalizing interactive governance. I then explain how we can evaluate and improve interactive governance by analyzing how it is enacted in *encounters in practice*. In the third section I illustrate this framework with the practices of the BPT Landlust and the narratives of various stakeholders. Finally, I provide practical advice for making interactive governance work by doing what’s necessary.

**Institutionalizing Interactive Governance**

The rise of interactive governance has been fast and impactful. Whereas in the 1990s it was first discovered that the public sector worked through *governance* processes‘no longer fully controlled by the government, but subject to negotiation between a wide range of public, semi-public and private actors’ (Sørensen & Torfing, 2007, 3), throughout the 2000s networks, collaboration, and participation were widely institutionalized in public discourse and practice. Few would dispute that nowadays various public, private, and societal stakeholders come together to address complex problems by developing new shared ways of working across organizational boundaries and socio-cultural divides (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003; Ansell & Gash, 2007; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007; McGuire & Agranoff, 2011; Emerson et al., 2012; Torfing et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, governance dynamics and outcomes have been far from problem-free or satisfactory. In practice, it appears extremely difficult to avoid ‘collaborative inertia’ (Huxham et al., 2000) due to a great number of contingent factors, ranging from political mandate and financial resources to cultural differences and practical skills. A common response has been to suggest that collaborative management (McGuire & Agranoff, 2011), meta-governance (Torfing et al., 2012), and boundary spanning (Van Meerkerk, 2014) should guide stakeholders in dealing with all these factors. Alternatively, several critical analyses have revealed that, despite the turn to governance, governments often did not relinquish their ability to steer or change their programs but retained crucial power resources and reshaped their control mechanisms (Marsh et al., 2003; Fuller & Geddes, 2008; Davies, 2009; Griggs & Sullivan, 2014).

*Interactive governance* was therefore introduced as a less authoritative and more democratic, collaborative, and bottom-up approach (Torfing et al., 2012). The aim was to interact with citizens through sincere efforts to set the agenda together, give them influence in decision-making, and jointly carry out activities to generate tangible differences. In the shape of co-production, partnerships, collaborative planning, community participation, participatory budgeting, and neighborhood governance, to name but a few, this *government-driven democratization* has demonstrated great potential for resolving intractable problems in innovative, empowering, and inclusive ways (Fung & Wright, 2003; Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003; Healey, 2006). A key insight has been that, in order to be successful, new structures, roles, and solutions need to be embedded in the existing institutional landscape. Although interactive governance thrives by informal relationships, creativity, and novelty, there also needs to be anchorage in political-economic institutions to ensure support and commitment, democratic legitimacy, and willingness to learn how to interact beyond existing routines and role patterns (Fung & Wright, 2003; Healey, 2006; Torfing et al., 2012; Connelly, 2014).

However, all too often institutionalized ways of thinking, acting, and organizing continue to dominate interactive governance (Huxham et al., 2000; Edelenbos, 2005; Hoppe, 2011; McGuire & Agranoff, 2011). Despite good intentions and hard work, it is often badly designed and managed, exposes lacking organizational capacities and willingness to truly share power with other stakeholders (in particular citizens) and fails to generate structural change. Hierarchical and fragmented institutional landscapes inhibit innovative practices and flexible solutions with bothersome policy criteria, lengthy administrative procedures, complex funding schemes, etc. (Wagenaar, 2007; Kruiter et al., 2008; Wagenaar & Specht, 2010; Hilhorst & Van der Lans, 2013). For example, citizens with good ideas and much needed skills need to submit a funding proposal according to the formal requirements and pre-set goals of a participatory policy, smothering their enthusiasm and energy.

Therefore, rather than inviting citizens to participate in governance networks, *citizen-driven participation* seeks to avoid the programs and interference of public organizations. Citizens, social entrepreneurs and small voluntary organizations instead develop informal, creative and sometimes subversive ideas and projects (Van Meerkerk, 2014; Wagenaar, 2014). A great many citizen-driven activities have emerged in the form of informal care, social entrepreneurship, neighborhood initiatives, community trusts, civic activism and so on (see e.g., Beunderman et al., 2012; Hilhorst & Van der Lans, 2013; Van den Brink & De Ruijter, 2013; Van Meerkerk, 2014). These provide a rich and inspiring evidence base of what can be achieved through community self-organization, the distinctive capacities and energy citizens possess for creative service delivery and pragmatic problem solving, and the huge diversity of initiatives that have emerged across borders, policy areas, and social groups.

Governments have been eager to embrace this development in their welfare state policies (Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013; Nienhuis, 2014). In the UK, the coalition government endeavored to create a ‘big society’ because ‘the way government has worked –top-down, top-heavy, controlling– has frequently had the effect of sapping responsibility, local innovation and civic action’ (Cameron, 2010; see also Cabinet Office, 2010). Citizens should not ‘always turn to officials … for answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities’ (ibidem). Similarly, in the Netherlands, the government seeks to turn ‘the classical welfare state’ into ‘a participation society’ in which ‘everyone who can is asked to take responsibility for his or her own life and environment’ (Troonrede, 2013, 1), while the state labors ‘to support civic oomph and suppress bureaucratic resistances’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2013, 3).

Currently, there is a lively empirical and normative debate about the shape, effects, and desirability of this development1. An important line of critique is that governments are institutionalizing yet another variation of the ‘governing by community’ governmentality (Rose, 2000; see also De Wilde, 2015). Political discourse presents the transition from welfare state to participation society as a *fait accompli*, disciplining citizens into self-organization without any regard of whether they want or are able to take responsibility for public services, social needs, and local problems (Hurenkamp et al., 2012; Kampen et al., 2013). Withdrawal of public organizations, funds, and responsibility is legitimized by making moral-emotional appeals about citizenship while the government paternalistically decides what citizens can and should do. Public officials and agencies will continue to be involved through governance technologies that uphold paternalistic and unrealistic ‘do-it-yourself’ expectations as they ‘facilitate’ citizens in taking care of the problems or lack of services they are facing. As such, governments could instrumentalize citizens to their utopian citizenship ideal while depriving them of participation in decision making and reallocating responsibilities for public welfare and pressing societal problems to citizens who desperately need to devote their time and efforts to making a living, thereby actively promoting political and socio-economic inequality (see also Blakeley, 2010; NEF, 2013).

Hence, institutionalizing interactive governance is both necessary and problematic for authentically and effectively generating solutions that fit with the needs and dynamics of problematic situations. Apparently, neither government-driven nor citizen-driven processes can prevent that institutionalized power inequalities and bureaucratic barriers frustrate genuine collaboration and creative problem solving. ‘The growing institutional framework for participation … should therefore not be confused with the extent and quality of participation that occurs’ (Blakeley, 2010, 140). Thus, we should not focus on who is driving interactive governance but, more fundamentally, examine and evaluate the nature and quality of the encounters through which it takes shape in daily practice. The next section develops a framework for doing so, which will then be illustrated by the case of the BPT Landlust.

**Encounters in Practice: The Law of the Situation and the Logic of the Organization**

Public encounters, the face-to-face contact between public professionals and citizens, have moved to the forefront of interactive governance. As the design and implementation of government-driven participation is mostly in the hands of front-line workers, their day-to-day interactions with citizens have become a critical means for realizing its democratic and instrumental ambitions (Bartels, 2013; Wagenaar, 2014; Warren, 2014; Bartels, 2015a). And although citizen-driven participation in theory implies little to no government involvement, in practice it means facilitation by, collaboration or conflict with, and changes from public professionals (see Van Meerkerk, 2014). ‘Encounters’ thus offer an empirical lens on the daily practice of interactive governance, but also imply a relational process framework for evaluating the quality of its situated, dynamic, and contested practices. As neither government-driven democratization nor citizen-driven participation provides a satisfactory norm in and of itself, we should evaluate stakeholders’ relational practices without pre-structuring these with substantive theoretical principles or practical interests, ideas and institutions.

By taking a practice approach we can examine what stakeholders actually say, do and feel as part of their mundane, concrete engagements with one another and the situations they face. Practice theory conceives of the world not in terms of formal, rational and universal knowledge but the ongoing routinized, embodied and materially mediated practical activities of actors situated in a wider social and historical context. A practice approach enables us to understand how interactive governance is practically and relationally performed; i.e., how the process of encountering produces new meanings, patterns of interaction and substantive outcomes. These practices reproduce and adapt the institutional context through mutually constitutive dynamics, meaning that the latter’s influence cannot be assumed in advance but should be assessed based on its contingent practical manifestations (Bogason et al., 2002; Van der Arend & Behagel, 2011; Cook & Wagenaar, 2012; Bartels, 2013, 2015a).

We can evaluate these practices by examining the quality of the relational dynamics that make up encounters (Stout et al., 2015)2. Mary Follett’s relational process ontology asserts that we are inescapably related through innate social bonds and are incessantly interweaving with each other and the situation we are in (Follett, 1924; Stout & Staton, 2011; Stout, 2012; Stout & Love, 2015). I do not approach a static and neutral ‘you’ but, instead, our dynamically changing interactions, the interpretations I have of those, the environment we are in, etc. Hence, mutual responding is always to the relating in-between us: our encountering. Misunderstandings emerge when we uphold a habitual pattern rather than truly integrating, or unifying our differences into new views, goals, and activities. Relational practices can thus be evaluated by assessing whether all stakeholders are enacting new ways of thinking, acting, and organizing in-between them that all consider better than what they individually did beforehand.

By unifying differences in their encounters, stakeholders will jointly discover and follow the *law of the situation*: the dynamics and needs of the social, political, economic, cultural, and material circumstances they are in (Follett, 1924, 1926/2004; Stout & Love, 2015). Emergent practical experiences, personal relationships and informal solutions with the situation will determine what is the best thing to do. The ‘situation’ is made up of mutually influencing and evolving factors, which do not exist side by side but produce the situation through their relating. Situations are nested in the ‘total situation’, which consists of all past and potential future situations, as well as all present and absent people, problems, policies, etc. in the direct and wider environment. Although stakeholders can never fully integrate with all aspects of the total situation, they should always strive to interweave with an ever-expanding whole by including more people and embedding their activities in the institutional landscape. Finding the law of the situation is an ongoing, dynamic interactive process of determining and doing what the situation (rather than any pre-determined and fixed policy, rule, or role) demands.

In contrast, stakeholders can enact the *logic of the organization* by prioritizing pre-determined political and organizational interests, administrative procedures and professional routines. For example, it has been observed in several countries that civic initiatives only get funded when they abide by centrally imposed targets and standards (Fuller & Geddes, 2008), silo-working and turf battles engross partner organizations (McGuire & Agranoff, 2011), participatory processes empower elites rather than deprived groups (Blakeley, 2010), and communities are defined according to administrative categories rather than local identities and historical boundaries (Griggs & Roberts, 2012). In these (and other) ways, interactive governance can take the form of an organizational logic and reality that is ‘decoupled’ (Meyer & Rowan, 1991, 57-78) from what is happening and needed in practice. Public organizations can adopt popular norms and concepts from their environment to acquire the legitimacy needed to survive. Rather than following the law of the situation, vague goals, delegated implementation, ceremonial evaluation, and informal coordination obscure the persistence of established institutions. The result is an experiential divide: public officials believe all is fine as policies are in place and their work ticks all the boxes, while frustration or antipathy grows among citizens as the institutional ‘tyranny’ (Cooke & Kothari, 2004) gives ‘only ritualistic attention to participatory practice’ (Stout, 2010, 45).

Hence, we can examine how interactive governance takes shape through encounters in practice and evaluate the quality of their relational dynamics. Are encounters integrative, experiential and holistic or institutionalized, decoupled and particularistic? Are stakeholders engaging in extensive face-to-face contact, situated experiences and an inclusive process of following *the law of the situation* or are public officials institutionalizing an *organizational logic* that is detached from the actual needs of citizens and the everyday dynamics of their area? Is there a process of unifying differences or imposing institutional tyranny? The next section illustrates how stakeholders can avoid that interactive governance follows the logic of the organization and follow the law of the situation by ‘doing what’s necessary’.

**The Neighborhood Practice Team Landlust: Doing What’s Necessary**

In 2012, Landlust was in dire straits. A group of youngsters dominated the main square and the youth center as they engaged in anti-social behavior, intimidated residents and public professionals and committed burglaries. Residents avoided the square and did not report crimes to the police, while youth workers struggled to preserve their fragile relationship with these youngsters at the brink of organized crime. In addition, a group of proactive residents was involved in a conflict over the renovation of the square with the City District and resisted the new participatory approach of the social work agency. Furthermore, statistics revealed alarming levels of poverty, safety, housing quality, and social segregation. Altogether, the public agencies4 had lost their standing and trust in the neighborhood as well as their grip on its problems. Encounters between public professionals and citizens were largely absent and those that remained (proactive citizen group–participatory planners; troublesome youngsters–youth workers and police officers) were rife with tension, frustration and conflict. Despite the presence of a governance network, active citizens and participatory policies, nobody seemed able to move the situation forward.

One year later, the group of youngsters had lost its dominance, the conflict over the renovation of the square was resolved, residents got increasingly involved in community activities and their relationships with public agencies and professionals recovered. Although many underlying problems still needed to be tackled, residents, public professionals and policy makers shared a sense that the first steps toward a bigger transformation had been taken. A BPT consisting of one public professional and three residents3 managed to generate this landmark change by walking around in the neighborhood, talking to residents, facilitating joint analyses, setting up office in the youth center, targeting the troublesome youngsters, mediating in the planning conflict, and organizing social activities on the square and in the youth center. They did not have pre-set goals or follow conventional procedures but were ‘doing what’s necessary’, as captured in the five practices below.

*Creating a Sense of Urgency*

Well, actually **[the start of the BPT] was declared to us**. At a time they already started I think. [chuckles] So there was no consultation whatsoever in advance and I experienced it like **we were confronted with it**. So not ... ‘We’re thinking about starting a BPT in your neighborhood given the nature of the problems. We’d like to discuss that with you.’ ... It was just, wham bam, introduced with a lot of fuss. ... At a certain moment they also started to do activities which totally overlapped with the work of the neighborhood coordinator, organizing resident meetings, and actually **there was no consultation** with the neighborhood coordinator in advance. Well, that stirred up quite a bit of annoyance, especially because, well, okay, when you’re going to do something, then, in whichever neighborhood, then you make, you orient yourself on the neighborhood, who’s active there, and you make contact, at least you go for a chat, get acquainted, what you’re doing, what do you do. And they just came, wham bam, and **did what they wanted**. And yeah, if you don’t make a joint start, because with the BPT you’re also very much **getting into,** well, it may sound a bit weird, **the territory of the neighborhood coordinator**. ... Yeah, if you surpass her, yeah, then you surpass something that’s really there. And I know that **the work we do, it’s really the fundamentals**: going into the neighborhood, talking to people, making connections, building networks, seeing what happens, picking up signals, taking those to the right place [in the organizations]. And yeah, if **you’re then kinda cut out or ignored**, yeah, then that’s, that wasn’t nice. ... Like ‘Yeah, **am I doing something here that’s useless?’ or ‘Don’t we exist?’**. That was very much the impression. *– Margreet*5*, Neighborhood manager* *City District Amsterdam-West*

Doing what’s necessary first of all means breaking with the logic of the organizations and its institutionalized practices. This can offset emotionally charged tensions with professionals like Margreet, who signals that ‘there was no consultation’ and they ‘were confronted with’ the BPT. Depicting the BPT as anti-heroes, the (government-driven) work she and the neighborhood coordinator (the heroes/victims of the story) were already doing was ‘really the fundamentals’ and was wrongfully dismissed, giving them the feeling that their work is ‘useless’ or that they ‘don’t ... exist’ because the BPT was ‘getting into ... the[ir] territory’ and they just ‘did what they wanted’. While we should not dismiss her ‘annoyance’, taking it for granted would obscure how she subtly prioritizes the logic of the organization over the law of the situation. Having meetings and drafting documents ‘to coordinate’ responsibilities and activities with all relevant professionals not only delays actually going into the neighborhood with weeks or even months, but also implies that yet another government-driven process is negotiated outside of, and possibly decoupled from, its daily practice.

The BPT legitimized its start with the diagnosis that the institutionalized practices of the public agencies were inadequate for resolving Landlust’s problems. Team leader Ron and policy maker May-Britt toiled to assemble available evidence and stories into an image of an area in urgent need of an intervention and political mandate for ‘doing what’s necessary’. After the success of a first BPT in another neighborhood, the City District Council had allocated budget for a second BPT. The choice for Landlust was legitimized based on a ‘quick scan’ of quantitative and qualitative evidence. Reports, memos, and statistics showed that 4,500 residents were living off a minimum income and 25% of the residents living around the main square were classified as poor. Levels of subjective safety were the lowest of the entire city district, with certain estates suffering from a high intensity of burglaries and robberies. Yet, willingness to report crimes and overall community engagement were found to be low. Although other areas were characterized by comparable data, conversations with several residents and professionals generated a number of ‘urgency’ stories about the anti-social behavior of the youngsters, the conflict about the renovation of the square, and other instances of discontent and safety issues—for example, how eye-witnesses to a stabbing incident were immediately told to keep quiet by casually mentioning their addresses.

As such, the BPT not only created the image of an alarming situation, but more fundamentally diagnosed that public agencies and professionals insufficiently related to the needs and opportunities of the neighborhood. The organizations were depicted as fragmented and focused on internal needs and systems. Professionals organized a host of participatory meetings and initiatives but did not manage to connect with active groups of residents, engaged entrepreneurs, and emerging social networks and catalyze their energy to resolve problems. In contrast, the BPT proposed a holistic, experiential and relational approach focused on understanding how all the problems were interconnected and restoring the relationships between the residents and the agencies. Rather than drawing up a pre-conceived plan, it set out to ‘do what’s necessary’ by discovering the needs, desires and capacities of residents as well as the dynamics, problems and opportunities of the neighborhood.

*Being Present*

I went to sit here on a bench on the square and just see what’s actually happening here, who plays here, who sticks around on the square and who doesn’t, what kind of square is it, what kind of people live here. And actually it became pretty clear that all kinds of **young children were playing in the surrounding streets and that parents were also hanging about and chatting there. But the square here, which is actually meant for those things, was just empty**. In the morning kids are dropped off [at the school located on the square] at half eight, at ten there’s fifteen minutes of playtime, at lunchtime the kids are picked up and then the square gets empty quickly, and at the end of the afternoon at three o’clock exactly the same happens. So **pretty often I was completely alone here at the square from three to six**. I didn’t see any traffic, nothing. But **what I did see was that the white residents ... really walked around the edges of the square to the place where they had to be, but they wouldn’t cross it**. It got lively again around four, five, with **youngsters from the neighborhood, who then gathered on the fence ... and the stone walls ... and formed a clear reason for those residents not to cross the square**. Because then they’d have to pass through this group of boys, through that narrow gate... And if you’d be an attractive women passing by, you could count on it there’d be whistling, or hissing, or shouting. ... I think that was pretty intimidating for those residents. ... **The surveillance team that was working here, yeah ... they cycled by if those boys were there, they waved at each other, and they cycled on.** **And you could see that with the residents, I could see on their faces that they turned away with an annoyed look** ... And that’s because that surveillance team consisted of boys from the neighborhood, who actually knew these boys. And they’d keep things quiet for each other ... But **the nuisance caused by that group ... people didn’t see that change**. And that made people feel unwilling to report problems and lose trust that something would be done. *– Ron, Team leader BPT Landlust*

To find out what was going on and what needed to be done, the BPT took an experiential, holistic and relational approach. Instead of the conventional route of gathering more data and convening meetings, team leader Ron6 explains how he ‘went to sit here on a bench on the square and just see what’s actually happening’. It did not take him too long to start observing a pattern: the group of youngsters was the sole user of the square and was also in control of who would use it; the surveillance team did nothing about their nuisance and intimidating; residents felt frustrated that the problems were not addressed and gave up on reporting them; resulting in the situation not changing. A similar pattern occurred inside the youth center, where the youngsters called the shots, demolished the building and facilities, and threatened the youth workers—who did not file reports to retain the youngsters’ frail trust. Crucially, Ron came to an understanding of these problems and patterns by experiencing them first hand. He not only observed what kids, parents, other residents, the youngsters, and the surveillance team did; he could even ‘see on their faces that they turned away with an annoyed look’. Moreover, the youngsters repeatedly intimidated him personally.

By being present in the neighborhood, Ron was also able to meet residents, listen to their stories, and build personal relationships. He also approached residents at meetings, asked his colleagues who they knew, and invited them for a coffee to chat about the neighborhood. This helped him to deepen his understanding of the problems and strengths of the neighborhood and find key residents for setting up new activities. Especially since the agencies had not been forthcoming with professionals for the team, Ron convinced three key residents to join and focused his energy and time on connecting with residents (rather than professionals7). For example, after encountering Saloua on a bench on the square, he got her to start organizing her sports classes for Moroccan mothers and daughters in the youth center. This proved to be the starting point of a transformation of the role and image of the building and the social dynamics in the neighborhood.

Thus, the BPT learned what needed to be done through embodied experiences of being in the neighborhood and organizing activities. These encounters facilitated interactive and adaptive processes of participating in ‘the situation’ instead of unilaterally applying institutional knowledge to it or following habitual routines (Wagenaar, 2004; Wagenaar & Cook, 2011). What was an appropriate or effective activity could not be determined in advance or captured in policy documents and procedures but emerged from their ‘locally negotiated regime of competence’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 137). This joint practice not only created an understanding of what needed to be done, but also developed the mutual relationships and rapport needed to make this happen.

*Developing a Shared View*

We had two parallel activities. ... Ron immediately got involved in [the participation process] of the renovation to understand ‘What should we actually do?’ . And **he started listening well to ‘What do the residents really want?’**. ... And secondly **we organized a Search Conference to delve deeper into, um, ‘What kinda strategy should we follow?** What is the nitty-gritty of the dynamics? What’s already working? ... Which stakeholders should we involve? Where is the energy?’ ... And after that meeting we made causal patterns ... and **we considered ‘What could be a lever?’**. To, on all those areas [coming out of the meeting], so both poverty as the renovation, as ending the dominance of that group, as reaching invisible residents, as connecting the networks which were just emerging a bit in the neighborhood... So what is, yeah, a lever to work on all those things? And **that was the community center**. And ... Ron literally went in there, in the community center, and started organizing things from there. – *May-Britt, Program coordinator Youth & Safety*

To further deepen its holistic understanding, the BPT tested and developed the personal experiences and stories it had gathered in two meetings with (about 30) residents as well as professionals. During a ‘Search Conference’ a joint analysis was made of the past, present, and future of the neighborhood to deepen understanding of its problems and especially its strengths and develop a shared view for the future—a neighborhood with thriving social control and contacts. An ensuing ‘In-depth Analysis’ led to seven concrete goals to achieve on the immediate term and a set of holistically related activities8. Rather than making professionals responsible for these, residents who had expressed an interest in specific goals and activities were immediately asked to get together and realize them. In this way, their existing and rekindled energy was fueled and they were engaged in the activities they would like to see. May-Britt and Ron subsequently analyzed ‘What kinda strategy should we follow?’ and ‘What could be a lever?’ to enable these activities, achieve the seven goals, and realize the shared view. They concluded that it ‘was the community center’; therefore, Ron ‘started organizing things from there’.

The two activities related to developing this shared view—understanding ‘what the residents really want’ and ‘delv[ing] deeper into ... what kinda strategy ... [to] follow’—were iteratively repeated. The BPT kept constantly checking whether it was doing what was necessary by gathering new stories and views and reflecting on the effects of activities. They did so by asking for feedback at resident meetings and meetings with executives of the public agencies, but most of all by observing what was happening in the neighborhood and listening to the stories, needs and desires residents were sharing. For example, during a ‘social walk’ in October 2013 it turned out that social cohesion was still low; residents in one street were not able to resolve their fight about nuisance caused by children playing football. Furthermore, Ron stimulated the professionals involved in the renovation project to carefully listen to what residents were saying and helped them in restoring mutual trust and jointly drafting a new plan in accordance with the shared view—even though the professionals maintain this turnaround was entirely due to their efforts to reinvigorate the participatory process after their political mandate had been extended.

*Taking Small Steps*

**It was a closed fortress here**. Everyone called it the bunker in fact. **Nobody wanted to come here**. Look, **I know it still doesn’t look pretty. But I know it can become pretty**. ... The lunch came in, also because of Ron, you know, I mean, the kids came in, ... **people crossed the threshold**. ... And in that way you just make things a bit nicer. And the BPT has absolutely made that happen. **We never expected it to happen so quickly**. ... [Beforehand] everyone picked up their kids and left the square. If you really had to cross it, ... at night it really wasn’t nice to walk on the square. And now I do cross it at night. ... **That has all changed**. And the surveillance team that’s there, and the Police has come, there’s simply a lot more supervision. **That has absolutely changed** ... Mothers hang around on a bench, often between one and three, then they pick up their kids from school and go their way. And if the weather is nice, then they might stay until six. And **that didn’t happen before... And now it does**. Because people just feel that, things have calmed down now. It’s not that they feel spied on, or bad, or threatened. And when you get that out of your system, then you’ll act differently too. ... **Of course it does not happen in a year**. No, you can reserve about five, six years for that, before it, you know, that you can say like ‘Yeah, I can **see clear changes.** **But I do see them**, yes.’ – *Anita, resident and BPT member*

After developing a shared focus, the BPT took a range of small steps to get to the big underlying issues and set a transition in motion. The power of taking small steps is illustrated by Anita’s *story of helplessness and control9*. At first, ‘it was a closed fortress’ and ‘nobody wanted to come here’. But thanks to the BPT ‘that has all changed’ much quicker than expected. Kids, parents, and other residents use the square again, surveillance has improved and everyone feels that ‘things have calmed down now’. Although big changes will take years to become visible, Anita can already ‘see clear changes’ and trusts things will further improve. Unfortunately I can just provide a snippet of all the small steps that have been taken and how these contributed to the big changes.

A crucial first step was to open the metal shutters of the youth center every day. The building was seen as a ‘bunker’ because the huge metal shutters were only opened for the group of troublesome youngsters. This bad image kept other residents from using the building, so that it remained a bunker and was tremendously damaged inside. There was a big hole in the wall of the hallway, almost all the chairs were broken, radiators had come off the walls, locks had been cracked. Ron single-handedly made repairs and painted the inside walls, even though the youngsters sometimes undid his hard work the same day. A next step was to ban the youngsters from the center and change the youth work agency, surveillance team, and policing strategy—a delicate and contentious process of negotiating with the agencies involved, all the while undergoing personal threats by the youngsters. Yet another small step was to remove the fences and hedges which gave the youngsters control over the square. Finally, by keeping the youth center open every day Ron facilitated residents in organizing all kinds of community activities so that more and more residents ‘crossed the threshold’.

Another example is how hosting four mothers and a handful of kids to have lunch during school breaks developed into a ‘healthy lunch’ for 20 mothers and 45 kids, new rules and activities at the school, and targeted help for kids whose obesity problems were not known beforehand. This happened as Ron had heard a mother say that a lot of children were obese and also noticed himself how many of them went to the snack bar on the corner in the school breaks. When it turned out that the (Moroccan) mothers were looking for a location, they agreed to self-organize the lunch in the youth center as they knew and trusted Saloua. Moreover, with the kids present, Ron could ask them about their interests and found other residents to organize such activities, leading to a week-filling program of theatre, arts and crafts, games, cooking, kickboxing, and dancing as well as parents entering the youth center, feeling the neighborhood was safe again, and expressing their public service needs. Hence, the BPT took small steps in response to signals from the neighborhood, making the big issues visible and change tangible. It has gradually kindled a positive social dynamic on and around the square: residents ‘cross is at night’, ‘mothers hang around on a bench’, and ‘things have calmed down’.

*Embedding Change*

We had hired someone who advised us and then **the [planners’] project group said like … ‘you don’t trust us**.’ Well, then we said ‘That’s right that we don’t trust you, because you don’t listen.’ Well, **then the BPT came**, just Ron, so yeah, several times we also, that was in summer, talked and organized a few things here on the square. And after summer we continued **and then we finished the design of the square very quickly. Because we got [a designer] who actually did listen to us**. ... Who just said like ‘This had been said by residents, that has been asked by residents. Is that correct?’ **Right, that’s giving feedback. Look, normally it goes like this**: ‘We made a report. Does anyone have anything to say about the report? Okay, and now we’re moving on because what we have in mind is this and this.’ ... Well, **in that very slipstream** of working on the square last winter, the idea emerged to do something about the [youth center] in Spring. And **also there [an active group of residents] have interfered**, they just hired an architect they knew, and they made a design and sent it to the City District and now that’s … going to be implemented. **But every time it takes an incredible amount of energy to, um, well, make it happen...** *– Harry, resident and BPT member*

In Harry’s experience, things started to change in the way professionals related to residents after the BPT (‘just Ron’) arrived. Not only did they manage to overcome the planning conflict and finish ‘the design of the square very quickly’; there was a qualitative change in their relationship of giving feedback and being responsive, creating a ‘slipstream’ for working together on improving the neighborhood. But Harry is mindful that ‘every time it takes an incredible amount of energy to, um, well, make it happen’. Even when professionals might be trying to go beyond their mandate and do whatever the neighborhood is asking, their organizations are often not enabling them to do so. Doing what’s necessary is thus not just about generating immediate positive changes but also about embedding these changes in the institutional landscape.

This remained one of the key challenges for the BPT. Even though after a year several professionals joined the team, they struggled with reconciling their institutionalized practices with doing what’s necessary10. Relationships that had been damaged by the start of the BPT remained fragile and needed to be mended. And those with no long term or direct contact with the neighborhood needed to be convinced that the BPT was not just a temporary solution but an investment in a wider process of institutional learning and change. Moreover, the transition that had been set in motion needed to be spread throughout the neighborhood, as many residents had still not been reached and underlying problems with poverty, housing, crime, and cultural tensions not sufficiently addressed. Whether or not these (and other) issues were going to be resolved fundamentally hinged on the commitment and ability of executives, managers, and professionals to deprioritize their organizational logic in favor of learning what needs to be done and change in the neighborhood and their own organizations.

Strikingly, the BPT approach of ‘doing what is necessary’ gives primacy to the law of the situation as opposed to the institutionalized understandings and routines of public professionals. Admittedly, it remained an issue whether the BPT would manage to expand the total situation by including ever more residents, groups, professionals, and organizations and embedding its approach in the institutional landscape. Indeed, embedding change is a delicate and contested balancing act of following the law of the situation and accommodating the logic of the organizations.

**Implications and Recommendations**

The case of the BPT Landlust defies a straightforward division of the interactive governance universe in government-driven democratization and citizen-driven participation. Although initiated by a few public professionals, its principal aim and practice was to carefully listen and observe what residents needed and enable them to realize their aims. By doing what’s necessary it toiled to work according to the law of the situation rather than the logic of the organizations. The BPT did not impose a government-driven process or leave it up to a severely distressed neighborhood to resolve its multiple deprivation through community self-organization. Instead, it brought a collaborative, bottom-up, and effective mode of interactive governance into being by being present, developing a shared view, taking small steps and embedding change. By engaging in relational, experiential and holistic encounters in the daily practice of the neighborhood, the BPT facilitated integrative encounters that generated immediate, tangible effects and restored damaged relationships, while struggling to embed change in the institutional landscape.

Analyzing such hybrids operating on the border of innovation and institutionalization reveals a great deal about the situated, dynamic, and contested practices that interactive governance comes down to (Connelly, 2014). Neither government-driven democratization nor citizen-driven participation are meaningful norms in and of themselves that can guarantee productive dynamics and positive outcomes. Therefore, we should analyze and enact interactive governance by evaluating the quality of the encounters, and the capacities to engage in them, through which it takes shape in practice. Stakeholders should find out what should be done and accomplish these changes by physically and socially connecting with what is going on in practice, how this is experienced by those affected, and what all stakeholders would like to and can do. Constant encounters with the situation and all those in it can facilitate integrative encounters that will lead stakeholders to discover and follow what is integral to the situation (law of the situation) rather than pre-determined institutions, interests and practices (logic of the organization). More concretely, stakeholders can ‘do what’s necessary’ by following three practical recommendations.

First, stakeholders should strive to come to an experiential, relational and holistic understanding of what should be done. Although this can involve conflicts about diverging interests, beliefs, and experiences, they should ultimately integrate their differences into new ways of thinking, acting, and organizing. This should not be a decoupled, institutionalized process, but a shared practice of experiencing what is going on and building up the personal relationships and rapport needed to get things done. Stakeholders should also not merely draw up a joint plan but constantly reflect on, deepen, and adapt it. They can do so by making joint analyses and deriving concrete goals, steps, and patterns from these. Finally, all of this is not only a matter of talking, listening, and thinking, but primarily of *doing*: doing what the situation demands and stimulate what it has to offer by organizing and facilitating activities.

Second, stakeholders should recognize that facilitative leadership is vital to the quality of their encounters. They should identify and appoint a key individual—who is savvy, communicatively competent, hands-on, and able to facilitate learning—to lead their efforts and bring the right people together in productive conversations and meaningful activities. Yet, interactive governance should never become fully dependent on the qualities and energy of one person. Leadership should not be fixed in one person; different stakeholders can take the lead on specific issues depending on what the law of the situation requires (Bussu & Bartels, 2014). That also means that top and line managers should not be detached from but actively involved in the daily practices of stakeholders who are doing what’s necessary and supportive of their needs.

Third, stakeholders should recognize the institutional implications of their relational, experiential and holistic encounters. Interactive governance should always cater to the law of the situation rather than institutionalized practices and organizational logic, but also needs to be institutionally anchored in the political, administrative, legal, and economic landscape to be effective (Healey, 2006). Policy makers should be actively involved to formulate and realize these institutional implications. Moreover, public professionals enacting institutionalized practices should not be dismissed but accommodated in doing the things they are used and expected to do in their organizational context and in learning what they can and should do differently. This is inevitably a dilemmatic, emotional, and contested process that can stir up frustration and conflict about recognition for efforts and accomplishments, competences for learning and change, and diverging perceptions and interests. Politicians and managers should therefore actively support joint learning and institutional change.

Interactive governance has been rapidly adopted far and wide, revealing both its enormous potential as considerable deficiencies. After two decades of government-driven democratization, community self-organization opens up much needed civic space in often hegemonically ruled urban environments and can generate more democratic, flexible, and effective solutions (Wagenaar, 2014). However, we should not unassailably herald it as something that will emerge by itself, operate without government involvement, or have no institutional implications. A more attractive way forward for interactive governance lies in examining, evaluating and improving the relational, experiential and holistic encounters that make it work in practice. Let’s start doing what’s necessary!

**Notes**

1 For example, in the Netherlands (the setting of my case study), 61 articles have been published on the matter by academics and policy makers on a popular social issues website (http://www.socialevraagstukken.nl [last checked on 18/05/2015]), four policy documents (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2010, 2013, 2015; Troonrede, 2013) and six public reports (see Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2013, 9-11) have been issued, and a growing number of (semi-)academic publications is emerging. For an overview of the British context, see Bartels et al. (2014)

2 Although substantive outcomes (socio-economic deprivation, political inequality, social justice, inclusion, etc.) are greatly important, we should first evaluate interactive practices on their own terms—rather than in terms of pre-conceived theoretical constructs—by examining the proximal process outcomes of relational dynamics, which will then tell us something about substantive outcomes and what can be done to better achieve these.

3 Whereas a preceding BPT started with a team of seven public professionals, the public agencies initially did not provide any members for the BPT Landlust. However, the team leader quickly recruited three key residents, received support from an administrative worker, policy maker, and consultant, and collaborated with a number of public professionals active in the area.

4 The following public agencies were involved in Landlust: Neighborhood Department (City District), Planning Department (City District), Safety Unit (City District), Police, social work, outreach and youth work, youth care, housing corporation, and the surveillance team.

5 Some names have been changed for privacy reasons.

6 Ron is a public professional in his forties working for the Safety Unit of the City District. While his experience as Youth and Safety Coordinator and impressive knowledge of the criminal justice system made him an ideal person to address the anti-social behavior problem, his laidback, hands-on, and savvy way of working also rendered him adept for starting up the BPT in Landlust.

7 This further complicated his relationship with colleagues like Margreet or the planners leading the participatory process, who felt like Ron betrayed them in favor of some rebellious and offensive residents.

8 The shared view ‘a neighborhood with thriving social control and contacts’ was translated in the following goals (and activities): improve contacts with and between social networks (organize a joint activity for children and elderly); reach invisible groups (open a ‘giveaway shop’ for the needy); turn the main square into a meeting place for residents (organize activities on the square); restore norms of social control and behavior on the square (facilitate better surveillance and talking to each other); use the renovation of the square to fit the needs of all residents (mediate in the participatory process); convey positive rules (make people aware of what is and is not tolerated rather than placing signs); turn the youth center into a community center (reopen the center and organize fitting activities).

9 ‘the situation is bad. We always believed that the situation was out of our control, something we had to accept but could not influence. Now, however, let me show you that in fact we can control things’ (Stone, 2002, p. 142)

10 The new team members worked for the Neighborhood Department, Police, social work agency, and youth work agency. They joined Ron and the three residents already in the team with the social walks, targeting the group of troublesome youngsters, mediating in neighborly disputes, and organizing activities in the youth center and on the square.

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