Chapter 9

Interaction Research: Joining Persons, Theories, and Practices

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On the one hand, reforming local democratic governance is a local issue, but on the other hand, it is something many West European and American cities deal with. Both practitioners and scholars are interested in learning across cities. Some practitioners are just curious and want to know how reforms differ from their own. This may shed a new light on their own practices or it may inspire them. Both instances invoke a certain kind of learning. The interest of other practitioners is more pragmatic in a direct manner. Their motto is “let’s not reinvent the wheel.” They are searching for best practices and “how to”manuals. And there are also those who wish to gather information about general trends in society. This basic “factual” knowledge may lead to democratic governance reforms that are experienced as necessary. Scholars try to help practitioners to obtain these learning goals.

In the Netherlands, learning about democratic governance reforms across cities is organized in different ways. The Ministry of Home Affairs, for instance, houses an office for the dissemination of knowledge and experience concerning urban policies. In addition, a group of sociologists (who are affiliated to universities and research/advice centers) is well known and is often cited in local white papers on neighborhood approaches to policymaking (Duyvendak 2001; Engbersen and Sprinkhuizen 1998; Fortuin, Van der Graaf, and Van Vliet 2002; Tonkens 2000). Also, a number of consultancy and/or research firms have specialized in local democratic governance reforms. Finally, there are a number of "city networks" in the Netherlands that aim at fostering learning across cities.

As part of a group of six public administration scholars at the University of Tilburg, we participate in one of these city networks. Starting out with eight cities, we now have a bond with eleven cities. This city network, called Governmental Innovations and Neighbourhood Approaches of Policy Making, came into being in 1999. A "window of opportunity" (Kingdon 1984) occurred after the presentation of research findings in the city of Utrecht (Tops, Hendriks, Knippers, Spapens, and Verduin 1998). The city of Utrecht wanted to know whether other Dutch cities had similar experiences with reforms, and asked the researchers to find out. From this day onward, the city network, as well as the research and exchange activities within it, have developed in four unexpected ways: relationally, situationally, flexibly, and directionally (aiming at meaningful experiences).

Something else we found out along the way is that the city network is based on the idea that learning, also across cities, requires a strong personal commitment by both researchers and practitioners. Those who wish to learn, and in the city network there was no clear distinction between practitioners and researchers on this point, need to care enough to make the effort. These insights correspond well with those within the new experience and transformation economy (Pine and Gilmore 1999; Noordegraaf-Eelens 2002).

In this new economy of experience and transformation, raw materials, goods, and services no longer determine the price of a product. Instead, it is the personal value of the experience that counts. Successful entrepreneurship within the experience economy means transforming the clients (and being prepared, as researchers, to also become transformed in the process). The experience rendered is more than a memory; it is a memory that carries through into daily life. As a university department which thrives for a large part on contract research, and less on research grants and student inflow, we increasingly wish to develop experiences and memories together with our clients. These experiences, we hope, will then make a difference in their personal and professional lives. The research report and its contents as such no longer exclusively define our product. Our products have changed. They have become more differentiated. Our products are conversations, workshops, excursions, presentations, leaflets, and such. Their quality and success for providing good experiences hopefully reflect how well we are doing.

As is the case in each economy, to undertake an enterprise involves taking a risk. Noordegraaf-Eelens (2002) mentions the unpredictability of experiences. Apart from being illuminating or common, experiences may also be disappointing or harmful. In addition, experiences can be difficult to materialize. This makes them difficult to transfer or to evaluate.

In this chapter, we will focus on the kind of research that has developed within the city network. We will call this type of research interaction research in order to stress its relational, pragmatic, and dynamic aspects. We have learned that it requires a number of personal, institutional, scientific, and economic conditions. In this chapter we will discuss these conditions by describing and illustrating a number of fragments of the research. Each fragment is written in such a way that theory is intertwined with practice. This style represents our way of doing research.

This chapter is structured as follows. In section two, we will report on how we organized the city network research in general and we will discuss some of the difficulties we, as a team of researchers, encountered, as well as how we dealt with these difficulties. Therefore, this section discusses in particular the institutional and economic context in which interaction research could develop. In the next section, we will describe one of the research projects as a case in point of interaction research. In section four, we will relate interaction research to other research traditions, in particular, social constructionist research, narrative research, action research, and responsive research. In the final section, we will conclude by answering the question: What is required to conduct interaction research and what are the results of interaction research?

Organizing the Study

In theory, we are aware that everyone, including scholars, justifiably may mean different things when talking about a certain subject. During a study of the Dutch policy on social renewal, for instance, it became clear that, in order to make the policy work, the different actors involved needed to define the concept of social renewal themselves. This resulted in a diversity of meanings (Kensen 1999). An example of a theoretical concept which refers to different things is the concept of discourse (Kensen 2000). Scholars refer, among other things, to the social process of dialogue (Miller 2000), a particular choice of words (Howarth 1995), or an instrument of power (Fairclough 1995) when using the concept of discourse.

In the context of the city network, however, we experienced how difficult it is to deal with diversity in an active manner. In order to make joint action possible, differences need to be made useful somehow for the task at hand. The objective, indeed, is to produce something concrete together. Scholars, on the other hand, are used to "only" responding to one another with words or any other actions. Scholars often carry out their work individually, although they are part of several communities. However, within the city network, we wanted to obtain our results collaboratively as a group of six researchers and as a network of this group of researchers and numerous local governments. How did we try to organize this, how well did we do, and what were our results? These questions will be answered below.

Getting Started

At the request of the city of Utrecht, Hendriks and Tops, assisted by their colleague, Rodney Weterings, asked their contacts in other cities whether they, like the city of Utrecht, were interested in research into their neighborhood approach to policy making. The aim of conducting parallel research on these local efforts to reform democratic governance was to create conditions for exchanging knowledge and experiences across cities. Remarkably, Tops, Hendriks, and Weterings's search resulted in interesting no less than eight cities, including Utrecht, in such parallel research. Perhaps even more remarkable was the cities' readiness to each pay 50,000 Euros (excluding tax) for a year of research. The specifics and details of which would be specified at a later stage during talks and discussions with the researchers.

Normally, clients contact a research institute because they have a research question. The surprising thing happened with the city network that researchers asked clients, and these clients were asked to enter into a contract in a situation in which they had no direct need for research and no clear view of what the research would be about. The cities were willing to participate in this risky endeavor based on their relationships with Tops, Hendriks, and/or Weterings and because their experiences with their previous research was well acclaimed. In addition, the aim of the network, that is, to learn across cities by exchanging knowledge and experiences, was both concrete and abstract enough to be endorsed by the cities. Also, learning from others and reflecting upon one's own work in the process, is seen as positive, but proves to be difficult to accomplish in practice. Apart from having to deal with the (time) pressures of daily work and routines, one also needs to have a certain state of mind, for example, being ready to question and change one's plans. Therefore, the cities believed they could use some help with this.

Tops, Hendriks, Weterings, and three other researchers of the same department (Public Administration at Tilburg University) wished to commit themselves to the research task ahead for different reasons. Some of them considered the city network as one of several sources which could provide them with interesting empirical data for discussion and publication. Other researchers expected the city network to provide them with a meaningful research environment in which they could experiment with a new societal role for the academic researcher. However, at that time, which was toward the end of 1999, there was no awareness that these different approaches to the city network existed. A number of difficulties were encountered in relation to these differences, the most important of which are mentioned below.

In order to serve eight cities simultaneously, a basic research contract was produced by Hendriks and Tops. Although important formally, it soon became clear that this basic research contract was not of much help to the (other) researchers. Accompanied by Pieter Tops, each researcher had to find his/her own way in the city assigned to him/her. In each city, it took quite some time and effort to find out who the real contract commissioner was, and whether or not this was the same person as the daily contact person. To whom should a researcher turn for a discussion on the research design? Also, as soon as the money aspect had been dealt with, attention faded. It seemed as if it was now up to the researchers to do their thing. But it was clear that they needed the help of others to give shape and contents to the research project. The project would not work if there was no one who took an interest in the study. This showed the disadvantage of the way the city network had come into being, for example, without the need for an answer to a particular research question. However, it also revealed a positive side to this, namely, its openness and therefore the space we were allowed as researchers. In section three and four we will elaborate on the complexity of developing such a qualitative, open research strategy.

The Individual Researchers as a Team

What was obviously different from the start was the scale of the research (eight cities), the reverse contract negotiations, and, as a result, an open research question. Also new was the cooperation between so many researchers: six in total. We wanted to create an inspiring environment/primary work unit in which we could share all the interesting things we had found out in our different cities. Therefore, we had a meeting every other week from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. The idea was that, if we saw each other often and long enough, we could become “a community.” Later on we discovered that the ideas regarding the meaning of “community” differed substantially.

Since we were struggling with so many things, including our relationships with our contract commissioner/contact persons and our research questions (for they should be relevant to those engaged in the local developments), not many experiences were all that exciting, or delightful, or even fun. This was especially true at the beginning, although difficulties continued to arise and at later stages too. As a group of researchers we were going through the predictable stages of group development (Anderson 2002). Instead of sharing exciting new insights, we particularly needed to talk about our struggles. Consequently, the meetings were experienced like another burden, especially by those who considered the city network as only one of the tasks to be undertaken. This did not contribute to the team spirit. At the same time, the tacit assumptions of what we were doing and what we were experiencing were important to reflect upon so that we could find out what the effects of our research were. After quite a while we realized our tacit assumptions were the following. As researchers we took part in the production of knowledge, which corresponds with the social constructionist perspective on doing research.

Nevertheless, this realization process cost considerable energy and caused frustration. Most of the stories we told, in turn, reported our difficulties. They were complicated and so it took some time to explain the situation. However, the other researchers at the meeting could not follow these stories very well because they were not involved enough. Therefore, exchanging experiences was considered as taking up too much time and hardly invited any response. Our way of dealing with this was to spend most of our time discussing practical organizational matters, such as contract and financial matters, and the building of a web site and its maintenance. In short, the research meetings were not very successful. Even so, we continued to meet at regular intervals from the fall of 1999 until the summer of 2001. From the fall of 2001 onward, we met as a group only when one of us felt the need to. Between August 2001 and June 2002, we met four times as a group.

The research group as such could not provide the individual researchers with the support they needed. This void was filled by Pieter Tops who, since the start in 1999, had managed the city network. Pieter Tops, who is a full professor, supervised four senior researchers. Ironically, he has received no credits for supervising the city network, because until now this sort of work has not been and is still not included in the academic credit system. Tops could have achieved more by supervising Ph.D. students since this is more fitting in an academic tradition.

The city network was an even more risky business for the other researchers involved. In order to become a full professor it is more sensible to play it safe, and to write as many articles as one possibly can instead of building relationships with those who engage in making policies from a neighbourhood point of view, without being sure these relationships will pay off, that is, result in research projects relevant enough to share with the academic community. Not every researcher was able (given his position) or willing to take these risks. Again, the researchers did not relate to the city network in the same manner.

Another reason for relating to the city network differently was due to the openness of the research. On the one hand, each researcher had to find their own way in the cities assigned to them. Since many unknown factors were involved, each researcher needed to rely on their own knowledge and way of working in order to make something of the research, that is, to make it work. On the other hand, because of the openness, the research also allowed each researcher to specify, to a great extent, the study undertaken upon their interests, preferences, objectives, personal knowledge, and capabilities. A researcher was not totally free to do as they pleased: the content of the project had to be negotiated with at least the contract commissioner. Despite the differences related to the openness of the research there was one common factor. We shared the knowledge and interest in the practices of local governance with all its complexity, fuzziness, dynamics, chaos, and diversity.

Notwithstanding different approaches, generalizing forces were at work. Most of the attempts to treat all researchers the same or to require the same from everyone did not lead to very good relationships. For instance, we started to work on a book together. Each researcher was supposed to write a chapter for each city where they were conducting research. However, there was a big difference in the way the researchers conducted their research. Some of these research strategies were far more time-consuming than other strategies. Still, an average time frame was set, which did not work for everyone. This was frustrating for both the researchers who finished their chapter(s) in time and for those who could not. Although we did succeed in publishing our book, our current strategy on writing about our research is to leave it to each individual researcher to produce and publish texts at an appropriate time for the researcher.

The coining of the concept of interactive research turned out to be a constructive element. The concept of interaction research was originally conceived by F. Hendriks. It became an important binding factor within which the relationships between the researchers could develop (Tops 2002). As is the case with other concepts, the concept of interaction research was interpreted differently by each researcher. Below we will describe the different meanings which resulted from practicing interaction research.

For the six researchers of the city network, interaction research means the following:

> For one individual, interaction research means to invest in personal relationships on the basis of his own inspirations and aspirations: "Authentic relationships can only develop when you put something of yourself into them."
> For another the challenge of interaction research lies more in putting theory and methodology into practice: "It is one thing to talk and write about democratic discourse theory, but it is another to do it."
> Others put more emphasis on the role of the researcher: For one this role is special because of its diversity, ranging from making observations, giving advise and following processes to writing a report or having an interview that turns out to be a "therapeutic" conversation.
> A fourth stresses the importance of being on top of policy situations in which real life interactions occur.
> For yet another, interaction research shapes an opportunity to react directly and critically, but from an involved point of view: "I also feel partly responsible for the process under study." He creates one-to-one relationships with project leaders (professionals or public administrators) in order to discuss strategies and evaluate policy actions. This training dimension is also valued by others.
> The sixth adds to this the dimension of self-reflection. This researcher wishes to make public administration reflexive but not without reflecting upon his own role as well.

Interaction research: Joining persons, theories and practices

There are similarities as well as differences in the way the researchers understand interaction research. As interaction researchers we all wish to make a contribution to the governance of a city, and we may do so by following the ongoing interaction between actors, by becoming one of the actors ourselves, or by even becoming one of the intervening actors. However, we put this into practice differently. We mix our personality, with our favorite theories and special practical skills, such as writing, organizing learning activities, and/or doing presentations. The concept of interaction research stimulates us to play with the boundaries of academic research in a creative manner. Some of us play more than others, but in our own way, each of us is looking for ways to be good academics as well as good partners in societal discussions. In the next section, we will describe how this may work out in practice and what kind of results it may invoke.

Conclusion: Managing Diversity

A concept may mean several things. This diversity of meaning can be regarded as the strength of a concept, since the concept gives those involved the freedom to attach their own meaning to a concept, so a concept literally means something to them. Simultaneously the concept binds those involved, since everyone is talking about the same, or is working with the same, concept. However, some consider this possible diversity of meaning the weakness of a concept. Rather, they want a uniform meaning in order to make it easier to communicate and to manage. Also within our group of researchers, some needed time in order to accept the diversity of meanings given to the concept of interaction research. Currently we realize, in accordance with our own publications, that we should not want to solve our differences, but that we can use our differences as a point of departure for managing on the basis of diversity. We should not aim at changing ourselves, but rather at changing the way we manage our team.

Some believe there is no city network: everyone, including the researchers, is doing their own thing. To some extent, this is indeed the case, but the question is: Why should the city network be uniform without being ambiguous? In fact, we may conclude that the city network does work as a genuine network. Also the team of researchers is not so much a team but more a network of scholars. Managing a network means, above all, intensive communication back and forth between participants, in more than one way and at more than one determined moment.

Because we had to solve our differences as researchers, we now know what each of us is good at and what direction each of us wishes to develop further, and when we can make use of each other's (potential) talents, we will. We may do so, for instance, by asking a researcher to work together on (certain parts of) a research project. Speaking at least for ourselves (the authors), the city network trained us to become better at being interactive and therefore better researchers. Every day, we became better at organizing relationships, at building networks, at inviting those who we believe can play a positive role in a project, whether a practitioner or a researcher (sometimes from another institute), to work with us.

Those who want to organize research within the context of a city network need to make a tailor-made solution for every specific situation. This is necessary so that the experience is meaningful to the researcher. This requires thinking through each situation, and although it is hard to question standardized solutions, this will, in the majority of cases, lead to better and inspired work. Regular team meetings and the production of a co-authored book, are examples of how it should not be done. In the next two sections we will come back to this and elaborate on the process of developing tailor-made solutions (also in interaction with practitioners).

Below we will describe an example of a study in which the relational was taken as a point of departure for creating meaningful experiences for those involved (both researchers and practitioners). This research project was tailor-made for the specific situation at hand.

Interchanging Dynamics between Form and Content

One of the most telling examples of interaction research is “The Other” project in the city of Tilburg in the Netherlands. More than the other research projects, “The Other” project developed interestingly in unexpected ways. Somehow the relationships that evolved between researchers (in this case Pieter Tops and Sandra Kensen) and public administrators created a dynamic situation in which the contents and the form of the research project contributed to one another. The outcomes of this research project were therefore relevant and interesting from the point of view of both public policy and research methods.

After a series of smaller city network research projects, the manager of the department for district affairs of the Dutch city of Tilburg, who was also our contract commissioner, was keen to have a research project with more impact. In the summer of 2000, he asked us to assist him in taking a next step in approaching policy making from a district or neighborhood perspective.

Since the Department of District Affairs was set up in January 1997, much time had been devoted to getting to know the districts and their residents. In this process, professionals from third-sector organizations and residents had become much more involved in the policy-making process than before. As a result, the public administrators of the four district teams had become rather good at consulting citizens and cooperating with professional organizations. However, according to the manager for district affairs, these contacts were vague and not well structured. He, therefore, introduced the idea of working with themes. These themes could be inspired either by developments within the districts or by urban developments across cities.

Our research assignment entailed organizing a huge conference about a relevant theme. In consultation with the Department of District Affairs manager, one of his policy advisers, and one of his district managers (she led one of the four district teams of the department), we decided to address the theme of “The Other.” “The Other” refers to a multicultural society in the broadest sense. So not only ethnic differences can make someone “The Other” in a specific situation, but also differences in habit, age, gender, occupation, and so on. The abstract title, “The Other,” forced us in each and every situation to define exactly who we were talking about and what differences mattered. Until then, the public administrators department of district affairs was used to talking about “residents.” But are all residents the same or do public administrators have a sort of average resident in mind? But what about those who differ from this image? How do public administrators approach individuals?

Fairly soon, the standard categories on which policy is based, such as "residents," "youth," "the elderly," "drug addicts," and "immigrants," were questioned, because one youngster is not like another, and policy is aimed at a certain type of youngster, so why not say so? In addition, what about those who "fit" into two or more categories? What to do, for instance, with a drug-addicted young man whose parents come originally from Morocco? Finally, which citizens do not fit into any category? Who are forgotten or overlooked? Should policy address these people too?

Questioning well-known policy categories raised a question that caused our three contact persons to worry. Because if local society is as colorful and diverse as it was suggested by the researchers, and people could not be put in one category or another, what should policy be based upon? Together with the three contact persons we then thought it a good idea to deal with this question at a conference.

An Unexpected Research Process

Our assignment was to organize a conference about the theme of "The Other." The conference should be open to the other cities within the network in order to provide learning across cities. The standard procedure of organizing a conference is: set a date, think about speakers, decide upon the objective of the conference, create suitable working methods in order to achieve this conference objective, and start advertising the conference. In order to define clearly the main question to be addressed at the conference, the policy adviser and district manager referred to earlier, helped to organize a number of interviews.

The first interview was a group interview with nine public administrators. These public administrators responded to residents' requests for quick and relatively small measures. These measures often entail physical changes in the street. So these were public administrators who spent most of their working time communicating with different residents. These residents, as the group interview learned, often asked for physical measures as a means to regulate social relationships with Other residents (residents who differ). Another lesson we learned was that these public administrators communicated in particular with residents within the unusual policy category of the "complainers" as they defined this themselves. To these public administrators, the category of the "silent," uncomplaining, residents were "The Other," and they wished they could spend more time communicating with them. Perhaps these "silent" residents had, instead of complaints, positive ideas they wanted to implement. However, this would require a different attitude from these public administrators. Instead of waiting for residents to come to them, they would have to go to residents themselves. No matter how difficult this may be, the advantages for citizens could be easier access to policy-making processes, the participation of residents in making neighborhood projects, and a better quality of participation, because of the chances for having true dialogue instead of consultation only.

The group interview with the nine public administrators thus taught us a number of things about the theme under investigation, but it was also informative for the others involved in the group interview. This included the policy adviser and the district manager who helped to organize the group interview. This group interview resulted in a regular meeting between these public administrators; the group interview had shown them they could learn from each other.

In the same manner as this first group interview, the next four interviews were not "just" preparations for something else, for example, a conference, but acquired a meaning of their own as well. These other four interviews were with four experts in the field of societal diversity[1]; originally they were considered as potential speakers at the conference. The original idea was to interview these experts in the presence of a public administrator and one of their professional partners in the district, such as a community worker or a police officer. The idea of taking two people along (two different people to each interview) derived from the manager of the Department of District Affairs (our contract commissioner) who wanted to have as many of his staff as possible to benefit from the city network and its activities. While preparing these four interviews, the original idea was altered. The researcher (in this case Sandra Kensen) made the appointments for the interviews, but the interview was prepared together with the public administrator and the professional partner. The public administrator and the professional partner (a community worker or police officer) asked the questions themselves. The researcher joined these two at the interview, chaired the meeting as far as this was necessary, discussed the interview afterward with the public administrator and the professional partner, and later documented it. The hours that were spent discussing the theme of "The Other" together and with the expert were as much a learning experience as the interview itself.

In this way organizing something *for* public administrators and their political leaders transcended to organizing something *together with* public administrators and their political leaders. Instead of providing knowledge that was simply consumed, the researcher's contribution was to challenge the practitioners to actively participate in the research. We all learned things about "The Other" together and many among whom the researchers themselves, changed during this learning process which increasingly consisted of experiencing "The Other" and reflecting upon one's own actions in relation to "The Other" instead of just talking about "The Other" in an abstract way.

And so it happened that the Department of District Affairs explored the theme of "The Other" itself. Apart from the five interviews previously described, a bus full of public administrators visited Rotterdam for an all day "city-safari" (which involved talking to ordinary, but also remarkable citizens). Two aldermen and the complete management team of the Department of District Affairs also participated in a workshop in which they interviewed one another as "The Other." As part of this workshop, for which we choose the metaphor of making a newspaper together, Pieter Tops presented "an oral editorial" and a guest speaker was invited to present “an oral column.” On the basis of all these different research activities, an actual newspaper was produced together with a communication expert from the Department of District Affairs. During a rather informal meeting, we presented this newspaper to 200 employees of the department of district affairs. It included city-safari photos featuring some of the participating public administrators: they were the stars of their own research product!

Ripple Effects

After the research project had officially come to an end with the presentation of the newspaper, we were involved in two other projects. The project leaders wanted to apply the lessons they learned in “ The Other” project to these projects and we assisted by helping them to shape their plans and process their results. One of these project leaders who is a public administrator worked as a sort of trainee at a third-sector institution (we should mention that during the traineeship she worked on nightshifts which is unusual for a public administrator who usually works from nine to five and writes reports). She first wanted to get to know the people before she wrote a white paper in order to address their problems. The second project leader, also a public administrator, wanted to develop a method to measure customer satisfaction. One of the methods was to ask colleagues to invite one of their customers to discuss, in a safe environment, the services supplied, the way they worked together, and whether these services were good and what could be improved. The above-mentioned projects were proof that “The Other” project did have an impact on the department’s work and/or some of its staff.

Listing the Different Lessons Regarding “The Other” Project in the City of Tilburg

Interestingly, the more we experienced “The Other,” the more we started to reflect upon the local government and the less upon “The Other.” “The Other” was a means to reflect upon ourselves. How does “The Other” affect you? What does “The Other” tell you about you and your work? The research questions evolved into: With whom and how does a local government interact and, what does this mean for policy making? How can a local government interact differently with every citizen and, what could this mean for policy making and local democracy?

Therefore, research into “The Other” is a good example of the interchanging dynamics between form and content. The consequence is that another topic of research not only requires another research process but it is also served best by a process which is tailored to this topic and the situation in which it is investigated. Formulated in constructive or positive terms, this also means that the topic of research may inspire a researcher to develop new research methods.

Of course, these dynamics may also work the other way around. Researchers may feel that they participate in the respondent's dynamics. For instance, when the topic of research (this is contents) is the relationship between administrative departments or the reorganization of the local administration, the form of the study can easily become "administrative" as well. In general, this means paperwork, meetings, discussing finance, regulations, positions, procedures, and policy. The city network research in both the Dutch cities of The Hague and Amersfoort are examples of this.

Interaction research means, to a certain extent, democratic research. In the case of the research into "The Other," the two researchers and the three public administrators decided what to do and when. Together they built different networks to develop activities and to produce good learning experiences. Some of the activities were open to everyone (e.g., the public administrators of the Department of District Affairs and their political leaders), and also the trip to the Dutch city of Rotterdam and the closing meeting. Although five of the researchers determined the general theme, the research agenda was influenced by the different participants (seventy in total).

By definition, contract researchers do something for the contract commissioner. They supply certain goods and/or services in exchange for money. This is definitely a part of interaction research as we know it. "The Other" research project taught us that we can transform experiences. However, these come at a great expense. "The Other" research project took almost three times more research time to complete than budgeted. In reflection, we considered this as our personal as well as our professional investment in experimenting with interaction research. Had we been employees at a research firm, we could not have accounted for the extra hours we had put in. It was clear that our institutional context, the university, made this possible.

"The Other" project was evaluated very positively by the contract commissioner and the other participants involved. Its success was also due to their commitment, and whether they realize this or not. In any case, the success of "The Other" project led, among others, to a new research assignment in the city of Tilburg. In addition, both the researchers and the practitioners involved wished to share their good experiences with our other contacts within the city network. The researchers invited people from the other seven cities and organized a special meeting. This was not the conference which, in the summer of 2000, we thought we wanted to organize; that summit never took place. It was a small-scale meeting and part of it involved meeting others, and therefore ourselves in the city of Tilburg.

The Use of Research Traditions

In section three, we described how "The Other" research project developed in unexpected, but interesting ways, due to the interaction between researchers and public administrators on the one hand, and contents and form on the other. What we did not describe in section three were the theories we used, or the way in which we selected and applied them. Ordinarily, a researcher starts by discussing these matters, and perhaps describes part of the research process, for instance, in order to explain why adjustments were made. It is no coincidence we have turned this process around.

In the case of "The Other" research project, we did not present a fully-fledged theory about how to deal with diversity in society, even though we had developed one (Kensen 1999). Instead, we introduced our ideas and knowledge about the subject during dialogues with the other participants. It was because of this interaction between researchers and public administrators that we could implement certain theories in the first place. First of all we needed to find out what sort of questions the respondents were struggling with, to what extent our ideas helped them to either reformulate or answer their questions, and what would happen next. Only then would we find out what would be appropriate, useful, meaningful, and could be considered as additional knowledge for the issues at hand. In the course of the research, our scientific understanding of our theories also changed. For instance, we discovered it was not as easy as we had expected to approach an "Other," and to deal with otherness on a case-to-case basis. Therefore, we needed to start paying attention to this topic theoretically.

In this section we will turn explicitly to research traditions: which ones do we use, how do we use them, and what is special about this? We will discuss these questions in relation to a concrete research project because the relevance of theories or research traditions depends on the people involved, including the researcher. An interaction researcher draws heavily upon personal knowledge and skills, and is therefore also personally responsible for the usage and application of theory. This means that we will argue our choices both in the actual interaction and in writing. In other words, we will talk about ourselves and include ourselves in the research. Below we will discuss four research traditions in relation to the interaction research that we are conducting in Amsterdam at the moment. In Amsterdam we can implement the following research traditions: social constructionist research, narrative research, action research, and responsive evaluation. With the exception of the action research, we had worked with these research traditions in a more conventional way before. In Amsterdam we put our knowledge into practice, as researchers but also with the respondents.

Research Traditions We Live By (Lakoff and Johnson 1983)

Over the years a good research relationship had developed between one of the researchers and a mayor of a district council of Amsterdam. In the summer of 2000, the mayor was eager to join the city network, but because of financial and institutional reasons he was only prepared to do so if the other district councils of Amsterdam and/or parts of the city's administration were also prepared to participate. We therefore decided to join forces and contact possible partners. In February 2001, we talked to the director of the department of urban policy and learned that the ideas we had recently developed could be of importance to one of their policy problems. The policy problem in question is acknowledged nationwide.

In the Netherlands, urban policy takes areas as a point of departure. The idea is to approach living and working in such an area in a comprehensive manner. In other words, policy makers try to integrate economic policy, planning, and social policy all at the same time. Notwithstanding the progress that has been made over the last ten to twelve years, those involved still encounter many problems in connecting these policy fields in a satisfactory way (Kensen 2002a). We had a breakthrough in our understanding of the connection between policy fields during the first months of 2001. These ideas were based upon a social constructionist approach.

(Social) Constructionist Research

In recent social constructionist research, the focus has shifted from social constructs as such to their relational aspect because within social relationships social constructs develop and change (McNamee and Gergen 1999). The main question regarding constructionism has therefore become: How do actors relate to one another differently over time, what different meanings are produced in these dynamic relationships, and what are the consequences of these different meanings for the practices of those (indirectly) involved? However, this latest social constructionist approach is counterparted by a constructionist approach in which the “actors” are people, but also things, objects, machines, and so on (Jaeger 2001; Latour 1997). In this approach, the relationships are even more heterogeneous, but the basic idea is the same: human and non-human elements relate to one another differently and in relationships they produce different realities.

Translated to the policy issue at hand—how to integrate different policy fields—we suggested the following: look at the way citizens relate to the city, and vice versa, how the city relates to the citizens (Kensen 2002a). To be more precise, apart from relating to each other, citizens also relate to objects in the street, such as benches, fences, public squares, and traffic signs. In addition, these objects also have an effect on people. For instance, they can make them socially oriented or they can divide groups of people, or they prevent them from going somewhere. Seen from this perspective, the city is made up of social-physical networks, and it cannot be put simply into the categories of housing, public spaces, residents, and businesses.

Narrative Research and Action Research

As researchers we introduced two new concepts into the discourse of urban policy: social-physical networks and a relational method of thinking. The director of the Department of Urban Policy in the city of Amsterdam asked us to investigate to what extent these two concepts could be helpful to those making comprehensive urban policies. We applied insights from narrative research and action research in this project.

Narrative research examines the use of language as well as the effects of using language in a certain way (Blaakilde 1998). Action research focuses in particular on change (White 1999). An action researcher may suggest certain measures for change, and others and/or the researcher may implement these. The effects of the measures taken are described below. In Amsterdam the combination of narrative-action research consisted of conceptual renewal. According to Van Twist (1994), new concepts may invite new actions when given meaning by a certain number of people. In order to investigate whether the concepts of social-physical networks and thinking relationally could be of any use to those involved in urban policy, we first interviewed four councillors and five public administrators.

The interviews made three things clear. First, the respondents mentioned they confronted numerous problems when drawing up comprehensive policies, and, second, they mentioned various solutions on how to deal with these problems. Finally, they all thought that looking at these problems in another way could be fruitful. In other words, they wished to explore the advantages of looking at urban problems from a relational point of view.

This led us to organize a meeting of district councillors, public administrators and public administration scholars. Most of the respondents we interviewed earlier were present at this meeting and they had brought two or three of their colleagues along. From the beginning, our objective was to try to build up relationships with the respondents and, besides exchanging existing knowledge and past experiences, the aim was to also build up new knowledge and to experience something new together. That is why we limited the number of participants to thirty so that they would form a group. A “training day” seemed to be the appropriate form for this meeting.

Using the metaphor of “training day” inspired the further organization of the meeting. We published a reader so that the “students” could prepare the subject matter. The training day itself consisted first of lectures and then an exercise into looking at the city from a relational point of view. The participants were split into small groups and visited the city where they filmed their observations and street interviews. Afterward, each group showed their material to the whole group in a final plenary meeting.

During the training day, some of the things that became clear were that participants with different backgrounds, either in social affairs or planning, were interesting conversation partners to one another. From the interviews we learned that when gathered for a two-hour meeting in a conference room, participants from the planning and from the social affairs departments discussed the daily affairs of their own individual work. It appeared that during these meetings they were unable to help each other or ask critical questions or even tackle certain tasks together. However, by introducing two new concepts, and by linking these concepts together in a specific context concerning the city, they were able to discuss the previously mentioned topics. By walking through the city together, and being able to point at certain things and talk directly to the people in the street together about how they use or like to use, for example, benches or cycle paths, demonstrated the value of different perspectives in a very direct manner. In a sense, we made use of an insight from management theory: if a problem seems to be unsolvable then try to get around the problem and do not focus directly on the problem (Van Dongen et al 1996, 256). So, we did not discuss professional relationships as such, but we (first) discussed the contents of such relationships.

Seen from a narrative research approach, we learned that the underuse of skills, knowledge, and professional contacts was due, among others, to valuing words differently. For instance, for those engaged in social affairs, social processes are important products, and materials are means for making these processes possible. However, for those from the planning department, the opposite is true. They consider processes as means. What counts are the material products. When walking through the city together, everyone could see, for instance, certain things were used for a different purpose than what they were originally designed for. Therefore, if planning results in a certain usage of physical objects, then it is vital to engage users in the planning process by asking them questions such as: How do you (wish to) use this? With whom do you want to use this? What do you want to use this for? In addition, how the objects in the street or on a square are positioned and whether they invite or discourage a certain social usage. Therefore, if social affairs wish to obtain certain social objectives, they had better include the physical surroundings in their decision-making process. This entails other things besides considering the number of square meters needed for a project. For instance, they should first ask themselves and the users questions such as: What do these different age/gender groups want to do? Do they want to integrate their activities or do they want to do them separately, or both? The answers to these questions should be found in the design of spaces.

Based on the positive experiences gained during the "training day," the director of the department of Urban Policy and two district councils of Amsterdam, asked us to develop a number of new research activities. Among these, was the production of a short film and a booklet based on the training day. The idea was to make a presentation about the city to stimulate a discussion on social-physical cohesion with as many relevant parties as possible (Kensen 2002b and c).

Another research activity involved cooperating with two urban projects, one in each of the two district councils of Amsterdam. The research objective was to put into practice the experiences and knowledge on running urban projects which we gained during the training day. Apart from applying relational thinking, we knew we would come across many new issues regarding connecting policy fields. Therefore, we would have to develop our relational thinking as well. The basic idea was to take up these challenges together. As researchers we made clear that we did not have all the answers, but that we were willing to cooperate to find out what the answers were. This could only work if it was an authentic collaboration. The way in which the interaction research developed with both these projects was very similar to a responsive evaluation (Abma 1997; Guba and Lincoln 1985). Below we will describe only parts of one of the two projects.

Responsive Evaluation

An important characteristic of responsive evaluation is prolonged engagement in the research setting. According to Guba and Lincoln (1985), prolonged engagement is necessary, first, for a research design to emerge in collaboration with the respondents. This is a safeguard to conduct relevant research for those involved. Guba and Lincoln describe the task of the researcher as moving in-between data collection, data analysis, writing, discussing these writings, and rewriting drafts of the research design.

From an interaction research point of view, we would say that the researcher first has to build relationships with enough respondents in different positions. It is within these relationships that meanings are communicated and understood and the research design can emerge. This was also the case in one of the districts in which we conducted research.

The council there was planning a new leisure center for youngsters. This project involved a combination of a new social program for youngsters and a new building to organize the activities in. According to the manager of the Department for Social Affairs, our contract commissioner, it was therefore a suitable project to try to integrate social and physical aspects from a relational point of view. The project leader was a public administrator from the Department for Social Affairs, who was also our contact person on a daily basis. The project leader had hired an external consultant, with a background in pedagogy, to implement the plan. All three respondents were female, and they played an important role in setting up the research. However, since our research task was to help integrate social aspects with physical ones, we also contacted public administrators from three other departments: district maintenance, housing, and communication. Within five months we took part in a number of meetings and had several interviews/discussions with six public administrators and the external consultant after which the research design began to emerge. As a group we discussed the final draft of the research design.

In the meantime, we had begun to organize the first research activities. These activities involved not only talking about the new leisure center but also jointly paying a visit to the site where it was planned to see it for ourselves and to talk informally to the users, including parents, youth workers, and the people living nearby the site, about it. A group of twenty district councillors, public administrators, and professionals from third-sector organizations were invited for this activity. Also the idea was that the researchers had to build and maintain relationships with these respondents.

According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), respondents may have different claims, concerns, and issues regarding a certain public matter. These claims, concerns and issues are filled with different values. A central research question to Guba and Lincoln is: What should we do with these different values, both within the research and within the situation itself? Responsive evaluators have mainly chosen one of two options: an evaluator either constructs an agenda for negotiation or constructs a conceptual framework with which the different readings of a situation can be connected to each other (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen 1993). In both instances, the aim is to instigate a fruitful dialogue among the respondents. Responsive evaluators differ in the extent to which they guide and/or take part in this dialogue.

In the case described above, many different claims, concerns, and issues were put forward by twenty people with different backgrounds who experienced a particular site in the city of Amsterdam to look at the way in which social-physical networks function. As researchers, we did not want to "solve" the differences among these twenty respondents. Therefore, we asked each of them to write a small report. We distributed these reports among the participants and held a two-hour meeting in which everyone gave their opinion about the reports. In addition, everyone discussed what ought to be done with the reports results for the project in question. Based on this meeting, followup activities were prepared.

With each new person a new meaning has to be negotiated and renegotiated. We assume that knowledge is created through communication and that this is an ongoing process: time and time again (other) people have to use their language (which can only exist in a community) to interpret what is going on and to express what they mean. In this social interaction process, meanings slip and slide and are therefore changed. Also these changes need to be discussed with the respondents. All in all, many hours are spent communicating and being with the respondents. This makes it possible, however, to get an understanding of the mechanisms or patterns that function within the research setting. A good example is the following case.

As described above, the project under investigation was led by a public administrator from social affairs and the external consultant she had hired to implement the plan. It took the researchers and two public administrators (one from housing and one from communication) nine months to get "connected" to these two professionals. The project leader and the consultant had consulted us all a couple of times, in particular to coordinate actions, but they had done so bilaterally. Therefore, the other parties involved did not know what contribution had been made or what the two women had done with the information they obtained from us. It was clear it was their project and they were going to do it their way. They felt responsible to make it work. But because we did talk and they did join some of the research activities, it took us quite a while to find out that their idea of collaboration was to obtain their information from other sources. There was no question of working together.

The researchers and the two other public administrators had complained to each other about how they were not involved and how frustrating it was. As a result, neither the researchers nor the public administrators felt like giving the project leader and her consultant any information anymore. It was during a conversation with the project leader and her manager (who is the head of the social affairs department and who is also the contract commissioner of the research) that we found out how they approached the situation. The conversation between the researchers and the project leader was repeated in front of the manager. This is another example of the value of face-to-face meetings and conversations for relevant knowledge production and dissemination.

As the above example shows, it is very difficult to discover certain routines, even when the persons involved are directly confronted with them, and it is even more difficult to break lose from them when you want to. The next thing we tried to do was to set up a new group comprising the public administrators, the external consultant, and the researchers. E-mails were circulated: no more bilateral communication. However, the question still remains: What kind of conversation can we have as a group? What positions should be taken? Should we remain only advisers, but this time as a group, or would it be possible to develop cooperative relationships?

Conclusions: Taking on Several Roles as an Interaction Researcher

We played with language and narrative form without hesitation. We felt we were able to do so because we conducted research from a social constructionist point of view. A construction process always assumes an active input from participants. Only the degree to which participants contribute to this construction process can vary. Analytically, three positions can be distinguished. One can follow, participate, and/or intervene. (The last two may have resemblances with different variations of action research [White 1999]). In the case of the city network, we combined all three. Depending upon the time and situation, we either did one thing or another.

Following Interactions of Others

When following the interactions of others, a researcher mainly listens and watches. In short, the researcher observes, and may do so from every possible theoretical point of view. However, in order to perform this role, a researcher also needs to relate to the people he or she interviews or watches in action. By being in a room together with others, if only as a spectator, expresses a certain relationship. In addition, a researcher needs to act too. They need to ask permission to attend a certain meeting. And those present at the meeting expect the researcher to comment somehow on their meeting at a certain point, either in writing or orally. Finally, understanding and interpreting what is being said and done are activities as well. In short, from a social constructionist point of view, a researcher cannot escape from becoming part of the interactions of those being studied, no matter how low their profile is. In this context, the following question is relevant: To what extent is it justified to exclude ourselves from of our analysis?

Participating in Interactions

Participating in ongoing interactions means "talking back," not later at a certain point at a special meeting, but in interaction—here and now. Researchers then explicitly join the social construction of realities they are simultaneously analyzing. The sort of input can be theoretical, practical or knowledge based on (former research) experiences. Apart from being an observer and an author, a researcher is also a respondent, and therefore the data consists partly of their own notes, comments, utterances, and so on, communicated in interaction with the other respondents. Also, the way in which the other respondents respond to the findings, interpretations, and additions of the researcher are part of their dataset. In this way, the distinction between researchers and respondents disappears to a certain extent, although the researcher's position and contribution is still distinct from the other ones.

One of the advantages of participating in interactions is the chance you get to learn immediately how your contribution is understood and valued. This gives you the possibility of adjusting your approach. However, it also makes the research more uncertain. This may be considered as a disadvantage, although the researchers do not experience it as such. Also, as a researcher you can communicate what you learn from the respondents. Learning becomes an authentic mutual process this way. In addition, giving feedback is something that goes two ways. Not only are the actions of the others examined but also those of the researcher. This exposes a vulnerability of the researchers and their research. We find this vulnerability a strength because it opens up people. However, others may not appreciate this.

Intervening in Interactions

Finally, an interaction researcher may try to intervene in the ongoing social interaction process which they are also studying. The objective may be to improve the interaction process, namely, to work toward a process in which (very) different types of people may speak out, are heard, and are shown respect. These process criteria may help in discussing the quality of the interaction process and ways to improve it.

Ways in which the interaction process may be improved include to set a good example as a researcher. For instance, asking for a second dialogue partner, one from the other department, when the objective is, among others, to improve working relationships between the two departments. Another intervention strategy may be to point out perspectives and to involve people who were not involved before. Furthermore, a researcher may organize and chair special meetings. The researcher can play with words, formulate things differently, and see whether this conceptual renewal invites other actions. The researcher may raise questions for reflection. He can make meanings explicit and/or symbolize them in different ways. And so on.

Intervening in interactions is the most risky research approach of all, since interventions may be either successful or unsuccessful. As for other managers who intervene in processes, one must wait and see how people respond to these interventions. The dynamic of social interaction processes cannot be predicted or controlled. There is always a surprise element involved. Several questions may therefore be raised in connection with intervening in interaction processes as a researcher.

When is it a good time to intervene? When is it appropriate to intervene? Are we allowed to intervene in processes only when we are explicitly asked to do so? Or may we intervene when we ourselves believe this is better for the interaction process? And how do we intervene? Perhaps it is sometimes wise not to say anything?

As when following interactions and participating in them our interventions in social interaction processes and the way people respond to them, are research data to be reflected upon. In the case of intervention we can leave experienced knowledge behind. Whereas in the case of following and participating in social interactions, it is merely a case of leaving written knowledge behind.

Final Conclusion: Interaction Research, Its Requirements, and Its Findings

This chapter described and illustrated a number of fragments of the interaction research that we have been conducting since 1999. We will conclude this chapter by answering the question: What is required to conduct interaction research and what are the results of interaction research? Four classes of requirements can be distinguished: institutional, scientific, personal, and economic.

Institutionally, interaction research requires colleagues from the same department who support and conduct this kind of research themselves. Interaction research is too complex and perhaps too unorthodox to be carried out individually. The next requirement is to manage the relationships between these colleagues. We learned the hard way. It requires intensive communication in various ways and at various times. In addition, interaction research has variations. Accepting differences among colleagues is another requirement. It should not be taken for granted that a colleague’s work will be found interesting to the same degree as another colleague’s.

Given the experimental character of interaction research, since each situation requires its own approach and process, the institutional setting should be such that there is time to try things out, to constantly reflect upon the research, and to learn about the latest developments within theory. In an academic setting these things are easier to organize than in businesslike situations.

Interaction research requires from the researcher personally an open research approach; interaction research develops as relationships are built with many respondents and a number of colleagues. Furthermore, interaction research means spending many long hours in the research setting and working with many people. This is very demanding and quite different than being left "in peace" as a researcher, to observe, to listen and to study.

It is important for the success of interaction research that respondents and the contract commissioner all work together on the research as a team. And it is important that the researchers get paid for conducting interaction research. The reason for putting a price tag to interaction research is to ensure that the respondents take a stake in the research. This is important, since interaction research, and its study of ongoing processes, aims at creating moments of learning that carry through into daily (working) life.

Interaction research is an undertaking which is carried out in close cooperation with—in our case—local democracy. It can give local governance the following: good questions, assistance in developing answers, training possibilities for staff and citizens, relevant meetings among people who have struggled with the same issues, awareness of certain hard but possibly better to change routines, and research findings by way of presentations, newspaper articles, videos, booklets, and co-authored volumes. To us, interaction research presents us with an inspirational context so that we are able to take part in society and continue our personal and academic learning processes.

Note

1. These experts were (1) a social psychologist who ran a huge social experiment in the multicultural city of Rotterdam, entitled "city etiquette"; (2) a chairman of a district council in Amsterdam in whose district at least eighty nationalities live together and "they do not make a fuss about that," according to him; (3) a popular local celebrity from the Dutch city of Tilburg: a former Catholic priest (1930) who supports the "leftovers" of society, as he calls them, by delivering them bread at night, by sometimes paying their regular housing expenses, or by helping them to fill in forms; and (4) a female entertainer who was born in Turkey, but now regards herself as an authentic Amsterdammer.