

Patterns in the institutionalization of process management and their implications for democratic governance

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Emerging discourses and modes of democratic governance – marked by adjectives such as participatory, interactive, deliberative, bottom-up, and networked – have accelerated the supply and demand of a specific type of expertise: process management. Process managers would have the knowledge, skills and techniques to manage non-hierarchical interactions and relations between governmental and non-governmental actors. The paper studies the development of the role and expertise of process managers in the Netherlands from the early nineties until about 2005. Their craft is a vital one, as the success and legitimacy of instances of democratic governance is often seen to hinge on their operations. As neutral outsiders regarding content, process managers should guarantee the inclusiveness, fairness and efficacy of policy making between the host of stakeholders with conflicting interests and perspectives that typically engage in complex policy projects. With the proliferation of participatory, deliberative governance, the request for good quality process management increases; also because it is unlikely that procedures and methods of democratic governance itself will become subject to direct quality control. Occasionally, this request is expressed as a need for professionalization in the field of process management.

In the more recent theories of occupational sociology, professionalization is seen as a process of interest group formation, in which people with similar work institutionalize their occupation (MacDonald, Larson). In this theoretical vein, the paper approaches the professionalization of process management as a relational endeavour, without a fixed end goal, which is only partly controlled, and involves politics and claims making. Again from the sociology of professions, three fields of professional institutionalization are distinguished: practice, knowledge and ethics. Based on a study of past, present and potential future activities of Dutch process managers, the paper maps the ways in which they shape their work practices, develop their knowledge and skills, and legitimize their role and their work.

Analysis of these data shows consistent patterning across the practical, cognitive and ethical institutionalization among process managers. Three groups can be distinguished:

- A quite well demarcated group of specialized facilitators, who clearly feel the need for professionalization and have actually created some institutions shaping the ways in which they perform, learn and control their work;
- A loosely delineated set of people who call themselves process managers, but with too little urge for professionalization to establish any shared institutions;

- A variety of process managers that is un-institutionalized to the extent that they are hardly recognizable as a group. They are genuine networkers – linking people, ideas and initiatives.

Based on this analysis, the paper distinguishes three sub-disciplines within the expertise of process management: facilitation, process management and networking. Although they are institutionalized to highly different degrees, the three do very similar work: they foster, guide, design and intervene in interactions and relations between people from organizations inside and outside government in the context of policy making. However, close examination of their work relations indicates that they work on completely different social-temporal scales. Facilitators work in sessions, process managers work on the level of processes and networkers function in networks. Each scale corresponds to a specific set of opportunities and constraints for process management. Interestingly, the division of roles and power relations between stakeholders and process managers varies per scale as well. Therefore, the paper tentatively concludes that the institutional patterning in process management corresponds to a scalar ordering of social action in networks that shapes opportunities and powers in democratic governance.