Heads and tails: both sides of the coin: an analysis of hybrid organizations in the Dutch waste management sector
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4. Research strategy

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the strategy used in conducting my research. In section 4.2 I describe how I developed a list of sensitizing concepts for my research by studying the literature available on hybrid organizations and by participating in a research project by the Dutch Court of Audit. In section 4.3.1 I describe why I decided to design my own research using the case study approach. In section 4.3.2 I account for my choice of cases. Section 4.3.3 contains information about the methods used for data collection, and section 4.3.4 about the methods used for analysing that data. Section 4.4 addresses validity issues. And finally section 4.5 contains a short summary and a chronological overview of the steps taken during my research process.

4.2 Literature overview and pilot study

My first step after deciding in 2002 that I wanted to research hybrid organizations, was to conduct a literature review. As a point of departure, I took the two inaugural orations of In ’t Veld (1995, 1997), an advocate of hybrid organizations, and the dissertation of Simon (1989), a firm critic of mixing public and private. From there on I explored other Dutch and international literature already available on the subject by using keywords such as hybridity, hybrid organization and public-private organization to start my quest in the catalogues of scientific libraries and on the internet.

The Dutch literature I found at this point proved useful in understanding what the possible positive and negative effects of hybridity might be, but lacked a firm conceptualisation of a hybrid organization. The reason for this was that most of these texts had not so much been written to add to the scientific knowledge on hybrid organizations, but rather as contributions to the societal debate on the pros and cons of autonomizing agencies that raged in the Netherlands during the 1990s. Much of the literature from after this period still repeated the arguments of those participating in this debate without adding much new insight to them. Only during the course of my own research (from 2002 on), more Dutch literature was published that was less normative and also aimed at conceptualizing the various forms a hybrid organization might take (Algemene Rekenkamer, 2005; Brandsen et al., 2006b; Sociaal-Economische Raad, 2005, 2010; Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2004a).
My search for international literature was limited to texts from English and German speaking countries due to my limited language skills in Romanic languages. I could not find many texts that dealt with hybrid organizations in the same way as the Dutch literature I had unearthed. But I found much of the organizational sciences literature and in this field especially those works dealing with the differences between ideal-typical public and private organizations very useful for my own understanding of the dimensions on which an organization could be a hybrid (Bovaird & Löfler, 2003b; Bozeman, 1987; Christensen, Lægreid, Roness, & Røvik, 2007; Dahl & Lindblom, 1953; Lawton & Rose, 1994; Perrow, 1993; Rainey, 1997; Rainey & Chun, 2007; Wilson, 1989).

My literature overview gave me a first idea of what a hybrid organization might look like and which positive and negative effects hybridity can produce. But it also made me draw the conclusion that despite all the debate of the 1990s and afterwards our understanding of hybrid organizations still is limited and, especially in a lot of the Dutch literature on the subject, tainted by normative bias. That is why I decided not to formulate and test hypothesis based on what I had learned in the literature, but to develop a list of what Blumer (1954) calls sensitizing concepts as opposed to definitive concepts:

‘A definitive concept refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributes or fixed benchmarks. This definition, or the benchmarks, serve as a means of clearly identifying the individual instance of the class and the make-up of that instance that is covered by the concept. A sensitizing concept lacks such specification of attributes or benchmarks and consequently it does not enable the user to move directly to the instance and its relevant content. Instead, it gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look. The hundreds of our concepts – like culture, institutions, social structure, mores, and personality – are not definitive concepts but are sensitizing in nature. They lack precise reference and have no benchmarks which allow a clean-cut identification of a specific instance and of its content. Instead, they rest on a general sense of what is relevant. There can scarcely be any dispute over this characterization.’ (Blumer, 1954, p. 7)

These sensitizing concepts were ‘points of departure to form interview questions, to look at data, to listen to interviewees and to think analytically about the data.’ (Charmaz, 2005, p. 17) The list of sensitizing concepts can be found in appendix 1.

In 2004 I was fortunate to be able to test and add to my list of sensitizing concepts by participating in a research project by the Netherlands Court of Audit on the benefits and risks of public entrepreneurialism by three hybrid organizations: the Leiden University Medical Centre, the ROC Midden-Nederland, an institution for vocational education, and the Netherlands Organization for Applied Scientific Research (TNO).
While being involved in several stages of this research, I especially participated in conducting the case study at TNO (Algemene Rekenkamer, 2005).

This project gave me an invaluable insight into how hybrid organizations function in practice, especially thanks to the special privileges researchers working for the Court of Audit enjoy, as organizations are obliged to share all requested information. I learnt a lot from participating in this project and from the discussions I had with the other team members. But I also decided that for my own research on hybrid organizations I would use another approach. While the Court of Audit paid special attention to the spending of public funds, as is its assignment, I wanted to employ a broader view and also include the cultural aspects of hybridity in my study.

4.3 Case study research

4.3.1 Reasons for choosing this method

Based on my experiences with the Court of Audit’s research project, I not only added to my list of sensitizing concepts but also decided to use an exploratory case study approach as research strategy. I based this decision on the idea that the Dutch debate needed to be moved away from the ideological stalemate between advocates and adversaries of the idea of hybridity, to a discussion about how hybridity effects organizations in practice. This could, I was and am convinced, best be achieved by a small number of in-depth case studies. Employing the case study method in my research also seemed to be a good choice because of the research questions case studies can answer (which are mostly, as are my own, how questions), the fact that I as a researcher had no control over the phenomena I studied and that these were contemporary, ongoing events. According to Yin (1994), all these characteristics not only justify but also call for a case study approach.

4.3.2 Case selection

I knew from the outset of this research that I wanted to focus on hybrid organizations originating from the domain of the state and the positive and negative effects of their hybridity. But I did not yet know what kind of hybrid organizations to study as my cases. I followed a two-tier process in selecting the case studies for my research.

After discussions with my two supervisors, as well as with other academics, such as Walter Kickert, Wim Van de Donk, Christopher Pollitt and Paul ’t Hart (for a full list, see appendix 2), I opted against a cross-sectoral or even international comparison. I made this decision in the belief that the differences between sectors as well as political
settings would make a comparison between case organizations more difficult. This made it necessary to decide on a sector within which to conduct my research as a first step in the selection process.

After publishing a short description of my research plans in 2003 in the newsletter of SiOO, the inter-university centre for organizational change and leadership (at the time one of the home bases of both my supervisors), I was able to interview several professionals in diverse sectors such as waste management, health care and security (for a full list, see appendix 2). These interviews focused on the question whether hybridity played a role in the sector and what its effects were. I also interviewed several of the participants of the Netherlands School for Public Administration’s (NSOB) course on the governance of autonomized organizations to discover how they dealt with hybridity.

After careful deliberation I decided to conduct my case studies in the waste management sector. This had several reasons. Firstly, there is a rich supply of organizations: in 2006, there were 650 organizations active in the waste management sector according to SenterNovem, the (former) environmental agency of the Ministry for Economic Affairs (cf. chapter 5). Second, the organizations in this sector have a researchable scale, which makes it possible to include a whole organization and not only parts or divisions of it in my research. Third, so far hardly any research has been done on waste management organizations with a public administration focus. This is both striking as well as a pity, as there are important public values at stake in waste management (see section 5.2). Other organizations that provide public services have already been the focus of much more academic attention. It might even be argued that organizations in the education and the health sector have been overexposed to research. I argue that one of the strengths of my research is that it deals with unspoiled organizations, whose members have not yet internalised the scientific jargon of the hybridity debate as so far they had not yet had a starring role in it.

After deciding which sector to do my research in, I had to find organizations willing to participate as case studies. I started my quest for cases in 2004 by conducting several expert interviews. I interviewed the director of NVRD, the Dutch Solid Waste Association,59 the umbrella organization for all public waste management companies, and the secretary of the AOO, the Dutch Waste Market Council, a deliberative body on waste.60 These interviews had two main goals: firstly, I wanted to learn more about the

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59 ‘Koninklijke vereniging voor afval- en reinigingsmanagement’.
60 AOO stands for ‘Afval Overleg Orgaan’. The council has in the meantime been merged with SenterNovem.
waste management sector and secondly, I asked both interviewees to point me in the direction of organizations that might be interesting to include in my research as case studies. I subsequently interviewed representatives from these organizations as well as from others, to get an idea about whether they were hybrid in the way I defined it at the outset of my research, and to find out what kind of challenges they faced. I invited several organizations to participate in my research as case studies. Unfortunately some declined, as hybridity is a sensitive subject in the waste management sector, where their commercial rivals often criticize public organizations for offering their services to private companies and in other regions than their own (cf. section 5.6 on this discussion). Other organizations were deterred to participate due to the investment this demanded in time and attention.

In the end, three organizations were willing to be my case studies. The first, which I call TOM, was the waste incineration and recycling plant of a big city. The second, which I call DICK, was a company collecting waste on behalf of several smaller municipalities in the west of the Netherlands. And the third, which I call HARRY, was a waste collection and disposal company of one of the island areas of the Netherlands Antilles. These organizations were chosen not only because they were willing to cooperate (which admittedly brought an element of chance into the selection of cases) but also because they together cover all segments of the waste management market: collection, recycling and disposal. They also made it possible to compare how hybridity manifests itself and is treated in varying environments. The inclusion of the case of HARRY made it possible to compare the effects of hybridity in another cultural context, though in my opinion there are, as I will point out in chapter 8, more similarities than differences between the context my Antillean case organization operated in, compared to TOM and DICK’s context.

In each case it was the organization's managing director who granted me access to the organization and who then appointed a contact person who was to provide me with the documentation I needed and help me to organize my interviews. In each case, a formal agreement on my research was signed, including arrangements on confidentiality and how to proceed in the case of dispute. This agreement also included a research plan, specifying the amount of time needed for every step of the data collection and analysis process, as well as an overview of my sensitizing concepts as topics I was especially interested in. Together, this information formed the protocol for each of my case studies (Yin, 1994, pp. 63-73).

4.3.3 Data collection

My sensitizing concepts guided me through the data collection process at each of my three case studies but I also tried to keep an open mind to those effects of hybridity not yet covered by earlier studies. At each organization, I gathered evidence from three
sources: documentation, interviews and direct observations. Also the study of physical artefacts played a role, such as the way each organization's offices looked. How it presented itself to the outside world, told me much about how each organization perceived itself. But unlike the evidence originating from the other sources, this evidence was not collected in a systematic manner. Multiple sources of evidence were used to achieve triangulation (Yin, 1994, p. 90).

I started each case by studying the documentation provided by my contact person. This was done to develop an as complete picture as possible before conducting the interviews. This documentation included: (1) letters, memoranda and other communiqués, (2) agendas, announcements and minutes of meetings, and other written reports of events, (3) administrative documents – proposals, progress reports, and other internal documents, (4) formal studies or evaluations of the same site under study and (5) newspaper clippings and other articles appearing in the mass media.

Studying this material had the advantage, as also Yin (1994, p. 80) points out, that the evidence it presented to me was stable and thus could be reviewed repeatedly, unobtrusive as it was not created as a result of the case study, exact as it contained exact names, references and details and broad in the sense that it covered a long span of time, many events, and many settings.

Using documentation as a source of evidence also has its weaknesses (Yin, 1994, p. 80). Retrievability can be low and bias can be an issue, both in the forms of biased selectivity and reporting bias. A last weakness concerns the access to relevant material, which might be blocked. I did not get the impression that my own data collection suffered overly from any of these points. I found my contact persons willing to supply me even with confidential texts. I tried to balance possible bias issues by not only studying documents but also conducting interviews at each case organization. A second reason for this was that texts only tell a researcher so much. To establish how the individuals in each case organization interpreted its hybridity, I had to interview them.

At each case organization, I tried to interview the following people: (1) if possible all members of the board of directors, such as the chief executive, the chief financial officer, the chief information officer and the chief strategist, (2) two or more members of the organization's supervisory board, (3) the board of the organization's works council, (4) its controller, (5) its managers responsible for marketing and for PR, (6) several of its operational staff and (7) several of its external stakeholders, such as public and commercial customers and political principals. In each case a selection was made between these possible interview partners; see an overview of interviewees per case in appendix 3. I posed several questions to all interviewees but also made a selection of the questions on my list of sensitizing concepts depending on their role or function within the organization. The interviews I conducted were focused, between
1 and 1 ½ hours long and were recorded using an audio recorder. I made a summary of each interview in which I clustered the information gathered around the topics on my list of sensitizing concepts. Some striking statements I wrote down verbatim in this summary to include them as an illustration in my case study report. I then presented the summary to the interviewee in question and asked him or her to alert me on factual errors and omissions.

According to Yin (1994, p. 80), interviews as sources of evidence have several strengths. They are targeted, ie, they focus directly on the case study topic and insightful in that they provide perceived causal inferences. They have weaknesses too. Interviews can be biased due to poorly constructed questions. There can be a response bias and inaccuracies due to poor recall. Another possible weakness concerns reflexivity, when an interviewee gives the answer he or she thinks the interviewer wants to hear. I tried to prevent these weaknesses from arising in my own interviews by carefully preparing my research questions and by testing them beforehand during the Court of Audit’s research project. I tried to limit the inaccuracy due to poor recall by not relying on just one person’s memory, but speaking to several people on each topic. I am also convinced that most (if not all) interviewees did not just tell me what they think I wanted to hear, as they sometimes disagreed with my interpretations of events.

A third source of evidence I used in this study were direct observations at meetings. See appendix 3 for an overview of the meetings I attended. Yin describes direct observation as a strong source of evidence, as it covers events in real time and also their context. However, direct observations are time-consuming and costly which means that one needs to be selective in using this method. The very fact that an event is being observed may also lead to it proceeding differently. Based on costs and availability I selected which meetings to cover and tried to bear in mind that my attendance might influence how they proceeded, though I never got the impression that people behaved in a special manner or were more careful with what they were saying just because I was there too.

I had originally planned to also gather evidence by participative observation, for example by spending a day joining the crew of a waste collection lorry. This was not possible as none of my case organizations allowed me to participate in their operational processes, mostly due to work safety and liability reasons.

I included the data collected at each case organization in individual databases to increase the case studies’ reliability (cf. Yin, 1994, pp. 94-8). These databases included all the documents gathered, reports of my interviews and my case study reports.
4.3.4 Data analysis

I not only employed triangulation in the collection of data, but also in the analysis of the data I unearthed at the three organizations. I first analyzed the data collected in each case study using a strategy relying on the theoretical propositions (or sensitizing concepts) collected during my literature review and during my pilot case study with the Court of Audit (cf. section 4.2). I used pattern-matching as mode of analysis, in which I compared an empirically based pattern with a predicted one (cf. Yin, 1994, p. 106). In other words, I compared the data collected in my case studies with the propositions from the literature and the pilot case and examined their similarities and differences.

I then engaged in a process of what Yin calls explanation building (Yin, 1994, p. 110). Its goal was to analyze the case study data by building an explanation about the case, which can then serve to develop ideas for further studies on the practical effects of hybridity in and for organizations. In my case study descriptions, I tried to explain not only why my three case organizations developed into hybrids but also why and how which of the effects of hybridity as described in the literature occurred.

As a second step, I composed an individual case study report for each organization studied. These reports had a theory-building structure, as described by Yin (1994, p. 140). This means that my description and analysis of the evidence unearthed at each case study was presented in such a way, that would make it easier to use them as building blocks for constructing a theory on hybridity based on these empirical observations later on in the research process. I discussed each report with the chief executive of the respective organization.

A third and last step in the process of analyzing my data was to summarize my findings and present them to a panel of experts. This panel of experts consisted of seven directors from waste management organizations. I asked them to reflect on my observations and to tell me whether they sounded familiar to them. By doing so I also collected data on how other waste management organizations dealt with hybridity, though not on a level of detail comparable to my three individual case studies.

4.4 Validity issues

According to Yin (1994: 32-8) there are four criteria for judging the quality of a case study: (1) construct validity, (2) internal validity, (3) external validity and (4) reliability.

Construct validity refers to establishing correct operational measures for the concepts being studied. If this criterion is not met, a case study might be tainted by subjective judgements. I strived to increase construct validity in my study by employing the following three tactics: first, I always used multiple sources of data,
combining documentation, interviews and (whenever possible) observations as sources of evidence. Second, I strived to establish a chain of evidence by making it clear where the data underlying my analyses came from. A third tactic I used was to ask every interviewee to review the summary I made of our conversation and to alert me to factual errors, misinterpretations and omissions. I did the same with my draft case study reports, which I presented to the managing directors and my contact persons in every organization. They did not always agree with my interpretations and conclusions but confirmed that I had my facts right.

Internal validity refers to establishing a causal relationship, whereby certain conditions are shown to lead to other conditions as opposed to spurious relationships. I strived to achieve internal validity in my case studies by pattern-matching, ie, comparing empirically based patterns with theoretically predicted ones. I also discussed my observations and interpretations with the managing directors of my case organizations and my contact persons, as well as with a group of managing directors from other hybrid waste management companies.

External validity refers to establishing the domain to which a study's findings can be generalized. I strived to achieve external validity by opting for a multiple case study approach and by using what Yin calls a 'replication logic' (Yin, 1994: 36). This means that I compared my three cases to see on which aspects they were similar and on which they differed from each other. Producing external validity was also one of the reasons to organize the already mentioned session with the managing directors of other waste management companies. By doing so I wanted to make sure that what happened at my three case studies was not unique to them but also representative to other organizations in the same sector. An important question is of course whether the same applies to organizations in other sectors. I will address this issue again in chapter 10, by comparing my findings in the waste management sector with those in other sectors.

Reliability refers to demonstrating that the operations of a study (such as the data collection procedures) can be repeated, with the same result. I strived to achieve reliability by composing a case study protocol, which included a list of the sensitizing concepts I paid attention to in all case studies. I also developed electronic as well as analogue case study databases for my individual cases, containing copies of all the materials collected during the cause of my research.

4.5 Timeline

I described in this chapter the strategy that I followed during my research. I began my PhD project in 2002 and spent the first two years developing my research plan, making an overview of the literature already available and conducting discussions with
other academics. I also wrote several papers and first drafts of chapters during this period and developed a list of sensitizing concepts.

I was able to test my preliminary list of sensitizing concepts in 2004, when I was part of a research team of the Dutch Court of Audit, studying three hybrid organizations. This was also the time when I decided to conduct my own research at hybrid organizations in the Dutch waste management sector.

In 2004 and 2005, I conducted several interviews with professionals working in this sector. These conversations were meant to deepen my understanding of it and of the dilemmas the organizations that worked in I had to face. I also used these conversations to look for organizations willing to participate in my research as case studies.

I conducted my first two case studies in 2006 and my last in 2007. In 2008, I presented the preliminary findings of my research to a panel consisting of directors of other waste management companies and asked them to reflect on my observations and analyses.

I spent the period from November, 2008 to March, 2009 by writing first versions of all my chapters and discussing them with my supervisors. I incorporated their remarks in my chapters and delivered them the manuscript of my thesis in June, 2010.