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Communiceren en improviseren: Omgaan met dynamiek en complexiteit bij de ontwikkeling en implementatie van een gezondheidsinterventie

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Summary

This PhD thesis is a study of the nature and development of complex collaboration in terms of how the BeweegKuur evolves in the continually changing contexts of this health intervention.

The BeweegKuur is a Dutch combined lifestyle intervention designed to improve the lifestyle of people who are overweight and have diabetes. Participants are referred by their GP to a lifestyle consultant, often a GP medical assistant or physiotherapist. For one year, they coach the participant who partakes in an exercise programme plus individual and group sessions with a dietician. NISB developed and coordinated the intervention and its distribution via regional and local networks. The collaboration in these networks is the subject of this study.

The focus is on the interaction between the people in organisations with different interests, views and practices, coming from various domains of society and faced with a shared task.

Question

The central research question is as follows:

How does communication develop between the people in a partnership in which various interests, views and practices merge, who come from different domains of society and are faced with a shared task? How can we understand those processes?

The study, which highlighted different aspects of that partnership, addresses the way in which the various people involved give meaning to the collaboration and how they find a shared basis in it. How do organisations handle the complexity of the collaboration between people with different backgrounds, interests and frames of reference? What does this mean for the identity of organisations? Can collaboration be planned in a constantly changing context in which the various professionals, researchers and policymakers jointly aim to produce an effect? And how is the result obtained and assessed by those involved?

The Netherlands Institute for Sport and Physical Activity (NISB) was involved in all the studies. NISB is a national knowledge institute in the field of sport and exercise that aims to promote participation, liveability and health. The organisation focuses on groups in society that are barely active (if at all) and aspires to play a leading role in developing, safeguarding and disseminating knowledge and expertise relating to

sport and exercise. The organisation has been around for 15 years, and in this time it has repeatedly undergone crucial changes in response to changes in its environment.

The methodological premises

Practices are messy and complex and our understanding of them cannot be 'captured' in terms of simple causes and effects. Ambitions, interests and views are reflected in the many decisions and choices that people make in the given context of the collaboration. The collaboration unfolds as a process without a clear beginning or end. If we attempt to create order in these processes we run the risk of this becoming the focus, which will distract us from the actual issue.

Any understanding of reality is a consequence of the process of giving meaning in constant interaction with others and the context. Given this ambiguity and the contextual relationship, the various studies take an interpretive approach. Meanings are intertwined and situation-dependent. This calls for an intense and deep understanding of these interpretations and the resulting dynamics in the networks and their contexts. That is why a qualitative case study is a good basis for the research. The case study used many research methods that have contributed to a systematic, coherent and accurate study.

The first study provides insight into the manner in which NISB collaborates in networks intertwined in various disciplines. The study shows how the organisation, in continually changing contexts, adapts its identity to the collaboration. In the process, the organisation develops more identities to be able to be effective in more contexts. Given its fixed mission and robust way of working, NISB is able to constantly shift its identity to suit the practices and communication in the various policy areas.

The nature and development of collaboration in a network of organisations in terms of a complex problem is the subject of the second study. This concerns the steering group of the BeweegKuur. Showing how the collaboration is gradually given continuity and direction, while the context in which the partnership aims to produce an effect is constantly changing, this study also bears witness to the increasing willingness on the part of the organisations involved to accept or bridge differences and reach compromises, and demonstrates that increased social cohesion in the BeweegKuur steering group is the result of intensifying collaboration. It explains that long-term collaboration fosters respect and room for differences in the nature of involvement, position and ambition, and that outside pressure enhances social cohesion. During the early stages of the collaboration, the BeweegKuur protocol serves as the basis for discussions about ambitions and expectations in the network. During the course of the collaboration, attention shifts from the protocol to shared experiences in the partnership. These experiences lead to reconsidering and re-ordering of the issue

and how it should be tackled. The results of these discussions are incorporated into how the BeweegKuur is interpreted in the collaboration. Patterns in communication show that those involved have faith in one another. They dare to take risks and accept different ways of thinking and acting. The boundary work, the care for each other and as such the care for oneself are interwoven with and reinforced by collaborative processes.

The third study has analysed the discursive strategies in everyday conversations of the collaboration. This results in a better understanding of the nature, development and effect of interaction processes in complex collaboration. The strategic use of language in interaction gives direction and meaning to subjects, processes and relationships, and impacts the nature and development of collaboration in different contexts and situations.

The fourth study provides a deeper and more concrete understanding of the dynamic process associated with complex collaboration. The study outlines the future expectations of the regional and local network participants. A Delphi study posits developing future ideas about the implementation in a systematic, interactive manner. A shared idea is conceived in three rounds of questions, analysis, feedback and new questions. The participants receive feedback on their answers. They can put forward their position twice in relation to the points of view of the group as a whole. The construction shows that the various people involved employ divergent reference points and still manage to formulate a joint vision for implementation. The analysis of the interactions forms the basis of a practice-based theory, on the development of gradual commonality in collaboration in terms of the implementation of an intervention.

This study fits in with the complexity approach to processes in which people with different backgrounds and objectives collaborate to achieve a specific result. Considerable theoretic contributions have been written on complex collaboration processes at both a conceptual and a normative level. Compared to these, the empirical basis of the complexity approach has not yet matured much. This thesis starts from practice. Theories about complexity, networks and communication have contributed to interpreting and understanding processes in practices that have been studied in this research. The theory contributes to understanding why the processes developed the way they did.

The general conclusion based on the various sub-studies is that collaboration is a complex, messy and chaotic practice that takes place in a context of constant interruption and change: coincidence, changing circumstances, people coming and going and the associated changing forms of involvement. The collaborating actors find a footing in this process by:

1. Self-organisation
2. Developing more identities
3. Jointly developing and using rules for collaboration
4. Using alternative planning models

The studies provide additional insights. In dealing with complexity, the experiences, frames of reference and interests of those involved in the BeweegKuur become intertwined when assessing joint events. The collaboration generates multiple identities, which become interwoven over time. The reality is expressed in socially constructed meanings that are co-created by language and framing in constant interaction, thereby contributing to commonality. This commonality is encouraged by mutually reinforcing processes: the success of the collaboration, the related stories in the various contexts and the BeweegKuur that is gradually becoming a major attractor in the network and pooling the great diversity.

Practice-based formulation of theory

The ambition of joint learning from within the processes of co-created and a shared knowledge base is a promising premise in the collaboration between practice and science. Although both science and practice agree on the importance of this ambition, academic formulation of theory tends to happen far from the practical domain. The permanent interaction with and reflection on practice and the inspiration from theory have proved their value in this PhD thesis.

One aspect that warrants more attention in future research is the role that institutions play in developing and implementing interventions. In light of this PhD thesis, I view the increased interest in evidence-based interventions from the government and national knowledge institutes as a concern. Evidence-based practice or evidence-based policy are not realistic in a context of complex collaboration in which processes of co-creation rather than the implementation of 'evidence' are pivotal. As such, research into the role that these institutes and the government play in these developments would be an interesting subject for further research.