

## Strategic volunteering: exploring strategic decision-making in a voluntary organization

### *The 8th Annual Liverpool Symposium on Current Developments in Ethnographic Research in the Social and Management Sciences*

VU University Amsterdam, 28<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> August 2013

Maikel Waardenburg  
Utrecht University, School of Governance  
m.waardenburg@uu.nl

The dominant narrative in governance literature is that government is losing its hierarchical position and cannot just authoritatively steer public policy. As a result new modes of public governance arise which focus much more on network governance in which civil society organizations play an important role (Stoker, 1998). Part of this policy has also been a focus on the involvement of citizens and their organizations. Activities of these civil society organizations are expected to bring many positive results: it would revitalize the social by increasing social capital and social trust, improve public services, and make them more democratic (Trappenburg 2008, Van de Bovenkamp 2010). However, increasing the role of these organizations also stems from more instrumental objectives such as shifting responsibilities from the state to its citizens and their organizations thereby cutting back costs (Van Oorschot, 2006).

Voluntary sport clubs are increasingly requested to fulfil societal tasks formulated by government institutions. While VSCs are among the most autonomous voluntary organizations in the Netherlands in terms of public finances, there are many VSCs that are involved in the implementation of government policies. Little is known about how and why these VSCs become involved in such programs. This paper addresses how meaning-making and meaning-breaking by diverse actors influence the decision-making process in one VSC to become involved in a government funded social program. The paper draws on insights of a year-long ethnographic study currently undertaken.

Strategic decision-making has been a major topic of study in organizational development literature. Most studies have focused on decision-making in firms and public agencies. However, little attention has been given to decision-making in voluntary organizations, let alone local voluntary sport clubs. This is striking, given the societal role such organizations play in many developed societies (Edwards, 2004; Putnam, 2000). In the Netherlands specifically, sport is the largest voluntary sector. It generates increasing attention from central and local government for its role it can play in revitalizing modern social life.

Using an ethnographic approach I will explore how diverse actors in and around one voluntary sport club decide on becoming involved in a government funded social program aiming to reduce obesity among youth. Particularly, I pay attention to the politics of meaning-making and meaning-breaking by a number of actors involved – e.g. board members, volunteers, subsidized professionals, independent advisors and local government officials. The results show that external and internal professionals play a major role in pushing the voluntary club towards social activities aimed at decreasing obesity among youth. While

some instances of meaning-breaking occurred through individual board-members, these 'breaks' are quickly manipulated into meaning-making by other actors involved, especially external professionals. The meaning-making/-breaking game pushes the VSC towards involvement in the social program. The program also explicitly aims for manufacturing new relationships, encouraging voluntary organizations and other private (non-)profit organizations to collaborate in challenging such social issues as obesity. Through this new mode of public governance government is trying to revitalize the social. The question left with is how sustainable such an instrumental involvement of voluntary organizations is, when voluntary organizations are pressured into collaboration. Could it be that in the pursuit of revitalizing social relations, the very essences of the relations that government tries to encourage (trust, self-organisation and collaboration) are destroyed? The case further suggests that analysing decision-making processes in terms of meaning-making and meaning-breaking helps in understanding power relations that steer a decision-making process. It is an innovative way of looking at the concept of contested meaning (Parker, 2000).

## References

- Edwards, M., 2004, *Civil Society*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Parker, M., 2000, *Organizational culture and identity: unity and division at work*. London: Sage.
- Putnam, Robert D. (2000) *Bowling Alone. The collapse and revival of American community*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Stoker, G., 1998, Governance as theory: five propositions. *International Social Science Journal*, 50(155), 17-28.
- Trappenburg, M., 2008. 'Genoeg is genoeg. Over gezondheidszorg en democratie' [Enough is enough. About health care and democracy]. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Van de Bovenkamp H., 2010, *The Limits of Patient Power. Examining active citizenship in Dutch health care*. Dissertation, Doctorate institution: EUR, 2010
- Van Oorschot, W.J., 2006, The Dutch welfare state: Recent trends and challenges in historical perspective. *European Journal of Social Security*, 8(1), 57-76.