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a case of Regional Governance Networks

Fotel, Trine

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## **Interactive and Pragmatic Methodologies in Public Management: a case of Regional Governance Networks**

\*\*\* DRAFT PAPER \*\*\*

**Trine Fotel  
Roskilde University,  
Centre for Democratic Network Governance  
Department for Society and Globalisation  
4000 Roskilde, Denmark**

**Mail: *trinen@ruc.dk***

International Research Society for Public Management (IRSPM)  
University of Berne, Centre of Competence for Public Management

## **1) Public management, governance networks and interactive research methods**

Interactivity between the researcher and 'the field' (understood as the relational web of institutions and organisations, including persons such as public managers, politicians and other stakeholders) is becoming a key word in contemporary discussions of methodology in parts of the social sciences. While the methodologies of public management have only recently begun to emphasise more experimental methods (McLaughlin et al., 2002), this paper argues that an interactive approach has much to offer research on contemporary public management.

The reason why the focus on interactivity and all the multiple ways that academic knowledge production is influenced by 'real' world dynamics attracts increased theoretical and methodological attention is partly related to the general discourse of the 'new mode of knowledge production', going from Mode 1 to Mode 2. It is thus related to the general shift in university to become, amongst multiple other things, more reliant on external funding (Gibbons et al., 1994). This economic dimension of interactivity is not elaborated in the paper.

The paper begins with a short review of different interactive positions within social science and contemporary public management research. The various consequences ascribed to the interaction between the researcher and the field is discussed by focussing on Constructivism/Interpretivism; Symbolic Interactionism and the New Pragmatism. These three positions are discussed against the poles of a continuum constituted in the one end by traditional formal abstract theorizing and in the other end by Action Research. A position of 'interpretive, pragmatic interactionism' is defined. It is argued that such a 'merged' position is fruitful for an interactive research design in which the researcher wants both the merits of deliberate interaction, and the autonomy to write up analyses, develop theory and disseminate results.

The paper then proceeds to drawing out experiences from an interactive case-study of regional governance networks in Denmark. The focus is on observations, seminars and informal ways of interaction, and the key point is, that methods and methodologies themselves are formed in interaction with stakeholders in the field. Furthermore, interactively researching governance networks within the field of regional development policies interestingly spurred the incipient formation of a new governance network, which included stakeholders from both the university and the region, who were all interested in the alignment of theory and practice.

The paper concludes with arguing that while research in general profit from interactive methodologies, these must also be uniquely combined in order to fit each individual research project. General 'Pros' and 'Cons' of an interactive research design are outlined and a final point concerning how respondents benefit from interactive research is raised. The aim of the philosophy of new pragmatism is to make theory 'work' to the benefit of practitioners and professionals, but so far, there has been minimal research aiming specifically at investigating how public managers actually benefits from participating in interactive research processes.

## 2. A continuum of interactive research methodologies

Interactive research acknowledges that decisive elements in the production of knowledge stems from the interaction between the researcher and the field. Interaction is not only between the researcher and the researched as in emphasized in e.g. interview research (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), but includes both the specific human respondents, the transient relations and processes as well as the wider ecology of the field. However, there are great differences in the ways that different research methodologies emphasise the interaction between the researcher and the field. Interaction may be tied to social constructivism and the interpretive approach (Kensen and Tops, 2004; Bevir and Rhodes, 2005), to symbolic interactionism (Hajer, 2005; 2006), to the actor-network theory in which interaction with material artefacts is included (Law, 2004), or to the new pragmatism (Bogason, 2000; Ansell, 2007; Shields, 1996) and to action research (Nielsen and Svensson, 2006; Reason and Bradbury, 2006).

The interactive approach builds on the notion that the production of knowledge benefits not only the researcher, but also society (Reinhardt 1979 in Kensen, 2007). Interactivity is on the contemporary social science agenda as a part of the move to methodological complexity (Law, 2004). All methods can, in principle, be part of an interactive approach and the methods themselves are formed by the ontologies and epistemologies present in the field with which the researcher interacts (Staunæs and Søndergaard, 2005).

However, the public management discipline and the political sciences in general, are still, on the main, marked by the ideal of a neutral investigation based on abstract theory and 'innovations and applications in advanced methodology and measurement techniques related to performance are sorely needed' (Brudney et al., 2000:8). One explanation of the seeming lack of methodological creativity might be that the public management discipline often aims strictly for increasing the steering capacity of the public sector. As a forthcoming anthology explains, the methods applied have tried to 'eliminate unpredictability through increased reliance on measurable performance objectives, improved financial and human resource management techniques, decentralisation of authority and accountability and resolving principal-agent behaviour pathologies.' (Rhodes et al., 2010).

My argument in this paper is following on from this critique. I argue that interactive methods are excellent in producing what Rhicard Rorty calls 'edification' – the art of reinterpreting 'our familiar surroundings' and finding 'new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking' (1980:360) about, in this case, public management. With the interactive hermeneutic help of public managers themselves, it is possible to produce nuanced understandings of the relations and processes constituting the contemporary public sector. I unfold this argument by illustrating some of the promises and pitfalls in 'the interpretive, pragmatic approach'. The positioning of this methodology is illustrated by a continuum, which begins with almost no acknowledgement of interaction between the researcher and the field, and ends with a specific ambition of the researcher to initiate processes of change in the field.

Figure 1: A Continuum of interactive knowledge productions.

No consequences or acknowledgement of interaction btw. researcher and field	Knowledge is constructed. The researcher has a privileged autonomy in interpreting and producing results.	Knowledge is constructed; emphasis on interactions <i>in</i> the field. The researcher has a privileged autonomy in interpreting and producing results.	Knowledge produced in interaction between researcher and the field, aiming for 'what is true is what works.'	Researcher interacts with the participants in the field in order to initiate social change. No privileged role ascribed to the researcher.
Objective 'value free' positivist theory	Constructivist/ Interpretive	Symbolic Interactionism	The new Pragmatism	Action Research

*The continuum is inspired from Bogason's discussion in the paper 'The New Pragmatism and Practice Research' (2006).*

The first part the continuum is the (admittedly a bit simplified) figure of the positivist methodologies, which aim at abstract theoretical generalizations, with no acknowledgement of the interaction between the researcher and the field. The next part of the continuum is the constructivist/interpretive position, in which the social interaction between researcher and respondents actively constructs the knowledge and the theories produced. The social constructivism of Pierre Bourdieu and the American constructivism of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann represent this position. Erving Goffman's dramaturgy is a prominent example of the Symbolic Interactionist position. This position stresses the 'micro' interaction amongst persons in the field it self, but otherwise it resembles constructivism/interpretivism. Further along the continuum is the position of the new pragmatism, where research is validated in practical circumstantial settings. The pragmatist philosophy has influenced the contemporary social sciences, with a focus on argumentations and deliberation in planning (Healey, 2009) and postmodern conditions for public administration (Bogason, 2001). Action research is placed in the far right end of the continuum. It works with a specific agenda of initiating social change and reform practice. As it has often positioned itself on the margins of conventional academia, it will not be elaborated much in this paper.

The following sections discuss especially the interpretive position and symbolic interactionism in order to afterwards relate these to the new pragmatism. During this endeavour I define a middle methodological position named 'interpretive pragmatic approach'.

Beginning with the interpretive constructivist perspective on the interaction between the researcher and the field, Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes contribution 'Governance Stories' (2006) is a unique example. With the use of ethnographic and anthropological theory, Bevir and Rhodes have made long observations in the British Government Departments, with the aim to explore the roles of ministers and civil servants, especially the permanent secretaries and the core executive. Bevir and Rhodes argue that an interpretive interpretation of the beliefs and traditions shaping everyday life in the British Government Departments serves as a valuable supplement to traditionally mainstream assumptions produced by 'objective' methods. Rather, Bevir and Rhodes argue that observations and the use of diaries (both for themselves but also of the respondents) are valuable methodological tools for opening up the black box of everyday life in the Departments.

With this approach Bevir and Rhodes deconstructs traditional notions and official accounts of the British National Departments and they illustrate dimensions and processes hitherto silenced. With 'thick descriptions' formal institutions are 'decentred' and it is illustrated how beliefs and practices are not just read off from structure, but rather creating their own histories, traditions and processes. This idiographic ethnographic approach, Rhodes later argues, does not preclude generalizations, because 'an interpretive approach can produce generalizations when to generalize means to diagnose and make informed conjecture.' (2005:20)

In general Bevir and Rhodes approach also serves as an argument for the value of observations. The use of observation is rare in political science (Schöne, 1993) and when used, it has primarily been in limited periods of time, such as the observation of specific meetings (Sørensen & Damgaard, 2007; Bevir and Rhodes, 2006). This is in contrast to the social sciences where the Chicagoschool (with e.g. W.F. Whyte's *Street Corner Society*, 1943) has paved the way for a tradition of longer periods of participating observation.

Moving further along the continuum to the position of symbolic interactionism, the Dutch political scientist Maarten Hajer can be used as a good example. Hajer (2005; 2006) also makes deliberate use of observations, this time with a dramaturgical focus. Erving Goffmans theories and approach is used to inform analyses of political processes, both in relation to participatory agendas and in relation to policy formulation in the EU. The dramaturgical framework works well to illustrate how social interaction between people in the field is decisive to policy formations. Politics is seen as taking place on a stage, in which 'settings' such as the material artefacts, and 'scriptings' such as the rules setting the interactions amongst the players – all influence the performance and the relations of power amongst the participants. The approach is sensitive to dimensions of time and space; it is of analytical important how each individual stage, setting and scripting is positioned in time and space. Consequently, the approach is very suitable to analysis based on observations, through which the researcher is able to investigate the actual time-spatial settings in which e.g. public managers perform. By observing the performance of politicians and public managers the researcher sense those elements, meanings and dynamics that are positioned at the front-stage and the back-stage respectively. The relation between 'front' and 'back'-stage is of decisive importance to a relational analysis of the field.

The case-study which I describe later in this paper illustrates how observations with the interpretive and dramaturgical approach can also be used for producing an understanding of the non-present others, i.e. those actors who are not present on the scene, but nevertheless constituting many of the rules on the scene/stage. Performance on stage is an important political tool, as Rhodes states 'Statecraft is also stagecraft' (Rhodes, 2005:21). However, I find that dramaturgical observations should be used with the methodological reservation that public managers and politicians are part of multiple scenes and act on very different stages, each constituted by different relations and 'non-present-others'. Hence, the observations made in the study reported below were conducted in a plurality of settings (such as formal and informal meetings, conferences and so forth) in order to produce a nuanced insight into the different relational construction of public managers and politicians.

The philosophical position of the new pragmatism is more radical in the importance ascribed to how the interaction between the researcher and the field influence the knowledge produced and the ways that knowledge can be validated. One of the main emphasises in the new pragmatism is, a bit crudely stated, that 'what is true is what works.' (Benton and Craib, 2001:86). This quest for validating research in the circumstantial practical contexts of which the research is part, is of course only one part of the multifaceted pragmatic philosophy, to which this paper will not do justice. Rather I draw out the implications ascribed by the new pragmatist philosophy to the process of an interactive alignment of researcher and field.

The new pragmatism evolves from a re-reading of the 'old' pragmatist philosophy of especially Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey, who all wrote in America at the turn of the last century (McCaslin, 2007). Dewey and James were influenced by evolutionary theories and they stressed the ways that learning and knowledge production is made by a commitment to practices and processes. Dewey used this position in arguing for a reform of the American educational systems (Shields, 1996; Bogason, 2006:5). Used as a method of inquiry pragmatism stress that theory and practice should be joined and that we learn by experience (Shields, 1996). Truth is verified in practice, in the words of James, 1907: 'The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events'. (cited in Shields, 1996:397). The philosophy of pragmatism illustrates how truth and knowledge is anti-representational. The relation between epistemology and ontology is relative and truth is created in dialogue and practical settings (McCaslin, 2007:672).

The period around 2WW were marked by functionalist and rationalist attempts to control, measure and build up public bureaucracies and following the shortcoming of Marxism, the pragmatist ideas were taken up by American scholars such as Richard Rorty (Bogason, 2006). Rorty argued that philosophy must leave the correspondence criteria and its endeavour of being an objective 'mirror of nature'. Rather philosophy and theorizing in general ought to be based on practical engagement and theory should find its validation in a resonance of the situated practices studied (1980). This leads not to relativism or to a situation that 'anything goes' because, just as in the times of Dewey, contemporary pragmatism of authors such as Rorty (1982) is linked to wider democratic ideals.

The pragmatic approach to knowledge production and truth influenced many of the broader 'turns' in the social sciences during the 1980s. The focus on communications, the power of language and epistemological constructions marked, amongst others, 'the linguistic turn', 'the argumentative turn', 'the interpretive turn' (as discussed above) and 'the communicative turn' (Bogason, 2006). The pragmatic position has had a rather strong influence on contemporary planning theory (Healey, 2009), while less used in contemporary public administration (Bogason, 2001) and, to my knowledge, almost not used in public management (McLaughlin et al., 2002; Brudney et al., 2000).

The final position included in this short review is the one of Action Research. It is included

primarily to state the difference to pragmatism. Contrary to the new pragmatism, which is a philosophy of the construction of knowledge and truth, action research is a broad label for 'research practice with a social change agenda' (Greenwood and Levin, 2007:4). The interaction between the researcher and the field, aims at reforming practice by liberating human potentials, through processes such as empowerment, utopia, social learning and varies strategies for human inquiry (Svensson and Nielsen, 2006; Reason and Bradbury, 2007). While action research has often been critical to traditional academic aims of theory development, action researchers has lately has moved closer to the traditional academic curricula and begun to position themselves as a part of conventional academia (Svensson and Nielsen, 2006:4; Greenwood and Levin, 2007).

The variations of interaction between the researcher and the field outlined above, all have something to offer an interactive research agenda. This paper argues that especially the position of 'interpretive, pragmatic interaction', which merges the middle part of the continuum, is interesting. Such a merged position includes, on the one hand, the acknowledgement of interpretations, thick descriptions and context sensitivity by the use of e.g. constructivist and ethnographic methods. On the other hand it is also acknowledge that a pragmatic and deliberative interaction and inclusion of participants in theory development (such as hypotheses testing) is qualifying the research process. Hence, the 'interpretive, pragmatic approach' deliberately uses interaction as an active part of the research process following the lines of the new pragmatism, while it also use the interpretive tradition of retaining the researchers autonomy to write up analyses and disseminate results.

The new pragmatism leaves it rather open as to how the statement 'what is true is what works' (Benton and Craib, 2001:86) should be used in practice. To some, such as the political scientist Chris Ansell, the pragmatic encouragement for a close alignment of meaning and action opens for an interactive research agenda defined as: '...a style of activity where researchers, funding agencies and 'user groups' interact throughout the entire research process, including the definition of the research agenda, project selection, project execution and the application of research insights' (Ansell, 2007:3000).

My ambition with the 'interpretive pragmatic position' is not as radical as the one reported by Ansell. The case-study outlined in the next section, rather aimed for interaction during the first and middle phases of the research process. Interaction with public managers was used to develop perspectives and reflections and the research team had the autonomy to afterwards write up analyses develop theories and disseminate the research results. The results of such an interactive process are not 'measurable performance objectives' (Rhodes et al., 2010), but rather new ways of understanding the complex world of which many public managers are part. The argument made is such new understandings are an alternative way of improving the effectiveness of contemporary public sector service provision.

The methodological position of the 'interpretive, pragmatic approach' is elaborated in the following by referring to a study of regional governance networks in Denmark. This leads on to a general outline of the pros and cons related to interactive research in public management.



### **3. The delicate balance of interactive involvement – a case of regional governance networks in Denmark**

The study of regional governance networks in the Danish Zealand Region was based on the interpretive pragmatic approach to interaction. Key stakeholders were involved throughout the research process in order to qualify the discussions of research questions, hypotheses and results. The research set out to explore how the new regions fared in the aftermath of the Danish Local Government Reform by 1/1-2007. The Local Government Reform led to a very radical transformation the Danish public sector; municipalities were amalgamated and 14 counties replaced by five regions. The authorities and tasks of the three-tier system were also completely reorganized and while the municipalities came out as stronger professional entities, the regions were left with very few tasks. The main regional task is first and foremost a transformation of the health care sector and then follows the drawing out of visionary regional development plans (Blom Hansen, 2006; Lov om regioner, 2005).

The regional politicians generally feel disempowered. They have no authority to collect taxes and the regional council is large but top-heavy managed by a small executive committee. Furthermore, the regional politicians do not have the same possibility as previously to build up a personal political expertise, because they are only allowed to work in political thematic 'Foras' for one year at a time. Adding all these things together, a wide disempowerment and discouragement marks the regional politicians in all the Danish Regions (Monday Morning, 2009). Continuing problems with restructuring the health care sector has further led to ongoing discussions amongst national politicians and the national government for demolishing the regions and the regions seem to have been enrolled in a 'doomed to failure' discourse already from the beginning.

This rather bleak situation was part of the background motivation for the research team to focus on an exploration of the processes and the transformations through which the regional public administrators and the regional politicians coped with their 'rite de passage' of becoming a new formal, and maybe strong, region.

The research team began late 2006 and ended early 2010<sup>1</sup>. Stakeholders from the Zealand Region has been involved as discussion partners from the beginning, both in the initial interviews and in a smaller appointed group, which were to follow the research process. The team of 8 researchers focussed on the policy areas of health care, regional development, growth and international policies, and on the relations between administrators and politicians. The theoretical framework guiding the research was the strong body of literature on governance networks (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007; Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan, 1997). A governance network can be defined as a relatively stable articulation of interdependent, but operationally autonomous actors, who interact through negotiations, which take place within a regulative, normative, cognitive and imaginary framework. A governance network must further be self-regulating within limits set by external

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<sup>1</sup> A total of 60 interviews were made, excluding all the informal talks and numerous observations were made (about 50 formal observations of meetings, conferences etc.).

agencies and it should contribute to the production of public purpose (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007:9).

The study reported in this paper, especially focused on the role of public managers and politicians participating in governance networks who formulated interregional policies on behalf of the Zealand Region. The research question was framed as: in which ways does do the political Forum for Globalization contribute to the formulation of interregional policies and are elements of the new regionalism present in the policies? On behalf of the above description of the regions being doomed to failure, the case was viewed as a 'most likely case' that the formulation of strong proactive interregional policies with a global reach would fail. And, turning the thesis around, 'a least likely case' that the formulation of interregional policies marked by the new regionalism would succeed. Parameters used to measure the success or failure of the interregional policies was derived from international research on the new regionalism. In this rather interdisciplinary body of literature, successful regions are assumed to be strong international, even global actors, who involves a plurality of public and private partners in the political processes and whose policies cross formal borders, stretching form local to global scales (Perkmann and Sum, 2002; Halkier et al., 2008; Schultz et al., 2001).

In answering the research question, various data were gathered with a wide repertoire of methods, including interviews, observations a survey and document studies. The following discussion focuses on outlining the interactive production of knowledge related to especially the use of observations, interactive seminar and informal talks. The reason for highlighting especially these three types of interactive methods, and not e.g. interviews, is that they are rarely included in public management methodology textbooks (McLaughlin et al., 2002; Brudney et al., 2000).

*Observations – Example one:* Multiple activities concerning the formulation of interregional policies were observed, including meetings in the Regional Council, meetings in the Growth Forum, conferences concerning regional planning and most importantly, meetings in the political Fora for Globalization. The observational approach was based on the assumption that observation is never a neutral endeavour; the researcher is not 'a fly on the wall' not even when sitting quietly in a back corner of the room. The notion of *participating* observation emphasise the active presence of the researcher and the ways that this presence co-produces the interaction observed (Warming, 2006). An example may illustrate this point: At several meetings in which I sat in the back-corner of the room, some of the people gathered at the meeting made implicit references to me and the institution (RU, Roskilde University) that I represented. This was done in way of nodding and small statements during their meetings like 'Now that we have one from RU today, I would like to state that...' or 'What do you say, coming from RU?' My presence influenced the interactions and the ways that people at the meetings talked. I, and the institution I represented, was used as a point of reference point which created situations resembling Rod Rhodes reflections on his observations in the British Departments: 'You are sucked into events, even if it is only casual badinage to ease tension' (Rhodes, 2005:20).

The observations were excellent in producing an insight-knowledge of the institutional dynamics in

the governance networks, including the construction of present actors as well as those outside the network. Such relational constructions are important in relation to internal and external processes of exclusion (Hajer, 2005; 2006), and the talks about 'non-present others' was an excellent way of quickly grasping the relational construction of a plurality of actors.

Finally, the observations were good at producing knowledge about the specific dynamics in developing the interregional policies. By way of example, a meeting in the Fora for Globalization were observed in the beginning of 2007, that is, at a time when the politicians were still sorting out their scope of action. At this meeting (as in others) an administrator were a very active part of setting the schedule and providing information. He presented various maps of the geographical scales of which the Zealand region were part and he presented long lists of the various organizations and representations in which the Zealand region had a formal seat. This administrative presentation spurred a fierce discussion amongst the politicians. Some meant that they had to be present in all these organisational and representational settings, in order to brand the Zealand Region. Others meant that they had to make a strategy for prioritizing their attendance. The meeting illustrated an administrative control of interregional policies and networks, which also characterized many other meetings in the forum. The administrative control of interregional policies is further confirmed by previous research, and mainly ascribed to the fact that interregional policies are often part of the EU-structural funds system (Hall, 2005). However, the year of 2007 became a period in which the politicians increasingly managed and politicized the interregional policy field. During the period elements of the new regionalism were introduced, amongst other things, the multiplicity in scales and actors involved in formulating and carrying out the interregional policies. The politicians in the Fora for Globalization acted as 'policy entrepreneurs' (Kingdon, 2003), who introduced new regionalist dynamics by using the discursive policy window that the creation of political-administrative regions in Denmark had created.

*Interactive seminars – Example Two:* By surprise, the research came to contain several interactive seminars. The seminars was not planned by us as researchers beforehand, they simply popped up because stakeholders at both municipal, regional and national level invited us to share and discuss with them, the hypotheses and the results we had reached so far. The value of these interactive seminars appeared to us during the process. Because we didn't organize the seminars, it was an excellent way for us to meet new stakeholders, e.g. public managers from other regions.

An example may illustrate the point. During the fall of 2007 I was invited to present our preliminary hypotheses and results concerning the interregional policy analysis. Public managers from the other Danish regions were present and, as the discussions went on, I realized how excellent a forum it was to validate my assumptions and to gather new material. The public managers described the situation in each of their specific regions and during their internal disagreements it was interesting to witness the logic of appropriateness and the local constructions of 'truth'. The seminars functioned as a forum for both validation and generalization. Apart from validating the knowledge produced in the perspectives of the present public managers, it also opened a possibility to sense the particularities of each region and the generally applicable results.

The ways that these interactive seminars popped up is just one example of the unpredictability in interactive research and it illustrates that the methods used are not always defined beforehand, but decided and developed during the process.

*Informal Dialogues – Example Three:* Throughout the research process multiple informal dialogues were held with public managers, politicians and other stakeholders. These dialogues took place in many very different settings, such as before and after formal meetings, in the coffee breaks at conferences and in the telephone. Informal dialogue between researchers and public managers is nothing new, but the active use of them to qualify the research process and to acknowledge them as a deliberative and valid method, is a new methodological tool-kit.

One informal dialogue should be highlighted here. It took place at a seminar concerning interregional policies in the Danish regions and various municipal, regional and national stakeholders were present. In one of the breaks I happened to talk with a regional public manager about the regional scope of action in the international policy field. Two municipal public managers joined us and the talk went on about the relations between municipalities and regions. The municipal public managers explained how the municipalities had been forced to make clearer strategies in their inter-municipal 'friend-ship' policies, because the amalgamations following the Local Government Reform had produced a vast international complexity. Gossip and small stories about what this and that municipality had done, as well as the how the municipalities would in fact like the regions to perform more actively in the field of interregional policymaking were discussed, and I had the chance to test hypotheses with both municipal and regional public managers. Thus we discussed issues concerning these like: 'the only chance for the regions to survive would be to use their international policy window' and 'inter-regional friendship-networks are not political' as well as 'there are many municipalities who do not make their international delegation to the region clear'.

These multiple informal dialogues served as a continuing possibility for hermeneutic dialogue. By a deliberate inclusion of the arguments and perspectives of the individual public manager, the conversation served as 'inquiring conversation', which continuously developed 'wholes' and 'parts' in an interpretive process (Rorty, 1980; Healey, 2009). The perspective of the public manager (the politicians or other stakeholders) were not a priori representing the 'part', that is the practical particularistic dimension in the hermeneutic interpretative practice; the public managers could just as well bring forward hypotheses and interpretations of the 'wholes'. This interactive process produced new and interesting hypotheses and 'best guesses' of the problematic discussed. As researchers, we brought these dialogues back home to the university desk to explore further. Rorty describes this type of conversation and the development of holistic arguments arriving at a 'best guess', as a sufficient basis for philosophy which importantly, sees 'human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately (Rorty, 1980:378; Healey 2009: 283).

### ***What about theory and did the interactive process 'work'?***

All these interactive ways of developing and validating hypotheses, gathering data and generalizing results, added up to a very concise interpretation of the regional governance networks. The time-consuming process also produced a lot of data based on numerous talks and observations, which at first sight, concerned issues not relevant for the specific study of interregional policies. Later on, however, most of the data were included in one way or the other, adding to a condensed and 'edified' understanding of the problem at hand.

Following the interpretive and pragmatic methodologies, theory and theoretical concepts are relative to the specific contexts and the circumstantial settings in which the research was carried out. However, it is possible to draw out some more general lessons from the study, which might prove valuable to understanding the dynamics in other top-down implemented administrative regions.

First of all, the popular notion that the regions are doomed to failure and ought to be demolished, needs to be modified. The regional public managers and politicians cope everyday with the structures that the local government reform has created. In doing this they have succeeded, to some degree, in formulating interregional policies marked by the new regionalism. The introduction of plural scales from the local to the global as well as the increase in the public and private actors involved in the interregional policies illustrates this and it may contribute to strengthening the regions justification of their continuing existence.

However the process is not rosy. The relations between key actors in the region are marked by fierce competition and antagonism. This is especially characterizing the relationship between the region and the municipalities within the region, but the regional organization also contains many internal barriers between the different policy sectors. Regional public managers must cooperate with the municipalities in order to develop the regional development plan, including the interregional policies. However, they continuously fight the others policy portfolio and agendas in order to be stronger and reclaim their authorities. The concept of 'competitive cooperation' describes this situation and it contributes to the existing literature on institutional dynamics of governance networks (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007). Depending on the context, 'competitive cooperation' can either be a fruitful stimulus or block the effectiveness of a policy network. In this context it is concluded that the fierce competition on the inward turf, that is the formal regional polity, hinders the formulation of proactive new regionalist strategies and connectivities with a global reach.

Supplementing the above results (and others reported in Sørensen et al., 2010), the process of interpretive pragmatic dialogue produced another interesting result: A new governance network was slowly formed with the participation of university-based and region-based stakeholders. As the public managers and other regional stakeholders were eager to reflect on their new situation following the Local Government Reform, they held on to the contact with the university in both personal and institutional ways. The general discourse of learning regions and the fact that our

university was framed as 'the University of the Zealand Region' probably helped the institutionalization of the governance network between our university and the regional stakeholders. Beside our research project there were several other cooperative initiatives and the result was a stable negotiated interaction with the aim of focussing on a wide variety of regional public policy problems.

The formation of such a new governance network is of course positive, as there are multiple merits of knowing each other, developing trust and laying out the foundations for future cooperation. However, in a longer perspective, the network between university and regional stakeholders may also run the risk of blocking innovations and the production of research results not favourable to the regional stakeholders. Thus the interdependencies might produce a consensus in order to avoid conflict. However, the risk of not moving beyond the lowest common denominator is a general risk in governance networks and it also points towards the formulation of some general pros and cons in interactive research designs.

#### **4. General PROS and CONS of interactive research**

The above reported study illustrates a rather positive interactive research experience in which the interaction between researchers and public managers, regional politicians and other key stakeholders went without any conflicts. Even with such a positive bias, the study leads on to the formulation of some general 'pros' and 'cons' related to interactive research. Following the outline of pros and cons it is discussed whether interactive research processes are always worth the while and suitable to answer all sorts of research questions.

##### **Pros**

- Thick descriptions enabled by the researcher being in the field: By being present the researcher is very close too, and also part off, the various situated practices in the field. During the process the researcher interpret 'bottom-up' what it means to be e.g. a public manager in a regional administration.
- Hermeneutic interpretation in close interaction with public managers: The process of validation and theoretical development in the hermeneutic circle is done with the deliberate participation of public managers.
- Embodied knowledge of the central positions in the field: Following the theories of Bourdieu (1999), the researcher gets the possibility of gathering an embodied knowledge of the structuring relations, the construction of positions and the capital formations forming the habitus of the public managers.
- Insight information on the institutional dynamics of governance networks: Participating observation in various governance networks helps the researcher produce 'inside' data on the institutional dynamics of governance networks. From such an inside position the researcher also learns about the relational constructions of the 'non-present others'. This relational knowledge of how governance networks are formed is an important contribution

to the literature on governance networks (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007).

- A close look at the dramaturgy of policy making: The researcher has the possibility of being present when politics is performed 'on stage' (e.g. at meetings) and get a hint on what is presented as front- and backstage of the governance network.
- Real-time research: As research is done in interaction with existing processes, it opens up for 'real-time experiments' rather than post hoc explanations given in e.g. interviews (Huxham, 2002).
- Interactive methodological bricolage: The research design is adjusted along the way and the methods are combined in new ways. Such an iterative design (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) is flexible and suitable to interactive studies of processes.
- The chance of producing better researcher while at the same time, contributing to the perspectives of the public managers: Interactive research opens for the possibility of producing knowledge 'that works' because it is reflected and developed in interaction with the perspectives of stakeholders in the field. It must be able to avoid advocacy research because a 'fidelity to an understanding of the problem itself' 'should guide both the researcher and the practitioner' (Ansell, 2007:310).

Each individual interactive research agenda will probably produce more or other pros than the ones listed above. Depending on the context, some of the 'pros' can also be switched and appear as cons.

### **Cons**

- Immensely time-consuming: Especially observations can be immensely time-consuming and they can, at first sight, produce data, which seems 'irrelevant' to the specific research question. Because observational data is often tacit and embodied in the researcher, most of the time used on observations, comes back as value added understandings when one is doing the analysis. Furthermore, an interactive study need not contain multiple observations; it can just as well be based on interviews and informal discussions, which are often less time-consuming.
- Unpredictable: Interactive research processes are often unpredictable to both the researcher and the participants. As knowledge and methodologies is produced in interaction, neither part knows where the story ends.
- Limits to the consistency of the research question: When the object of study is continuously changing and multiple interactive perspectives are brought into the process, the research question may transform and at worst, frustratingly loose its validity. It is important, as Chris Ansell writes, that even when researcher and practitioner are aligned through a common definition of the research question, 'the loyalty of the researcher should be with the problem rather than to the practitioners.' (2007:310).
- Potential consensus and/or conflicts: When the researcher is involved with the field over longer periods of time, sym- and antipathies naturally arise. In order to avoid conflict, an interactive research may run the risk of being marked by consensus and a reluctance to move beyond the lowest common denominator – both in the formulation of hypotheses

and in the results produced.

- **Twofold Loyalties:** The researcher naturally develops implicit loyalties towards certain positions and epistemologies in the field. In order to cope with this, the researcher may firstly consult as many perspectives amongst the practitioners as possible and, secondly, the local constructions of power and definitions of (Foucauldian) truth may appear during the process. The researcher has to cope with this complexity in the field, while at the same time retaining his/her loyalty to the research problem. This twofold loyalty may be problematic to combine and integrate especially when the research results are disseminated and the final 'full stop' is being placed.

Adding all these pros and cons together, there is no doubt that the interactive research process is often a valuable endeavour creating interesting results. In a contrast to a purely positivistic 'neutral' investigation, an interactive approach deliberately emphasises the contextual, bodily production of knowledge in close interaction with professionals, such as public managers and politicians. However, thinking about the time-consuming process of interactive studies, it is important to consider whether an interactive study is always worth the while? And whether the interactive methodology is a suitable research design to answer all types of research questions?

One straightforward answer is that if the researcher is inclined to the interpretive, pragmatic epistemological and ontological position, then interactive research is almost always a reasonable approach. Interactive research can be moulded with quantitative and qualitative methods and adjusted to suit almost all kinds of inquiries. Furthermore, interactive research produce alternative and 'edified' perspectives, from which generalized lessons and results can be derived. The analytical holism and the close alignment of theory and practice are suitable to analyses of the complex processes constituting contemporary public management. The public sector is continuously met with new demands, and contrary to rationalistic performance criteria and e.g. lean-processes, an interactive approach is able to shed light on alternative ways of improving the effectiveness and efficiency of public service delivery.

Another more general answer is, that interactive studies are here to stay. With the last decades move towards a plural and competitive new institutional landscape of knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994), knowledge production is commercialized. The change in the phenomenology of knowledge production from the so-called 'Mode 1' to 'Mode 2' is contributing to strengthening the interactive production of knowledge: 'Mode 2 involves the close interaction of many actors throughout the process of knowledge production and this means that knowledge production is becoming more socially accountable.' (Gibbons et al., vii). Furthermore Mode 2 research is not organized in the traditional academic 'ivory-towers' but rather in a non-hierarchical and heterogeneous mode of organization involving a plurality of actors.

Both answers, that the interactive position is an epistemological and ontological choice, and that the interactive (economic) mode of organizing research is here to stay, points towards a further integration between research and practice. Postmodernism marks some of the public administration research and this furthers an interactive approach to be benefit of both public



managers and researchers (Bogason, 2001). Furthermore, as public managers are continuously challenged with new demands for effectiveness and efficiency in the public service delivery, they may be more inclined towards reflecting and developing new perspectives in interaction with researchers.

Whether the interactive research process is used to deconstruct traditional theoretical notions or popular images of what e.g. public management is about, or whether it is used to explore certain processes, the specific methodological design is always important to reflect. Methods such as interviews, observations and interactive dialogue, just to name a few, each have their strengths and weaknesses and produce different perspectives on the research questions. It is important not to correlate the knowledge gained, or to assume that e.g. the knowledge produced by interviews is more 'fictive' than knowledge produced by observing the 'real' activities (Atkinson and Coffey, 2002).

The outline of pros and cons and the reflections on the nature of interaction in this section is a new contribution to the existing literature on methodologies of public management and political science, which, on the main, exclude issues of deliberate interactivity (McLaughlin et al., 2002; Brudney et al., 2000; Burnham et al., 2008). In conclusion, the next section further raises the intriguing question of when, and what, the public managers may gain from participating in interactive research processes.

## **5. Research is improved – but what about public management?**

This paper has argued that the combination of the New Pragmatism, the Interpretive Constructivism and the Symbolic Interactionism, produces an interactive methodological position, named 'Interpretive, Pragmatic Approach'. This position accommodates both the ambition to produce better research and theories along the interpretive/constructivist vein and, at the same time, it contributes to the reflections of practitioners and professionals along the pragmatic vein. The development of this 'Interpretive, Pragmatic approach' departed from the discussion of an interactive continuum, which began with the abstract, positivist position and ended with action research.

A case-study of regional governance networks in Denmark highlighted many of the pros and cons related to interactive research designs. Amongst 'the pros' was the possibility to develop, check and confirm hypotheses in close interaction with competent public managers throughout the research process. This hermeneutic interactivity is a sensible way of validating the production of knowledge, but it requires trust and confidence in the relation between the researcher and the professionals. If the process works, and it did in the reported case, it leads on to the production of thick descriptions and embodied knowledge.

Governance networks in the Zealand Region are marked by competitive cooperation, and the public managers and politicians involved, continuously cope with the situation. Thus, the thesis

that the regions were doomed to failure is not rejected, but it is not confirmed either. Rather, the result was that the competitive cooperation between the regions and the municipalities on the 'inward turf', that is on the formal territorial polity, hinders the proactive development of interregional policies with a global reach. The public managers and the politicians in the Zealand Region have been introduced to this result (amongst many others outlined in Sørensen et al., 2010) and they find it useful to develop their reflections further. The pragmatic ambition to make knowledge 'work' has thus been met.

However, as a reflection on public management research in general, it might be useful sometimes to ask stakeholders in the field what they think they gained from participating in a research process. A thesis might be that, in a short perspective, the stakeholders (public managers, politicians etc.) are always fond of having someone/a researcher to reflect and discuss with, but that in the longer perspective, the usefulness and the applicability of research results may be more difficult to describe. The relevance and fruitfulness of interactive research is often argued by academics (Bogason and Brans, 2008). The academic and philosophical argument is no doubt very important, and I am deeply inclined to interactive research myself. However, it could be ethical and also interesting to hear the voices of the field and present their perspectives on research processes. This is something rarely done within the social sciences, not even in research which includes more vulnerable participants such as children, who may be more exposed to 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1999; Fotel, 2007) during research processes. Public managers are of course often strong participants who know exactly what and how they want to participate in a research process. This makes collaborative and interactive research endeavours even more interesting.

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